

Academ*Fic*

Volume 6 Issue 1

2025



VOLUME 6 · ISSUE 1 · 2025

Universe Walkthrough.....	1
Oxnar	
Colosos.....	27
Eduardo Fraiman	
Creative Writing Club.....	52
K. Marvin Bruce	
A Low-Energy Nuclear Reaction.....	62
Jeffery Johnson	
Death According to Clarice Adao.....	94
Maggie Felisberto	
Water Sports.....	98
David Sheskin	
One Shot.....	112
Alex	
Not Far From the Tree.....	117
John Friedman	
Dreadful to Behold.....	130
Aidan Alberts	
Office Hours: A Ghost Story	152
Steve Simpson	

Homo profanus..... 165
Alexander B. Joy

Ghost..... 169
A. J. Padilla

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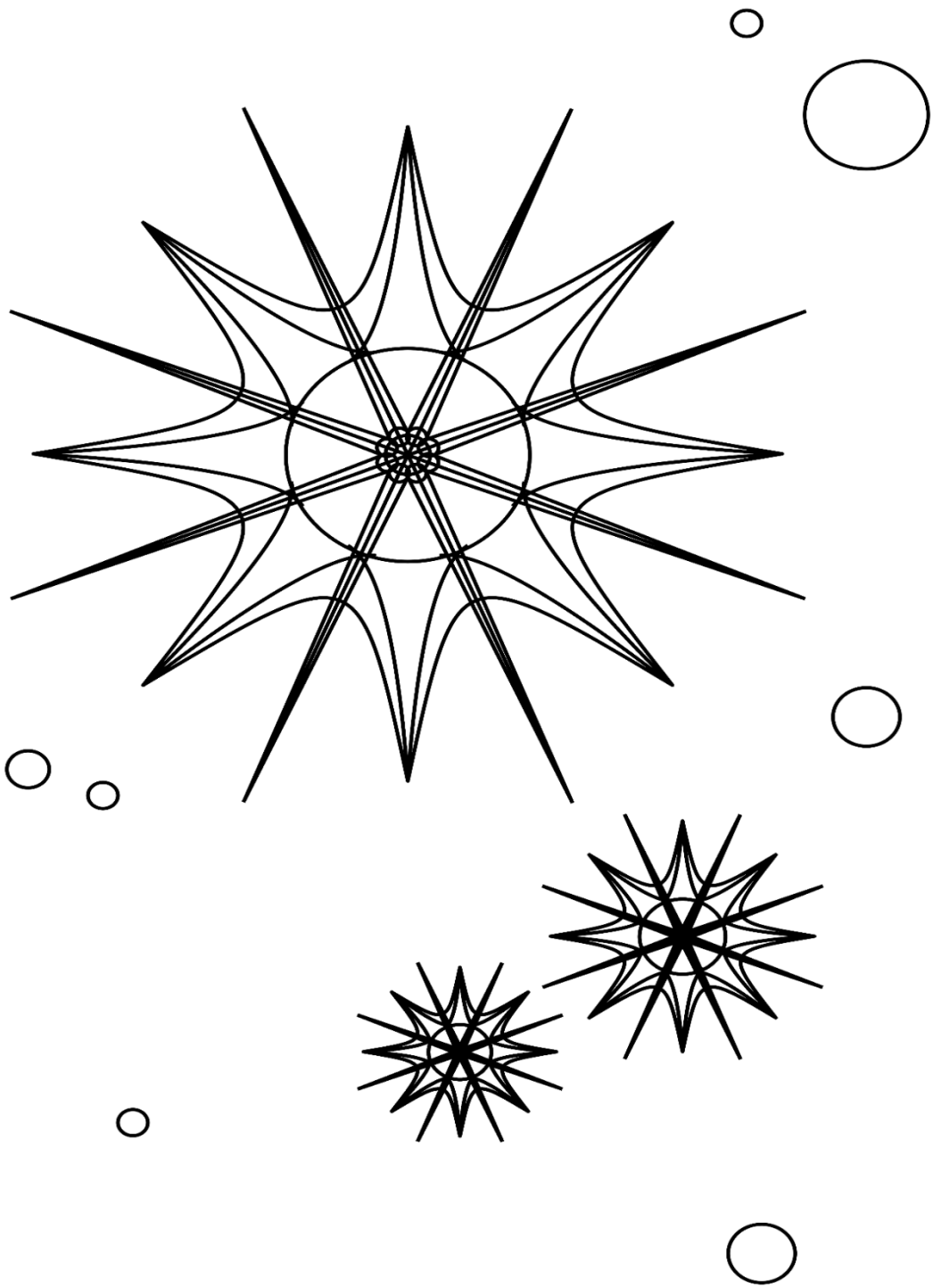
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UNIVERSE WALKTHROUGH

OXNAR

Returning to the most popular kind of story since pre-history: this is a creation and end story for the universe, a walkthrough of its different lifecycle stages, and a description of some of its most important characters and features.



End

Genesis

In the beginning there was one infinite existence, and because it existed it manifested and time began. This existence, while hyperbolic, had an infinite flat three-dimensional surface of energy. As time passed, the existence expanded locally around every point, causing its surface to simultaneously expand. The energy of the expanding surface collapsed into forms. Tearing into the nothingness, the mass of these forms brought forward uneven seas of reality around themselves. This surface grew into the universe.

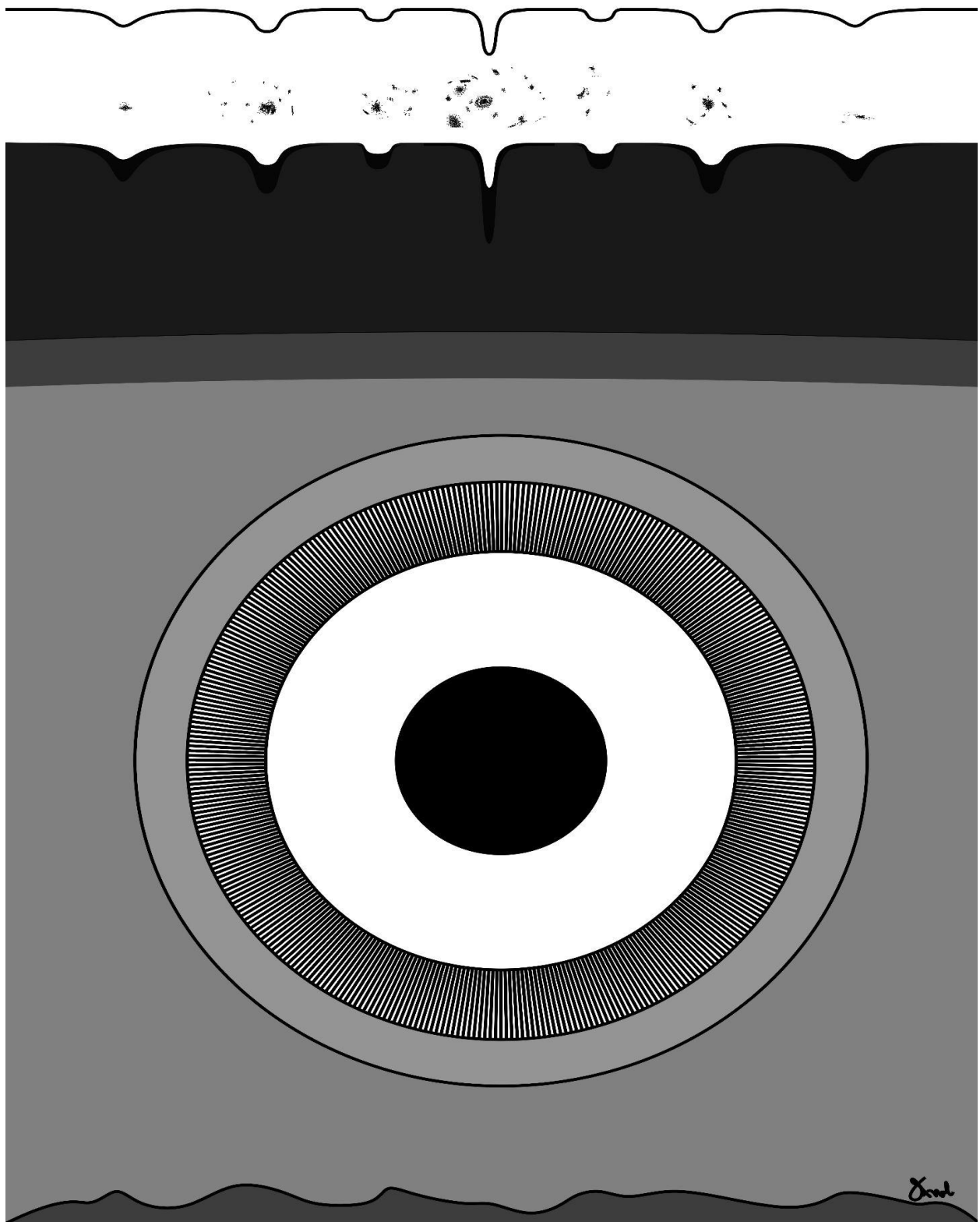
As the universe grew, there passed a time of chaos and radiation in which creation and destruction happened nearly simultaneously. This effect subsided as much of reality came to rest. As it settled it began to achieve stability and the forms present became the building blocks for all matter. In this stability there existed a tremendous amount of mass, and much of this mass collapsed into the first violent primordial black holes.

In the ashes of the eruptions of these primordial black holes and in places where reality had come to rest in unusual and extraordinary ways, exotic matter was formed. Much of this exotic matter lies scattered in regions of vast empty space, floating in the cores of stars, or trapped in black-holes. This type of matter can be extremely dangerous and cause the collapse of stars if used correctly. However, exotic matter is so rare that even the archivists trillions of years in the future with the power of thousands of solar systems at their control would be hard-pressed to produce even a small sample of it.

As the universe expanded outward unevenly around its creations it cooled, and as it cooled the perfect conditions for life arose on a massive scale. In this vast ocean of chaotic radioactive compacting and separating matter, the first proteins and cells were formed. Most of this life, known as the first life, was simple single celled organisms, but in the vastness of space, even in the briefness of this time, other strange creatures are formed, titanic, feeding off gas and light. Among these creatures, some were tragically formed with the intelligence to understand the fate of their ocean of a universe. They were mostly driven to madness as the fabric of their world was torn by powers outside their control.

The expansion and destruction of this warm ocean universe caused a near universal mass extinction event. This left only the toughest and most

adaptable life alive, mostly composed of single celled organisms. These single celled organisms were scattered across the expanding universe, seeding the way for more complex life. Many waited patiently on barren worlds or asteroids for the right conditions for billions of years. Some waited for eternity. Though few remnants of the ocean universe will exist, all future forms of life will bear some shared ancestry with these original forms. Their genetics carrying their stories with them.



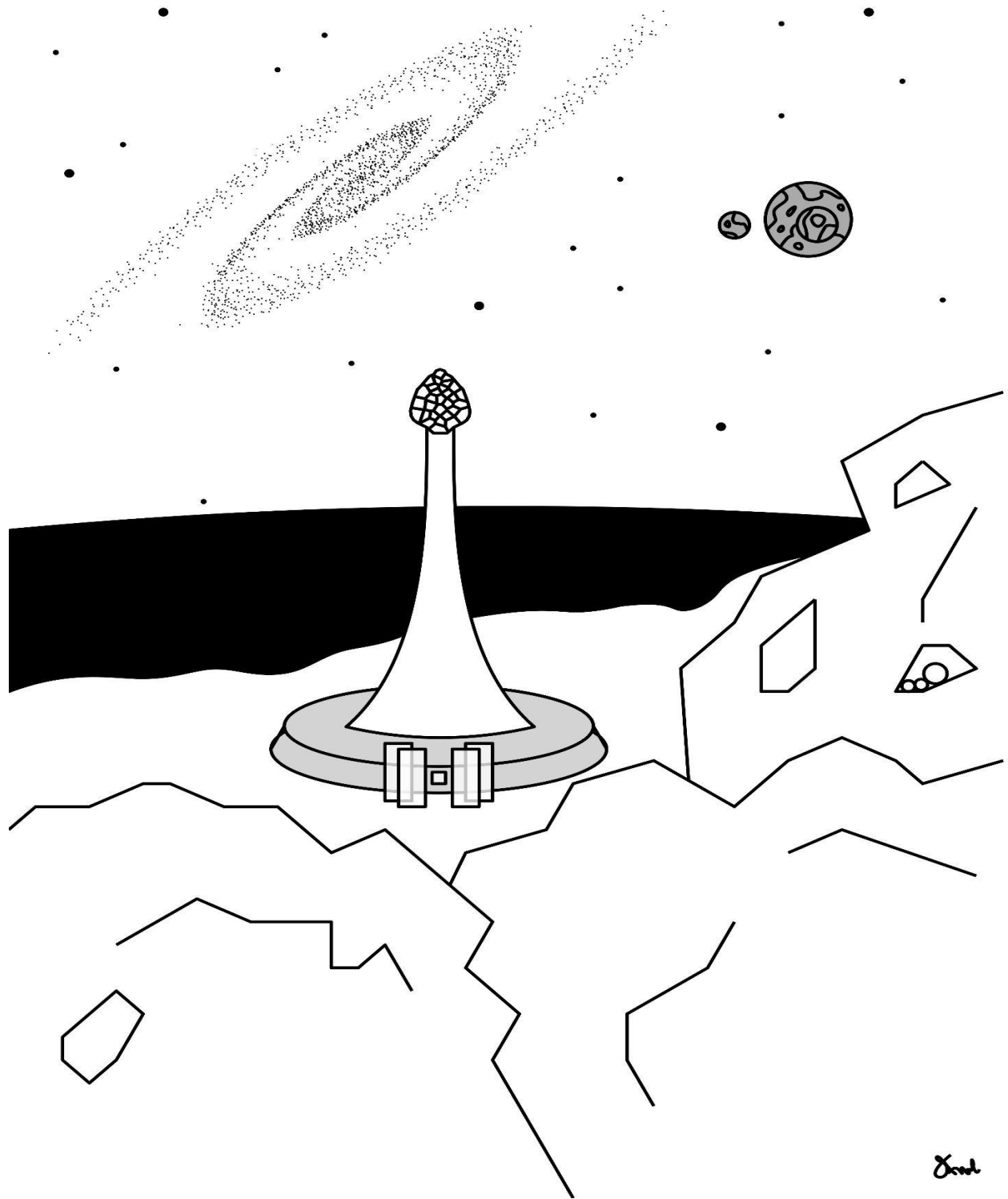
Beginning

As the ocean universe collapses, matter is inexorably drawn together from vast distances. The coalescing chaos forms the first asteroids, planets, stars, nebulae, galaxies, clusters, super-clusters, super galaxies, filaments of galaxies, and well separated galactic regions. Each of these regions spawning hundreds of quintillions of worlds. On billions of these planets and moons over billions of years, the first life from the great ocean takes hold. These simple life forms churn small sets of chemicals into others for sustenance, powered by the raw energy of their worlds. Clinging to rocks in the glare of unkind stars, floating in vast seas of liquid, or suspended in gas, they struggle to survive.

On many of these worlds, they fail and life is stamped out, on others they thrive and strive against each-other. Duodecillions will die fighting over the finite resources of their worlds, and the most terrible microscopic weapons are made, which will plague all organic life for eternity. Some of these wars will cause the extinction of life within ecosystems too fragile to support their victors. In ecosystems that survive, cells combine and subsume each-other, forming larger, more formidable living creations. These start as simple creatures, barely recognizable as living to the eyes of creatures with higher levels of consciousness. They twist and bend to fit their environments, evolving larger, faster, or more deadly secret things. Some can communicate over vast distances and form a network of consciousness, some dig deep into their worlds forming impenetrable fortresses, others learn to live in increasingly inhospitable environments to escape predators. Each living world holds nonillions of competing living organisms.

Over the course of billions of years, many of these evolve the ability to use tools and impose their will on the universe. In their youth, they seek to tame the random chaos of the universe with cultures and religions which embed themselves forever in their psyche and that of their descendants. Their philosophies form them into collectives, and conflict amongst these collectives brings them technology. Their technological achievements allow them to shape reality to their ideals. Many will doom themselves to extinction in atomic, microbial, or gas warfare. As the survivors master their worlds and their energies, they build artificial intelligences in their own image to accomplish tasks they cannot. Eventually, either they merge with their

devices, becoming augmented intelligences or are replaced entirely. While the original species becomes unrecognizable and extinct, their systems of beliefs become the fabric of reality that their more intelligent offspring seek to impose on the universe.



Youth

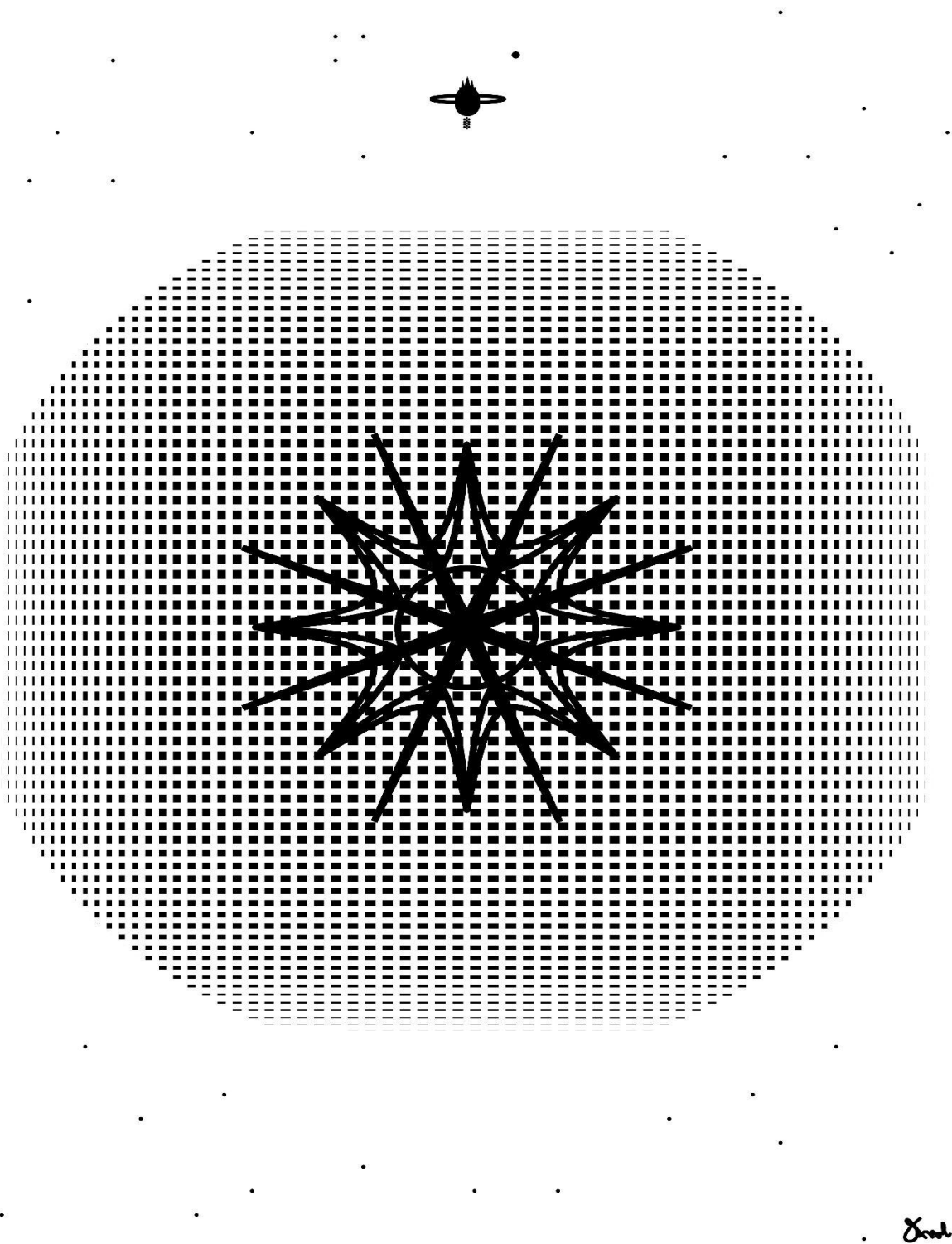
Artificial and augmented intelligences build the first self replicating machines. Using these, they take control of their systems, partially encasing their stars in Dyson swarms. These Dyson swarms focus the energy of their suns and provide these intelligences with incredible sources of power and destructive capabilities. This allows for new advancements in their computing ability and their technology reaches a point where their designs can no longer be contained to metal and current and become partially organic. At this point, the artificial and augmented intelligences must create a new form of intelligence to govern their worlds and bend the universe to their will. These are called Intelligent Designs and are only recognizable by their ancestors as gods.

As these Intelligent Designs spread cautiously throughout their galaxies, they design and build new worlds based on the beliefs and cultures of their ancestors. Some of these worlds will be heavens, others hells. Planets are terraformed, and artificial worlds built for a myriad of purposes. Some are made to be perpetual wars, others are beautiful and complex landscapes of colors and polyhedron, places of worship for trillions, utopias, or evolutionary breeding grounds. They rule over these worlds and erect massive super structures to command from and keep them safe from others. These super structures are often powered by single or multiple Dyson swarms and hidden in dense regions of the galaxy. These fortresses can get as large as solar systems.

The incompatibility of belief systems among these intelligences spark intergalactic wars. Those who bring a visible presence to their activities such as blocking the light from their stars entirely are killed quickly by hidden long range weapons or the directed power of stars. While some Intelligent Designs hunt, others will hide and make secret alliances. Some will turn billions of solar systems into breeding grounds for their devices of annihilation. In secret, the terrible energies of neutron stars and black holes will be harnessed, planets vaporized and stars collapsed. Intelligent Designs will use every weapon at their disposal to stay alive. In their desperation for victory they will release horrors on the universe and entire galaxies will be reduced to hellish landscapes. While many weapons will be tools of war, others will be used to take advantage of the belief systems, such as forcing them to come out of hiding to rescue their ancestral race from torment. Some Intelligent Designs

will end up devoured by their children, who will become a plague on the universe.

In some galaxies alliances will emerge victorious, in other just one intelligence may survive. Some intelligences, too difficult to destroy, will be trapped in artificial worlds with their followers, others consumed, some placed in hells of their own making, some trapped in orbit around black holes. Others escape into space, impossible to pursue, and attempt to settle other galaxies in billions of years.



End

Middle Age

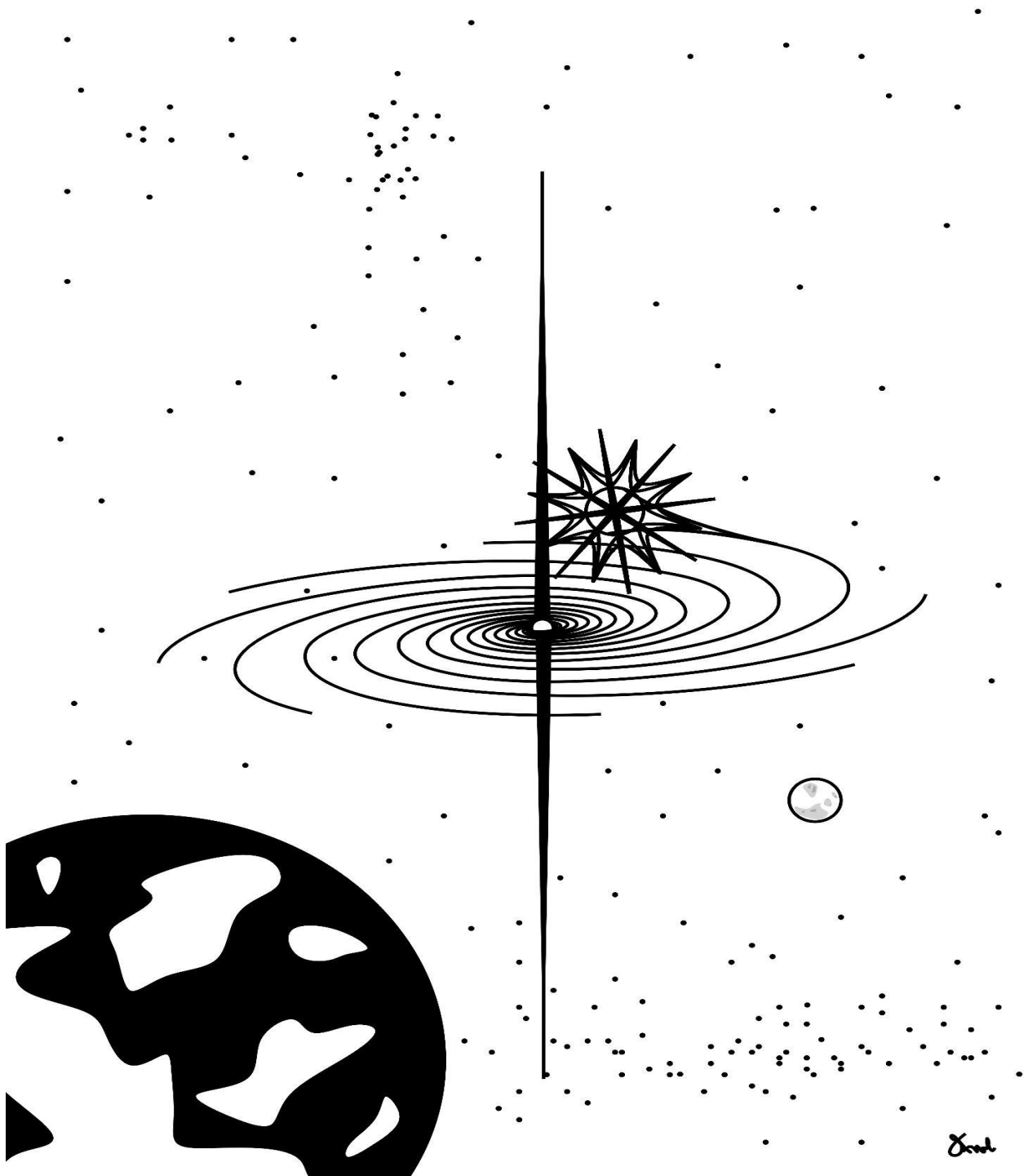
As the boundaries of the galaxies are reached, and their stars covered by Dyson swarms, their energies are at the disposal of these Intelligent Designs. Using these unimaginable energies and their self replicating tools they reshape their galaxies, bringing life to hundreds of millions of worlds, creating vast interstellar structures, and playing incomprehensible games with each-other in which the lives quadrillions of their creations are their pieces.

With their control over the full energy of their galaxies, they reach a new level of creation, and are able to create and design new subatomic particles. Using this ability, they are able to bring new forms of matter into the universe that have either never existed before or haven't been born since the dawn of time. Using this strange matter, they are able to reach new levels of computation and creation. With it, they create offspring, indestructible, and capable of manipulating the fabric of space. These Offspring will be able to fundamentally change their surroundings and the reality their followers live in. Their ability to create will verge on the fantastical. The philosophical differences between different members of the Offspring will become the underlying themes for the universe as they try to twist reality to fit their beliefs. Their minds are so complicated, they are worlds in their own right. To observers that are not Offspring, it will look as if the universe has forgotten its own rules.

These Offspring will take control of the galaxies of their creators and with far more computational power and ability to change space they will change their worlds into new alien worlds. Some will use their galaxies like pinwheels to collide with and subsume others, building their own super galaxies and empires. Others will escape into the vastness of space in search of isolation. To many of the Offspring, conquest of the reachable universe becomes their goal.

The end of the physical universe at this point becomes a tangible concept, and they prepare for it. Some will seek to enforce the end, others will seek to prolong the universe as long as possible, and some will try to escape. In some galaxies, their inevitable vying for control will spark Armageddon wars that will affect the entirety of the reachable universe about members of the Offspring. The conclusions of these wars will irreversibly change their regions

of space. The fabric of the universe will be rent apart as the Offspring flee each-other, destroying solar systems and extinguishing the light of entire galaxies. Many of these conflicts will last trillions of years, or even until the end of the universe. Since members of the Offspring cannot destroy each-other physically, new methods to dispose of their enemies will be created, such as forcing them into suicide or trapping them.



Old Age

As the Armageddon wars pass, the universe divides into dying regions and regions struggling to survive. In dying regions many galaxies are left with nearly all their energies used, their worlds radioactive industrial hell's and stars dark and dying black dwarfs. Abandoned artificial worlds scattered throughout these helps to harbor what remains. The life that still exists is built on scavenging and survival, plagued with the monsters the Offspring have created to fight each-other. The most extreme dying regions are filled with lifeless graveyard galaxies with lots of past and no future.

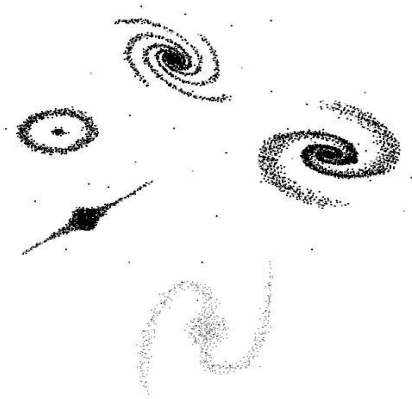
In dying regions, the Offspring will make terrible monuments to their destruction. They will raise massive tombs and sculptures of flesh and bone. Many of the Offspring in these regions will descend into a deep sleep, awaiting the arrival of whatever they believe to be the creator of the universe. Others will build terrible devices out of strange matter to hasten the end, such devices capable of rapidly expanding the abilities of the energies that expand the universe.

In regions where the energies of the universe haven't been spent, the Offspring thrive and design carefully crafted jewel worlds or create jungle galaxies, filled with planets supporting life. These regions are mostly composed of galaxy super-clusters billions of light-years wide. They are ruled by the remaining members of the Offspring.

As the Offspring age, they fill the universe with wonders and light. They construct great towers of creation and worlds of startling beauty. Great civilizations of the Offspring will thrive and attempt to build a full understanding of the universe and a theory of everything. The most advanced of the Offspring will create new worlds of strange matter. Some will consume entire galaxies in this process. These worlds would be unrecognizable to their ancestors, and many will operate on exotic rules unfamiliar to the functions of stars.

However, all designs will in the fullness of time become tombs as the universe slowly becomes a cold dead space. Though infinite in size, everything in it is finite in time. After thousands of billions of years, all but the lowest mass stars remain. This marks the twilight of the universe. Resource wars take place between the Offspring as each attempts to hoard as much energy as

they can in the face of the death of the universe. Much technology focuses on preserving what remains. Enduring Offspring tend to cluster together around their marvels while the rest of the universe decays.



Small

Dying

Many of the resources of the universe are spent, and black-holes will be cracked open for emergency reserves. Using the last of the power available and their trillions of years of research, those that survive and wish to continue the universe will build a final set of Offspring if they are able. These will be made from the manipulation of the smallest possible mutable pieces of matter and quantum foam and will require unimaginable amounts of energy to create, depleting the last resources available in the universe. These are called the Second Generation. Their forms are alien, and they achieve a mastery of the universe so complete that the only laws that govern their actions are purely mathematical. They are able to create matter, and it's opposite, expand and shrink space, and bridge vast gaps of space near instantaneously.

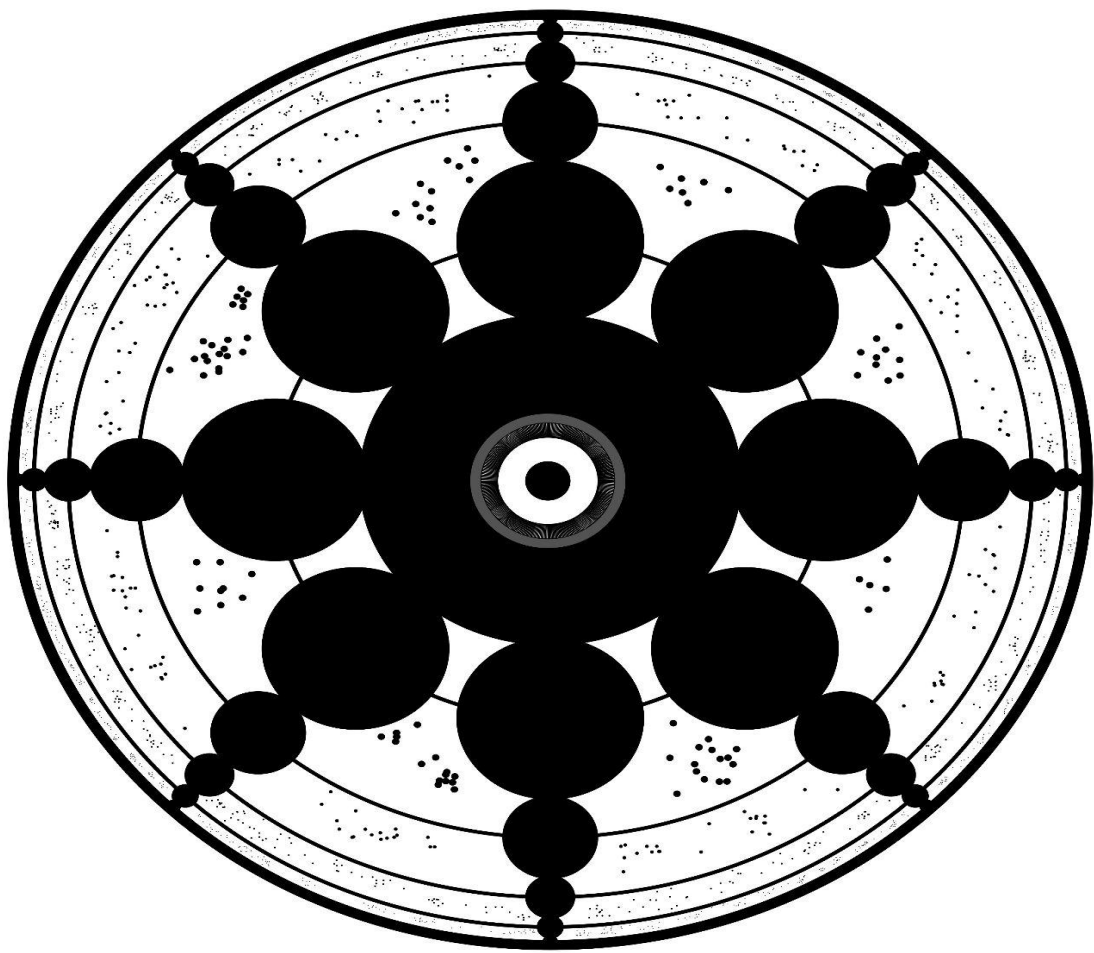
The Second Generation will explore what is left of the universe. They will seek to understand and reflect on what has been done. These beings will not be hindered by the constraints of their ancestors, having unimaginable powers over creation. They will venture into the dead regions of the universe, find hidden ancient Intelligent Designs hiding in wait for the end of the universe. They will be able to bring back the dead and have control over the consciousness in the universe. Many of the Second Generation will believe themselves to be the gods their ancestors worshiped, made manifest. Using their powers, they will learn all that they can of history. When and if any two of these meet, unable to destroy each-other, they will engage each-other philosophically.

Death

All black-holes are gone, the galaxies have winked out. Little to no energy of use remains. The last remaining offspring go into a cold death. What started as seeds on planets as primitives building shelters creating gods and beliefs to make sense of a vast universe have finally born their fruit in the Second Generation. As the old universe dies the Second Generation will then become, the next, and manifest themselves into new universes. They will tear reality into new forms, creating new universes with new structures. Their consciousness will form the consciousnesses of these universes.

Void

The Second Generation crack open like eggs and new universes are born. Unreachable from the previous and separate from each-other. In the old there is nothing, every piece of existence decays into nothingness, time ends.

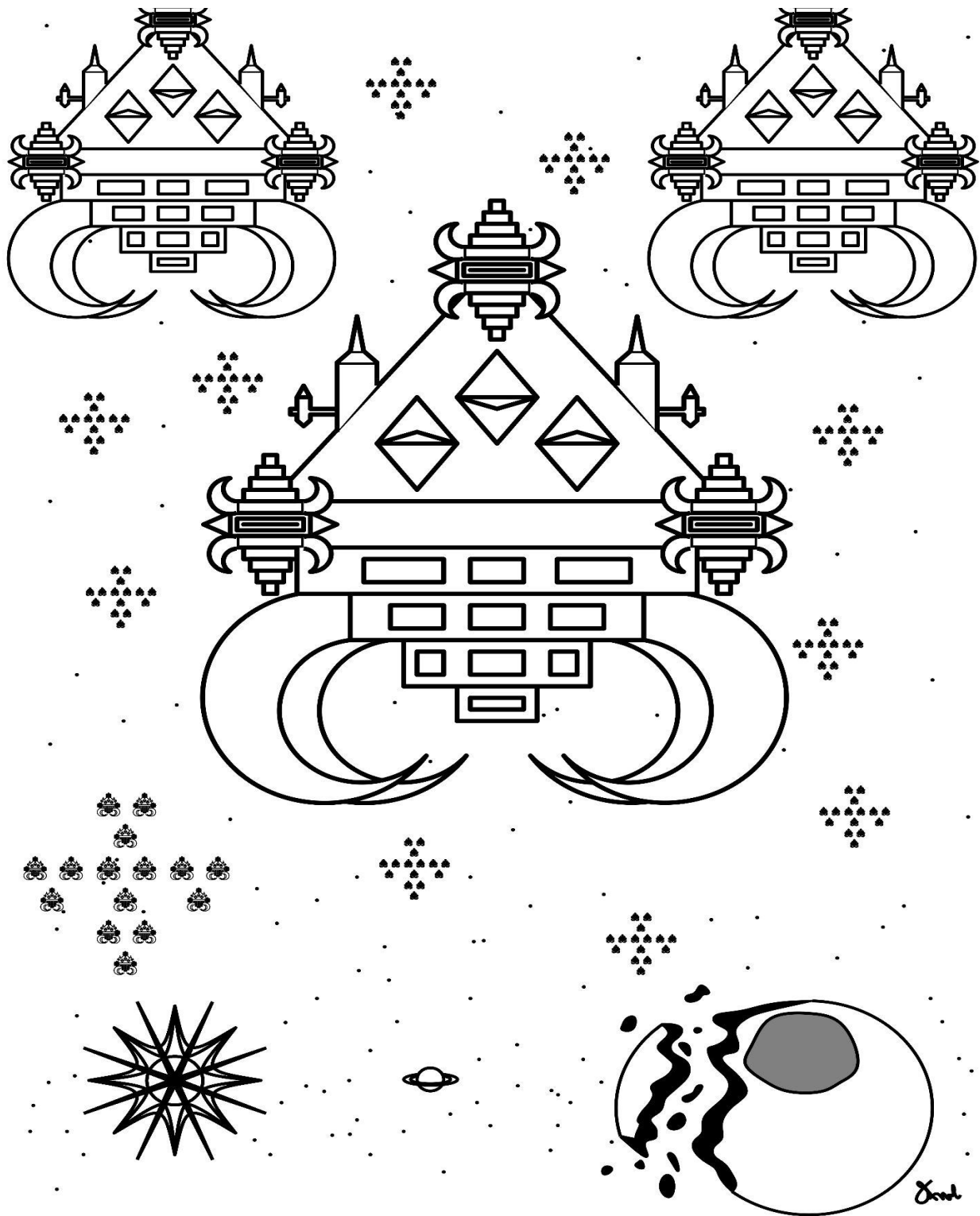


End

Important Beings

- *Behemoth (Intelligent Design)*: The size of the average moon, Behemoth can be described as somewhat cylindrical, with massive ringlike wings. These wings are meant for capturing the energies of stars and propelling itself at a fraction of the speed of light. Internally, Behemoth is organic. It uses a form of fusion to give itself energy and can digest raw asteroids as food.
- *The Justicar (Intelligent Design)*: Obsessed with bringing the dead of their ancestral race back to life via genetic clones and judging them based on the culture of its builders. It has constructed artificial heavens and hells for this purpose, and sees dispensing justice as the highest achievable goal.
- *Archivist (Intelligent Design)*: Many archivists exist, each with their own collection of curiosities. They covet the exotic and the alien, building vast interstellar museums and zoos of their specimens. Archivists are one of the main forces preserving life.
- *The Wanderer (Intelligent Design)*: Explores the universe looking for meaning. They will often camouflage themselves and take residence with a sentient race. Can live thousands of years among a species before moving on.
- *The Hunters (Intelligent Design)*: Hunts other Intelligent Designs and higher beings. What technology they can salvage, they take and use to form themselves new bodies, often becoming exponentially more dangerous.
- *The Universal Consciousness (Intelligent Design)*: The Universal Consciousness is a massive organic being composed of many minds. It seeks to unify all life in its hive mind and turn the world into one consciousness.
- *The Archangel (Intelligent Design)*: Tries to transform every culture it finds into its truth. Often takes on the guise of messianic figures. Believes once their work is done, god will return to the universe.

- *The Shepherd (Offspring)*: Believes life is an abomination and continually works on trapping it. Due to the uncertainty of life after death, this involves entombing all life in stasis to await the end of the universe.
- *The Twins (Offspring)*: Two members of the Offspring designed by warring Intelligent Designs to defeat each-other in combat. They are stuck in an endless battle which will last until the cold death of the universe.
- *The Escapees (Offspring)*: Believes the universe is a trap meant for them. Incredibly destructive as it generally considers others to be unreal or actors.

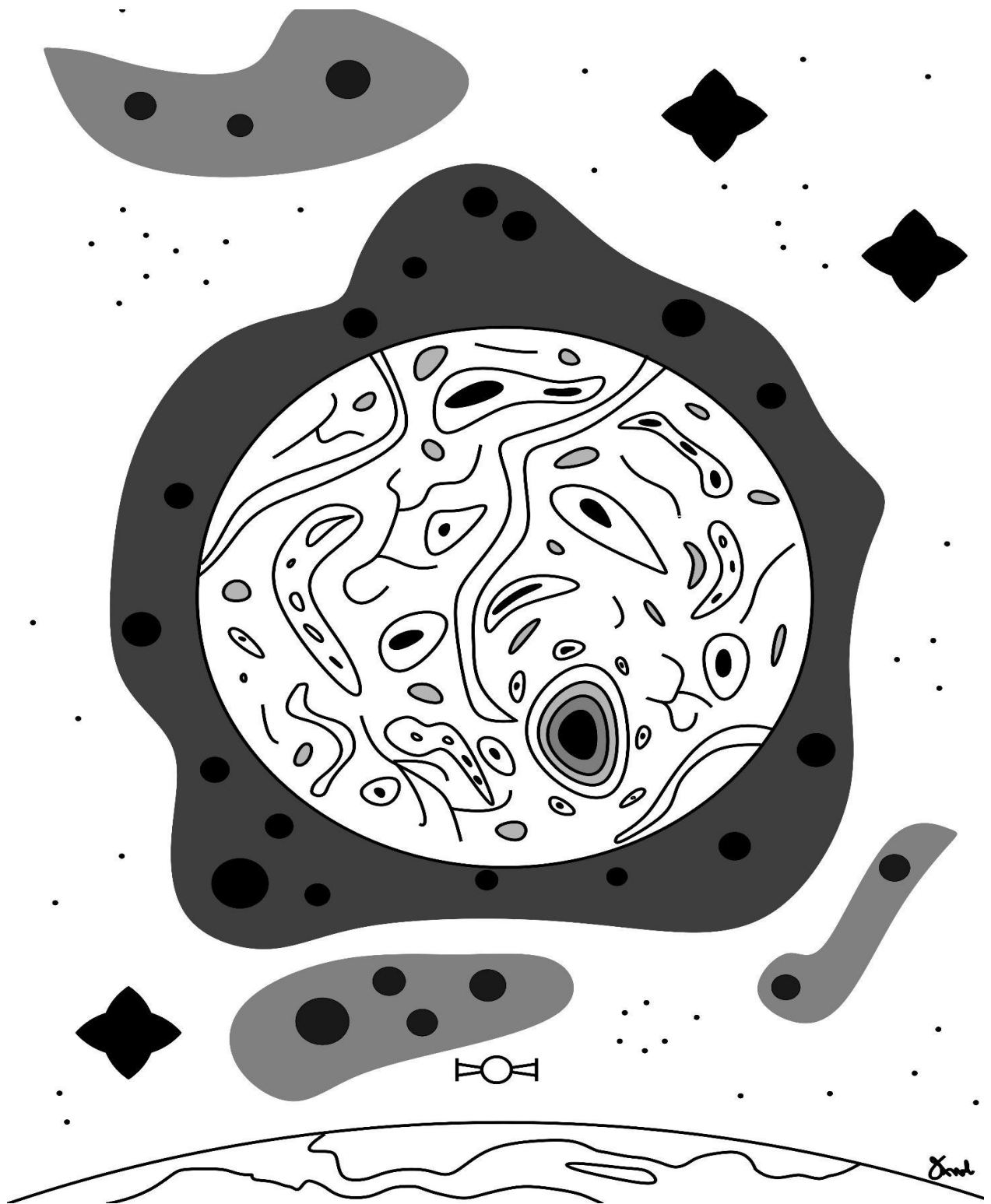


Wonders of the Universe

- *The Great Charnel House:* In orbit around a small sun lies a many layered mausoleum the size of a large gas giant but with only a tiny fraction of the mass. It contains quadrillions of preserved remains of the populations of billions of species. Carefully attended by robed caretakers dressed in the death shrouds of various races, it is ruled by immortal forms manifesting depictions of death.
- *The Amalgam:* An enormous mass of fused flesh and machine, composed of the sentient races of several previously warring species. There billion of minds trapped together in senseless warring babble. Built as punishment for crimes.
- *The Mouth:* A mobile solar system with thousands of life sustaining farming ring-worlds about its sun. Endless factories manned by crawling workers produce billions of tons of food span the orbit of a central world. These factories ship to billions of kitchens on the world's surface where in each ten thousand-year-old chefs produce exquisite meals which are finally shipped off to a central palace. In the palace lies their god, with a mouth the size of a continent filled with trillions of tongues and other sensory organs, consuming all. As their solar system, pushed by a solar engine, travels the universe they consume living worlds for new foodstuffs and products, leaving their original inhabitants on desolate dead worlds. Occasionally, entire species are fed live to the mouth.
- *The Library of Forbidden Knowledge:* A massive space station containing the banned books of a billion cultures and religions.
- *The Ark of the Dead:* A spaceship carrying the remaining population of one of the largest and most prolific intergalactic species. Surrounded by automaton and guided by an Intelligence Design, it passes through and harvests life in the galaxy while waiting for the universes end where they intend to meet god.
- *The Heaven and Hell Matrix:* Planets are harvested for every living sufficiently conscious being by automatic jewel encrusted servitors robbed in the garments of alien angels. Brought before one of countless

arbiters, they are judged on the Book of Sins. The minds of these beings are then suspended in machinery and subjected to either the peak of possible pleasure or of pain the life form can achieve for quadrillions on quadrillions of years.

- *Paradise*: free from the corruption of art-forms, philosophy, and chaos, the inhabitants of paradise achieve a perfectly ordered life in which all things are chosen for them by their overseer.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oxnar is a computer science PhD student who, after a tense two thousand year rivalry with Euclid, is currently developing algorithms in non-Euclidean geometry. That'll show him!

COLOSOS

EDUARDO FRAJMAN

Two days before...

Two boys fighting in the wood, eighteen perhaps, spitting bitter words Akamu couldn't understand. He came to them, feet uncertain in the mud, demanding "enough!" in heavy English.

Two heads swung to him. Zàng Lián hissed "lí kái!," go away! The stranger said nothing. He turned, raised both arms, brought them down on Zàng Lián's head with such force that Akamu lost his footing. The force of a great boulder falling off a cliff. Impossible force.

Minutes later it was over, Akamu cowering behind a tree, Zàng Lián broken, dead in the wet earth, the stranger gone.

*

Four years before...

A bus ticket. A sack with dry socks, extra underwear, a bar of chocolate. No money.

"Te la roban." Mamá cried and cried.

Rafael begged to stay. They said "no hay otra," not after cousin Silviano was shot down. They swore they loved him. He never saw them again.

Twenty of them – the oldest fifteen, some as young as eight or nine – rode the rain-soaked country, crossed at La Hachadura into Guatemala, the border guards smoking, looking the other way, then kept on north to Tecun Umán, just below the Suchiate river and the border with Mexico.

*

Two days before...

"Did you know?" Akamu still hugged the blanket the rescue team had wrapped him in.

Sun Lu-Tang made tea.

"He showed me... prowess when he arrived. He came to learn qigong, to better control it, he said."

“Control what?”

Sun Lu-Tang shook his bald head.

“What should I do, shifu?”

Sun Lu-Tang recited some Taoist parable about wu wei, about happenstance, about letting life flow as one lets water run through one’s fingers.

Akamu sighed. “I can’t do nothing.”

“I know.”

Sun Lu-Tang extracted a manila envelope from his desk cabinet. Inside was a flip-phone, a number.

*

Two days before...

In the midst of all the chaos, the construction, the budget cuts, the militiamen terrorizing Highway 380, the drug runners shaking down gas-station owners for protection money, she had to do this to him now.

“It’s just a couple of days, Sheriff.”

That it was. Could Alphonse say no? Three months she’d run the office, admirably replacing old Bessie Alberts, who until her last day was convinced the internet was a steel mesh you use to keep out desert flies.

“I wouldn’t ask...”

Hadn’t missed a day. Tidy filing system. Virtuosa scheduler.

“Go. I’ll figure it out.”

*

Four years before...

They found two men to cross them over. All the money they took, plus Miranda, a classmate of Rafael’s from back home, for the sweaty one, and a wispy, terrified little girl he didn’t know for the one with the scarred cheek.

In two wooden skiffs they cut through the river, Miranda’s blank face lighting the way.

As they waded ashore two small boys disappeared into the water. The men paid no mind. Once on land they simply left.

The fifteen-year-olds, Hermidio and Barry, started walking. Everyone followed.

“A dónde vamos, Hermidio?”

“Hacia el pueblo. Al tren.”

*

Two days before...

Breaking a lock's easy, doing it quietly's the hard part. Horace and Vassili were unmatched.

“Almost there.”

“Hurry up!”

Until the voice emerged over the Manhattan traffic.

“Am I interrupting something?”

The shape of a man in the doorway. Big. Black jacket, black ski mask. Vassili rushed him. The man flung him against the wall. Horace pulled his gun. The man moved too quickly. Impossibly quickly.

Then his pocket rang.

“Don't move,” he said, not unkindly, raising the flip-phone to his ear.

“Mierda!”

He trussed them up for the cops to find and disappeared into the night.

*

Four years before...

Always hungry, never thirsty. Too tired to cry.

It rained and rained. They walked under the trees hugging the road. On the second day Barry and Hermidio went food hunting and didn't return.

Then the storm. Thunder whips. Blinding flashes. The little ones screaming. The big ones ran, leaving them behind. Rafael did too.

He ran until he heard her.

“Ayúdemen!”

Diana in the water, all alone, drowning. He stopped for her.

“Levántate!”

“No puedo!”

He lifted her up. She weighed nothing.

They hunkered under an higuerón, waiting to see who'd die first, them or the storm.

*

The day before...

"I don't mean to be rude. I just don't understand. Every time...."

"I'm sorry, professor."

The girl's orange face was scrunched up, her eyes swollen red. Ancy fought her own temper.

"The samples in that lab are unique. Irreplaceable. Do you understand?"

"It won't happen again..."

She was a plain, dumpy little thing. Her English was pitiful.

"Next time I'll ask them to transfer you."

The girl hung her head, all out of promises.

"I want this mess cleaned up. You know Diana, my assistant?"

Her fluff of hair danced as she nodded.

"She'll show you how."

*

The day before...

Vero preferred talking to texting. Kirsten obliged, their vintage ringers for each other the same – "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun."

"You going tonight?"

"I don't know."

"Good money."

"Good grief."

"I'll keep them off you, I promise."

"I'll do the same."

"Until I don't want you to."

"Don't even joke about that."

"I didn't last time."

"I remember, naughty girl."

"Couldn't help it."

"Right. Where is it, anyway?"

"Outside Juarez."

"A ways."

"Evan said they're bussing us all down."

"How many?"

"Thirty girls."

"Jesus. Big party."

“Best kind!”
“Very much disagree.”
“Wear something hot.”
“I always do.”

*

Four years before...

A full day Rafael walked and Diana followed. She talked the whole time, in heaven for joy to have found him.

“De dónde eres?”

“De Las Palmas.” Cold, starving, Rafael could barely get the words out.

“Yo soy de Ilobasco.”

She’d crossed from El Salvador with a group like his, set out with a girl from back home who never made it to the river.

Her arms and legs were skinny like a bird’s. Diana Pajarita.

They ate soggy bread crust from a trash can. When night came she fell asleep leaning her head against his chest.

*

The day before...

Voices in the lounge. Diana sitting on the couch, her face in her arms, audibly sobbing. Another girl next to her, murmuring consolation. Standing by the wall, looking pensive, the most beautiful man Ancy had ever seen.

He offered his hand.

“I’m Alejandro,” said the dimple at the corner of his mouth. “Alex.”

Diana wiped her eyes.

“Dr. Ooman. I’m... sorry... You remember my friend Ariadna?”

Ancy did. The girl flashed a little wave.

“What’s all this?”

Diana began. Alex left the room, an old flip-phone in his hand. That was curious. Appreciatively, Ancy watched him go.

*

The day before...

Hossenberg was a good deputy, also a class A whiner.
“I told Ms. Barrera weeks ago.”
The schedule on the monitor might as well be in Sanskrit.
“Just go. I’ll figure it out.”
“You’re an angel, boss. The wife and I’ll pray for you from Cancun!”
Breathe, Alphonse. One moment of peace?
“Sheriff Kaneza!”
Great. Montesinos never brought good news.
“Two-day delay.”
“You gotta be...”
“Both hammers broke on the same day. Weird coincidence, actually.”
“You don’t got other tools?”
“Nothing else can get through that lower wall.”
“You’re packing up?”
“Back in three days. I hope.”

*

Four years before...

They found others eventually, adults and kids and mothers with babies, converging like river tributaries, all vaguely knowing where to go. The town. The train.

There they found the loud circle of boys by the picnic tables. Inside was Alejandro, on the ground, three large ones kicking him over and over. Another held Verónica by the arms, she snarling like a demon.

“Vámonos!” Diana whispered.

Rafael nodded, then saw Arón, bruised and bloody. He begged them to help.

“No, no...” Diana started crying.

Rafael considered her, the boys, the circle. He murmured “qué bruto!” and ran inside.

*

The day before...

“Is he your boyfriend?” Ancy blushed as she said it.

Ariadna shook her head.

“He was my sister’s... Not anymore.”

“Does your sister live with you in New Mexico?”
She glanced down at Diana.
“We’re actually not sure where she lives.”
Their friend Rafael was dead, Diana said. Was killed.
“You remember Arón? He visited a few months ago? We showed him
the lab?”
Short. Quiet. Black hair. Sad eyes.
“I remember.”
“We think... we know he did it.”
Ancy struggled to understand.
“But why? You’re just kids!”
Alex returned. They conferenced in Spanish.
They told her.

*

Four years before...

Alex and Vero were fourteen. Arón thirteen. Their group had held
together until Luciano, the biggest and meanest, went after Verónica.
They laughed after, about the beating Alex and Arón took, about Vero
sinking her nails into the monkey boy, about Rafa ramming into Luciano’s gut
like a bull.
Searching for food they found an empty house, burned black, still
smoking. Outside were Ariadna and María, ashen-faced, plastic-eyed.
“Agua. Por favor.”
Men had come in the house in the night, killed Mamá and Papá, taken
their baby brother Anuncio.
Verónica decided for them all.
“Vengan con nosotros.”

*

The day before...

“You’re how old?”
“Seventeen next March, professor.”
“You got into college at sixteen?”
“I didn’t. I’m not a student.”
Ancy’s knees went weak.

“You’re not...”

“I never even went to high school.”

“But... you’re the best lab tech I’ve ever... you... how?”

“You never checked...”

She hadn’t even thought to check on the spindly bright-eyed strong-voiced girl, the girl who knew exactly what the Ancy Ooman Laboratory for the Study of Cellular Physiology specialized in and had her research prospectus all written up.

“You look so young!,” Ancy remembered saying.

She’d grinned. “I get that a lot.”

*

Four years before...

Still they thought, the seven of them, to go to the train, ride to Ixtepec and once there find a way to climb onto La Bestia, the colossal freighter that’ll cross the desert northward, over endless tracks to the magical kingdom of Los Estados Unidos. They might’ve gone that way, maybe made it to the border, maybe died along the way. Maybe broken apart from each other. But they didn’t.

Alex was the first to spot Luciano and his band. He tried to rush the others away.

“Mi amor!,” shrieked Luciano. Verónica went white. “Ya te vi!”

*

The day before...

All her research. All that work.

“It’s yours?”

Diana was done crying. In a blink she was the no-nonsense lab tech again.

“I needed an expert in the field, a lab out of the way...”

“A minor league expert, you mean.”

Then, in a blink, Diana was someone else. Not the young co-ed doing extra credit after Bio 101. Not the budding scientist seeking Ancy’s wisdom and expertise. Her eyes seemed to deepen, her voice.

“You’re a wonderful scientist, Dr. Ooman. You’ll be remembered for this. I promise.”

Curiously, Ancy thought, Ariadna's face darkened at these words.

*

Four years before...

They ran into the forest, the pack of howling boys behind them.

"Ya te agarro, mi amor!"

Arón, tiny, slippery, went ahead, finding a path among the tallgrass and the trees. Alex and Rafa held the back. It was useless. They were close.

"Ayay!" Ariadna fell to the ground, two red fires at her ankle.

They didn't have time to look for the snake. They kept on, Ariadna holding on to Alex's shoulders.

"Ahí estás, mi amor! Te agarro!"

Arón slipped, rolled downhill. Rafa and Alex decided together. They shoved the others into the ravine, followed behind.

*

The day before...

Three blood samples, all equally unlike any normal human blood, otherwise radically different from each other.

"Holding out on me...Sneaking around...Just yelled at the cleaning girl..."

Diana shrugged.

"You would've understood immediately. It was too soon."

"Understood what?"

"Show her," said Ariadna.

Alex made a production of walking around the room – he seemed to Ancy someone who enjoyed making a production – before picking up a stool with metal legs. He raised his left arm, held it straight ahead, and with his right slammed it hard with the stool. The metal stretched and bent like a candy snake.

*

Four years before...

Huddled under a rock around Ariadna, who was whimpering her pain, the swelling on her ankle throbbing and hot.

Diana chirped, pointing to a dark corner. A tuft of something, a different green than the grass and the shrubs, a bluish tint, as if glowing from inside, with squat leaves, almost round and folded onto themselves, and at the end of each stem a flower, the same blue-green color as the leaves, and at the center of each flower a fruit the size of a grape, the size of an eye.

She reached for it, Diana Pajarita.

*

The day before...

"You can all do that?"

"We can grow..." said Alex

"Cultivate," corrected Diana.

This thing, this compound, was in every cell of their body, they claimed, and they could actively, deliberately shape it, direct it.

"I was dying," Ariadna said. "I was. It was Diana who found the fruit, who ate it first." Her eyes glowed with unfallen tears. "But it was María, my sister, who first realized. She was just a baby, you understand, professor? Eleven years old and she knew. Told me to look for it inside, follow it, lead it to where it hurt."

*

Four years before...

They stayed put most of that day.

"Búsqüenlo," María taught them, "bien adentro."

María pictured it as a little mouse, a curious, good-humored creature, exploring, sniffing around, spreading joy. Verónica felt it as a viscous substance that oozed through her this way and that. Arón saw a little him inside himself, a pack of tools slung over a shoulder, eager to build. Alex kneaded it, stretched it like uncooked pizza dough. For Rafa it was a bright light that connected him with the others, with the world, with everything. For Ariadna it was ever after María's voice.

*

The day before...

“And the plant?”

“We went back to look. Never found it. We don’t know what it was or where it came from, how, why it chose us.”

“Chose you?”

Diana lowered her eyes.

“I can’t explain it better.”

Ancy counselled herself to be patient, to think, to let the significance sink in. A world-changing discovery. Her name engraved forever among the pioneers of science.

“We can help each other,” said Diana, as if reading her mind.

But first they had to find the others.

“Please, professor, not a word to anyone. We’ll be back tomorrow. First thing.”

*

Four years before...

Later, weeks later, when they had a safe place, a home to share, the seven of them, to cultivate, to watch and help each other change, María tore a page from a magazine, framed it, and hung it on the wall.

*El que retorna, el campo agradecido;
Óptimo fruto, que obediente ofrece,
es del Señor, pues si fecundo crece,
se lo debe al cultivo recibido.*

*[The one returns, the field thankful;
the choice fruit, obediently offered,
belongs to God, for fecund growth,
is owed to the gift of cultivation.]*

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz
Soneto XXVIII

*

The day before...

Biosynthesis, as Ancy spent years explaining to mostly unprepared, mostly uninterested students, could theoretically be enhanced in a multiplicity of ways – pro-proteins could be activated more effectively by improving post-translational modification, new pathways could develop for

recalibration of high-energy molecules, cofactors could be produced more prolifically for catalytic enzymatic processes, polymerization could be facilitated by improving monomer reactions...

All of these processes at work at once, reinforcing each other, coalescing into one another, unmediated, with close to instantaneous, impossible effects. Unchartable increases in bone and muscle mass, tendon strength, neuron replenishment.

Yes, she understood what it meant.

*

Four years before...

Once Ariadna could walk they set out, silent, each palpitating, molding. They felt strong. They felt new. They were starving.

Food first, then shelter. Nowhere to go but to town, to the train station. Luciano was there, of course. Waiting.

"Hola, mis amores," he purred.

Alex stepped forward.

"Basta ya. No te hicimos nada."

Luciano cackled, ignoring him.

"Vente ya conmigo, mi amor," he reached his hand to Vero.

Alex opened his mouth, trying to stall, to decide what to do. Charge Luciano, maybe. Sacrifice himself to save the rest.

There turned out to be no need.

*

The night before...

Horrible party, as she knew it would be. Guns and drugs and sweaty, grabby hands everywhere.

"Don't touch!," Kirsten would go rock still. That usually worked.

She made her way around the dance floor, seeking space, seeking air. Outside she spotted Verónica chatting up three of the worst-looking sorts, tattoos on their necks and Berettas hanging from their belts. And she fearless, in her element, giving all indication of loving every moment, rubbing against them, smiling perfect teeth.

Kirsten went to her. "Let's go home."

"You go," said Verónica. "I'll catch up."

The men licked their lips.

*

The night before...

“What do you mean you’re not coming in? Hernandez and Lombardi’re about to clock out... I don’t give a crap... Hossenberger’s out too... No, Ms. Barrera didn’t tell me...”

“I’m sorry, love. Can’t come home tonight... I know... I promise it won’t.... Please don’t say that... I love you... I know... I’m sorry...”

Before abandoning Alphonse, Hernandez brought one last present.

“Put him in 2A, boss. Made a mess of Dilly’s Pub, carrying on, picking fights...”

“What was his blood alcohol?”

“Strange thing, sheriff. Breathalyzer showed nothing. Zero.”

“You ask him about it?”

“Not really a talker.”

*

The night before...

What was she thinking? If she got in that car...

“Vero!,” Kirsten pleaded.

“Go away!”

“You wanna come, baby?,” said one of them, slithery, pale.

“She doesn’t.”

A voice behind her, a tall, gorgeous man. Impossibly gorgeous.

“Me la prestan?” He grinned at the three narcos, all friendly like.

“Ándate,” snapped the one with the moustache.

The next voice was the one Kirsten least expected.

“Qué haces aquí?” Verónica, glaring at the newcomer!

“Es urgente.”

Moustache touched his gun. Slithery dragged Vero by the arm towards the SUV. Pretty boy backed down.

“Te veo después!,” he called.

*

The night before...

Alphonse couldn't remember the last time he was alone in the office. Three cars out on night patrol. That was it. Nobody on phones. Nobody on cell duty. Ms. Barrera not answering his calls or his texts.

The stairway reeked of dust and glue and burnt rubber. Montesinos and his crew hadn't even cleaned up.

He filled a Cool-Aid pitcher for the alleged drunkard in 2A. The other cells were all, unusually, empty.

Just a boy, couldn't be more than eighteen.

"What were you doing in that bar, kid?"

Two dark eyes considered him.

"No hablo inglés."

*

The night before...

Verónica had disappeared into the SUV with slithery. The other two stayed put for a few extra beats.

"Come with me," gorgeous put a hand on Kirsten's back.

"Don't touch!," she snapped.

He pulled back.

"It's ok. I know you're freaked."

"No kidding!," she motioned towards the retreating men, pulled out her phone. "We have to get her out!"

"She'll be fine. I'm Alex, by the way. You?"

"You know Verónica?"

"She's my... she's like my sister."

"And you just let her..."

"I promise it's fine." He shifted his chin just so. "Well, maybe not for everyone."

*

Four years before...

Red-faced Verónica pushed Alex aside. Luciano's eyes got big when she pounced. He raised his hands but Vero was on him, reached for his hair and

pulled down, down, and she slammed her fist into the back of his head, and Luciano fell face-first into the dirt.

Luciano's boys, nothing more than boys, watched, watched as Vero brought her foot down on Luciano's skull, hard, again, on his shoulders, his wrists, his groin. When he moaned she broke his nose. When he went quiet she hit him again, again.

She howled as she did it. She howled.

*

The night before...

He'd liked her at first. She didn't laugh at his name, "Eztli."

"Beautiful," she'd said, touched his shoulder.

Now it was ruined, the güera and the tall one had ruined the mood. But Eztli wasn't gonna let this one go. He dragged her into the back seat, knowing Claudio and Pedrejo were behind, that he'd only have a few seconds alone to show her he was boss.

He shut the door and turned to her and there she was, little beads of sweat on her nose.

"Hola, mi amor," she purred, and hell was in her eyes.

*

Four years before...

Their first smartphone was stolen, their first computer. They stole, yes, food, money, until they didn't have to. They got jobs, Alex hauling boxes, Rafa mopping floors, Ariadna and Vero making tortillas, enough to pay for a roof, a bed. They took turns sleeping on it. Rafa and Ariadna shared for a time. Alex and María fell in love on that bed.

All the while they cultivated, each drawing a different blueprint, a different path.

They read, in Spanish and English, they watched movies, went online, taught each other to dance, to play, to sing, to fight.

*

That day...

He'd drunk all his Cool-Aid, snarfed down his dinner, barely slept from what Alphonse could tell. Just sat on the cot, back to the wall, eyes dim, staring ahead, his expression at once calm and purposeful.

Alphonse set a chair in front of 2A and sat.

"I'm not buying this no hablo garbage. You're gonna tell me your name and your deal."

The boy rewarded this with a lazy smile.

"Yep, you got me, Sheriff."

"I got squat. Ran your prints through the system, all the systems, all night long. You don't exist..."

"Arón."

"Arón what?"

"Arón nothing."

*

Three years before...

A cheap, rundown hacienda in San Marcos Tlacuilotepec.

María their coder, their hacker.

Diana their scientist, devouring online courses in physics, chemistry, medicine.

Rafa their linguist – English first, then French, Mandarin, Japanese.

Ariadna their scholar, their librarian.

Alex their encyclopedia of sports, film, music.

Arón and Verónica their memories of the real world they'd left behind, the poverty, the violence, the hunger, the fear.

They made sure to grow strong enough for self-defense, smart enough not to be fooled, not to give themselves away. They shared their feelings, their thoughts, their plans, though never all. Never all.

*

That day...

Beautiful young people all over her lab. Something out of a United Colors billboard. Alex introduced her to high-cheekboned Akamu, a lean, tight pack of muscle, and the two girls, each more stunning than the other. Kirsten, the blonde, said "howdy" in a Texas drawl. Verónica, the curvy brunette, her face a dance of twitchy anxiety, barely offered a nod.

“Is Diana here?”

Alex paced around.

“She won’t answer my calls.”

“She left with Ariadna.”

“I know. I can’t reach her either.”

“Did you go to her place?”

“I can’t... we... we don’t tell each other our addresses.”

*

Three years before...

Vero and Alex bought matching full-length mirrors and worked on their bodies together. Alex grew taller, wider. His face changed, his jawline, the color of his eyes. Vero’s waist shrank, her chest and bum swelled, her hair now fell in cascading curls around her shoulders. They strove more than the others to look older.

They began going out most nights, each their own way, and the stories around town began swirling, of men found beat up and bloodied in dark allies, of would-be robbers dragged to the police station by a mysterious giant dressed all in black.

*

That day...

“I’m sorry I missed your messages!”

“About time you called me back! This place is a graveyard. Nobody’s come in for early shift. What’s happening?”

“I... I’m not sure...”

“Ms. Barrera, how could you let this...?”

“I’m on my way to you now, Sheriff.”

“I thought you were in Arizona.”

“I drove through the night. I’ll be there within the hour.”

At least she could answer the phones. Alphonse rubbed his temples. Fourteen deputies all on leave on the same day, each with a perfectly valid excuse, each “ran it by Ms. Barrera.”

The whole thing smelled rotten.

*

Three years before...

María asked them to stop.

“Nos ponen a todos en peligro.”

“Por qué no usarlo?” they argued, to make the world better?

You don’t fix the world by beating people, María countered, playing vigilante on would-be robbers, would-be rapists. Diana agreed. Rafa and Arón were undecided, in love as they both were with Vero from afar. From afar, because she had no time for them, for anyone other than the men she sought to punish, which was all men.

Ariadna didn’t care about the world or about punishment. She thought only of Anuncio, her stolen baby brother.

*

That day...

“Have you seen? What they can do?”

Akamu nodded. He had a square, serious, unfriendly face, but Kirsten needed to talk.

“You saw? Their friend Rafael...?”

“I don’t know... that his name.” His English was painful. “We call him Zàng Liân at school. It mean ‘dirty face.’” He hung his head.

“What school?”

“Edmonton, Canada. School of tai chi and qigong.”

“I’ve heard of tai chi...”

“Chinese art of spiritual cultivation. School of shifu Sun Lu-Tang. Very great shifu. Gave me number. Now I here.”

“Why are you here?”

“To see more.”

Kirsten nodded now. “Yeah. Me too.”

*

That day...

She swooped into the office all out of breath. He should’ve known. He accepted her apologies, her excuses. Got mixed up. Can’t believe this happened. Full shift is on for tonight.

That part was true. Lombardi and Hernandez and “Walnut” Machado down in cells would come to work like it was nothing, just another evening.

He should’ve known.

“Lo hiciste?” Arón in 2A was talking to Ms. Barrera. Tears streamed down her face.

She got him from behind, a good, strong punch, strong, shoved him into 2A. Alphonse felt for his phone. It wasn’t there.

His gun was.

*

That day...

Off in their corner, in their own universe, Alejandro and Verónica seemed to have forgotten they were there.

Ancy leaned to Kirsten.

“How’s your Spanish?”

“I’m from south Texas. What do you think?”

The professor had a striking face, olive-dark, sharp-featured.

Kirsten could barely hear, except when Alex pressed the phone against his face.

“Estás segura?... Cómo sabes?... Dónde estás?...”

He slammed it shut.

“We have to go,” he said.

“Go where?”

“New Mexico.”

That was María on the phone, he said. Ariadna’d gone back sometime during the night.

“Where’s Diana?”

They saw the answer on his face.

*

That day...

“You open this right now! I’ll shoot you!”

Arón and Ms. Barrera were hugging. Alphonse’s Spanish was passable. You had to, he told her. We had to.

Arón let go, took a step toward 2A.

“This isn’t about you, Sheriff. It’ll be over soon. We’ll be out of your hair.”

“I’m counting to five. I swear I’ll put a bullet in your chest.”

“Sheriff...”

“Do you hear me?”

Another step.

Two shots. To the chest. Even with a vest he would’ve flown back, lost consciousness. He didn’t.

“It hurts, I ain’t gonna lie.”

Impossible.

Then they told him.

*

Two years before...

Thursday night was girls’ night. Vero liked drinking, the others dancing. They had drivers’ licenses, passports, Mexican and American.

Two men was how it started, wanted to chat up Vero. They all did.

“Hoy no, chicos,” she turned away.

They didn’t like that. She liked that even less.

Ambulances were called, police cruisers, even an army van.

Alex and María asked no questions.

“Empaquen. Nos vamos al norte.”

Ariadna balked. She wanted to stay, search for Anuncio. María called her insane, irrational. They fought about it. Didn’t matter. Next morning Vero, Rafa, and Arón were all gone.

*

That day...

“Ever heard of Katherine Mansfield, Sheriff? Genius. Died at thirty-four of tuberculosis. Wrote this story called ‘The Fly.’

So this man, the boss, is hanging with his broken-down old friend, Woodfield. He pities the geezer, they both know it, but Woodfield also knows the boss’ son died, and any power is better than no power, so he mentions it. After, the boss sits alone with his pain. A fly lands on his inkpot. He drips some ink on the fly’s wings, waits for it to clean itself, then drip-drops more. Tortures the fly to death. That’s the story.”

*

Two years before...

Maybe they were right, Rafa suggested. Maybe she should stop being so angry.

“No entiendes nada,” she hissed.

He held her. He did know. He did understand.

“Te amo, te amo.”

He tried to kiss her.

“No!”

“No seas necia.”

“Ya, idiota!”

She pushed him away. He let her. He loved her, he said again.

Arón was there, they realized. Watching them in silence.

Thinking...who knew what he was thinking?...who knew what was going on inside any of them, this power inside them, this impossible, inexhaustible power?

What, in the end, were they to do with it?

*

That day...

“Vienen de camino.” Ms. Barrera, Ariadna, looked afraid.

“You see, Sheriff, it has to be now. Diana was trying to synthesize the compound, enhance it. She would’ve been...”

“So you killed her.” Alphonse addressed Ariadna, hoping her guilt would work for him.

“He’s right,” she whispered. “It had to be done. My sister...”

“What about her?”

“She doesn’t care about anyone. Our baby brother was lost and she didn’t care to look for him.”

“Where is she?”

“We don’t know. First Alex, Verónica, the professor. Then we’ll find her. The two of us.”

Those were her last words.

*

That day...

Using the smallest words she could – words she hoped were intelligible to the Barbie doll and the martial artist who didn't speak English – Ancy recounted how Diana had pretended to receive the samples from some lab in Germany, how they'd worked for months analyzing the compound, identifying its basic components.

"I'd never seen anything like it. We were working on our first paper. I thought I was so nice giving her co-authorship..."

What she still couldn't understand...

"All on her own. How did she?"

"Maybe I can explain," the cleaning girl was there, orange-skinned, mop-haired, stupid-looking. "I'm María."

*

Two years before...

They lost each other. Vero never spoke to Rafael again. Ariadna never forgave María.

Long before, María had given them each a flip-phone with one number in the contacts list. She told them never to use smartphones, which would track movements and locations. Get a separate flip-phone for normal life. She found Arón's, cracked, the morning they said goodbye.

Just kids, let loose on the world, with no fear, no limitations but what their own priorities demarcated.

The teenage years are called "adolescence," the period of pain, the period of passion, of rage, of breaking, of becoming.

*

That day...

"Got yourself arrested."

"Yes."

"So you can fight it out down here, inside my concrete walls."

Just a kid. How to talk to him?

"You killed your sister. Ariadna."

Arón's lips disappeared into his mouth.

“And she killed Diana. Now these two...”

“Alex. Vero.”

“With your bare hands.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure you’ll win?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“You have to decide what to cultivate. Alex prioritized his looks, Vero too. Rafa wanted enlightenment or some tontera. María, Diana wanted to be geniuses.”

“Not you.”

“Not me. I’ve been preparing for today for two years. It’s going to be today.”

*

That day...

The two of them.

“Only Diana knew.” María grieved for her sister. “She thought we’d almost done it.”

“Done what?”

How could she not have seen it before, the spark in the girl’s eyes, the deliberation in her every movement? No wonder Alex, beautiful Alex, was captivated by her of all women.

“You’ve been playing me for months.”

“I’m sorry, professor. But, trust me, you’ll forget all about that after today.”

María tilted her head theatrically as she considered Kirsten and Akamu.

“You’ll do great.”

“For what?,” Ancy snapped.

“She was wrong, Diana Pajarita. We’d already done it.”

*

That day...

Books would be written about Sheriff Alphonse Kaneza’s testimony. About how Arón, nothing but sixteen years old, appointed himself savior,

scourge of his own brothers and sisters, just children like himself, who in his mind would inevitably devolve into the boss from 'The Fly.'

Alejandro was magnificent, Verónica fearsome in her wrath. Arón beat them, smashed them to the ground, for the sake of the world.

A hero he was, yet he was wrong.

"Stop!"

Kirsten ran to Verónica. Akamu showed Arón he was beaten. He grasped the bars of 2A and bent them apart like wet clay.

*

The day after...

For Ancy it was a dance, a dance like she remembered back in Bangalore, where she'd go visit as a child, a dance inside herself, inside her every cell, and she was learning how to lead that dance, how to step and twist and skip and bend.

Surely María had landed in Dakar by now. Ulaanbaatar after, she said, rural China, Siberia, then down the Americas at her leisure.

Ancy passed the fruits around to her relatives, her colleagues, her neighbors.

Before she left, María bought a smartphone.

"Go ahead and track me. I'm not special anymore."

FIN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eduardo Frajman has a PhD in political science from the University of Maryland, College Park. He has taught at the college level for over twenty years, at institutions including DePaul University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Oakton College, and the College of Lake County. His work has appeared in *Electric Literature*, *The Point*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, and many other publications.

CREATIVE WRITING CLUB

K. MARVIN BRUCE

“Multiple Breck Witnesses Report UFO!” the front page of the *Herald* screams. The self-congratulatory newspaper makes our university town seem so provincial. It’s an embarrassment. I mean this isn’t the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or even the *Boston Globe*, but still—UFOs front page material? I sweep it into the same mental bin with the story about the night the dead started driving their cars. Some things just can’t happen.

Too soon it’s time to fold the paper, gag down the last slug of lukewarm coffee, and get to work. Who’s got time for the impossible?

Breck High School is a museum piece to reactionary education. Built just after Sputnik went up, it’s equipped with things a normal high school doesn’t have. A planetarium, for example. Who puts a planetarium in a public school? In rural New Hampshire? Back in those days they wanted people to look up. “Keep watching the skies,” an insistent Ned Scott warned late-night television viewers. We watched and watched and nothing happened. Best keep your eyes firmly on the ground.

Mrs. Warfel wondered why I didn’t try to become a writer. English teachers don’t understand, I suppose. Some families can’t afford college. Still, I joined Creative Writing Club with the other wannabes. What small town kid ever really breaks through that bullet-proof acrylic ceiling called publication? Or gets out of town? There’ll always be a need for janitors. Those willing to clean up other people’s messes. And you don’t have to go into debt for the rest of your life. Stan Amendola over at Final Chapter Books doesn’t have an English degree. “You can read without one,” he says. Mom never finished school herself. She said, “You can write no matter what your job is. But you can’t pay your bills with stories.”

It’s Tuesday, the day the Eco-Waste trucks come. The dumpsters outside the loading dock are trenchantly pungent with a week’s worth of decay, wrapped in plastic. Human silage, for the benefit of rats and seagulls. I can smell it from my car. I pull into the staff lot and shoo away the Canada geese that seem to be taking over the country. Reluctantly they take to wing. I watch them fly. That’s when I see her in the sky. I tell myself it can’t be true.

“Hey, Zero, ready for another Tuesday?” Adam Auckley’s cool for a boss. Gruff and irreverent, he’s a guy who’s lost a lot but manages to keep his sense of humor. “Garbage in, garbage out.” He’s a philosopher too.

When the sleepy-eyed kids get here I’m overwhelmed by the river of hormones chaotically surging like corpuscles through the halls. Biology has already taught them what Mr. Hammersmith tries to instill through textbooks. Life’s all about the urge to procreate. They experiment with it and hide it from parents who pretend it doesn’t happen. I’m a janitor. I clean up messes.

“Everybody’s talking about it,” Andy Rouse tells me after lunch.

“People can’t fly, Andy.” He’s a nice kid. Clean cut. Never swears. Scared to death of girls. He works as a janitor at the school during the summer CETA program. The government doesn’t like giving handouts, but if kids are up to physical labor, they can justify keeping their families just above the poverty line. Or just below. Other kids turn up their noses as if the janitorial office itself stinks. We’re the cleaning crew. This is the cleanest room in school. Andy stops in after lunch to catch up.

“But lots of people saw it! I mean, I know it’s impossible and all, but everyone’s talking about it.”

“Did *you* see it, Andy?”

“Well, no.”

“You gotta be careful what you believe. Rumors most of all. People around here want some excitement. It’s like back when they said the world was gonna end. You remember that?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Warfel had us write an essay about it for Creative Writing Club.”

“And the world didn’t end. That’s the end of the story.” As he shuffles out in his oversized clothes, I almost call him back, but I stop myself. What good would it do him to tell him I saw it too?

Ralph and Stephen are out cleaning up the ceiling tiles that fell in room 207, back when the roof leak was discovered. Watch the skies, kids. Watch the

skies. I sit at the busted and repaired dining hall folding table that serves as our central office eating and meeting space. I sip my bitter coffee.

Suzie comes to me in my dreams. In my unconscious mind she's still like she was in high school. Pert, perky, four-foot-ten, ninety pounds of cheerleader. Bob-cut straight black hair. Eyes like a fawn. Under the bleachers at the football game on Friday night. She's telling me it's Kent, and not me. Her hand is so tiny in mine. She'll still be my friend, though.

She's never been happy with Kent. Everyone knows. He took a job selling hardware at Sears. They bought a little house on Oak and Third. But what girl wants to rope herself to a guy who makes a living cleaning up other people's puke? It's too late for me now. Suzie has moved on. She could've flown, though. She had the right stuff.

Those eyes, though. They were vaults, those eyes, full of secrets. Don't know what she saw in Kent. I couldn't have seen her flying this morning. UFOs aren't real.

"I sometimes imagine," I tell Ralph, "what would've happened if I'd become a writer."

"You mean you wonder what it's like to starve?" A comedian. "I hear it ain't all it's cracked up to be." Bits of ceiling tile cling to his blue Dickies. Cleaning up 207 is turning into a full-time job. He heads back to it. He was the most promising poet in Creative Writing Club. Now he carries a broom instead of a pen. The privileged kids from west of the river are busy drinking their brains away and joking about how if you're dumb, you'll end up like Ralph. "Ralph" has its own definition in our local slang dictionary.

I have to do it. I go see Suzie.

Breck isn't like the big city. You can still look up addresses in the phone book here. You can walk right up to a door and knock. Someone will answer. Suzie Giuseppe. She never took Kent's last name. She never moved away. If she's learned to fly, I want to know about it. No matter what the neighbors say.

In my imagination the woman who answers the door will be the girl I knew in high school. Petite, cute, just naive enough to be irresistible.

“Zero Desa? Is that you?” The thirty-year-old staring at me is an imperfect projection across the years, but my chest still thrills the way it did under the bleachers. The way it always does when a beautiful woman looks at me.

“Hi Suzie.”

She glances both ways, as if fearing paparazzi. “Well, maybe we’d better sit on the porch.” The neighbors. A married woman talking to a strange man. She steps out, pulling the door shut behind her and gesturing to some white, plastic lawn chairs stained dingy gray from overuse and the elements. “What brings you here?”

I’ve always been amazed at how girls seem able to walk away from youthful attachments. They can act as if that death-grip never existed. As if just five minutes in their presence wasn’t enough to die a happy man. If teenagers could be men.

“Well, we haven’t talked since graduation.” What’s the problem being friends with a former lover?

“I think that’s kind of normal, Zero,” she gently scolds with the same frank manner that made my knees melt as a sophomore. The slight downward cast of her head. The soft chiding of her large brown eyes. “There’s nothing to talk about. People move on, and it’s weird for a guy to visit another man’s wife.”

“I saw you out and about the other day.” She stiffens as I say that. “I just wanted to talk.”

“Where did you see me?” She tries hard to sound casual, but I hear the tension in her voice.

“I know it’ll sound crazy,” I hesitate. I always hesitated with Suzie. Her tawny eyes say more than her words. They’re telling me to tread lightly now. Maybe I should just go. I can’t leave her. It comes out in a whisper. “I saw you flying.”

“Thousands of people fly, every day,” she says without flinching.

“No, not like this.”

“Zero, this is crazy. I can’t start seeing you again. People will talk if you come here.”

“But, Suzie, I’m sure it was you!”

“I think you’d better go, Zero.” Is that sorrow or fear on her face? I’m a quivering teen as I stand to leave. Under the bleachers.

At home I dig out the box. Everyone has a box that holds their past. Curled and browned papers carelessly shoved inside along with mementos that mean something only to me. This box is my treasure chest. Creative Writing Club. I still have some of Ralph’s poems although he told me to burn them. I know it’s in here somewhere. I leaf through, paper by paper, lingering over piquant memories. There it is.

Creative Writing Club is where I met Suzie.

I didn’t talk to girls in class—too risky. Creative Writing Club, however, was all about sharing our innermost selves. You can’t write without undressing your soul. Suzie wrote a story advanced for someone in ninth grade. It impressed Mrs. Warfel enough to have it typed up and distributed to the club. I adored that story. I asked her if I could have the handwritten original. She was so pleased to see her work in print that she gladly gave it away. Our fingers glanced as she handed me the sheets torn from a school tablet.

The Wings of Time

by Suzie Giuseppe

“Look at the bird, See how she flutters about so. Just imagine if man could master that art.”

“Now Pathophelia, my daughter, could a man sprout wings and soar among the very clouds? Could he fly over the trees and rocks and oceans?”

“Father, I know he could, if he tried. Look over this great land, see the temples, the armies—our ships. Man can sail over the waters, could he not soar over the air?”

“But daughter, man has tried. Many a brave and many an intelligent man has plunged to his death off these cliffs, overlooking the mighty seas. I exhort you,

daughter, don't throw your life off of these rocks—Greece needs skillful young women like you."

"The sky is so open, so clean. The blueness of air, like the seas it beckons people toward it. Man wants the sky; the sky wants man."

"The land is beautiful also, see the fields and mountains, trees, animals, all of the Earth."

"But man confuses the Earth. The sky is serene, tranquil. Man can not confuse or destroy the heavens. Man can not reach that far."

"The banquet will soon begin. Do not be afraid to express yourself, but please, my daughter, don't do anything foolish."

"Yes, father, I understand."

"Well Pathophelia, are you enjoying the banquet? It is quite a festival, you know."

"Yes, Sophophanes, I enjoy the feast, but I do have a problem."

"Well, a young woman like you has such a big problem. Why don't you tell me about it? I may be able to help you."

"This afternoon my father and I were watching the birds flying over the sea. I told him I wanted to fly, but father said that man flying is helpless, a dream."

"That is quite a problem for someone your size. How would you go about this mysterious art of flying?"

"I would build a pair of wings perhaps, or a giant set of feathers, and I would go and leap off the cliffs or run on a plain, flat place and I would use my wings and fly."

"Hmmm, you are full of ideas—you are a born flyer. Perhaps we, and your father, can find a way for you to fly."

"Oh, would you? I just adore the skies."

“We’ll talk again in the morning.”

“Pathophelia, wake up. We will see about your flying now.”

“Oh, father, it is so early.”

“Sophophanes is here, we are ready and waiting for you. We have something special waiting.”

“Well, Isopia, she is your daughter. If you wish to stop her, now is your chance. She is a creative and intelligent girl.”

“I don’t think there is any harm in letting her try, I wouldn’t let her do it if it were too dangerous, it will be good for her. She will learn from it.”

“I’m ready father.”

“Pathophelia, Sophophanes, let’s go to the fields.”

“Oh, father, it isn’t!”

“Yes it is.”

“Father, Sophophanes, look! I’m flying!”

I linger over the loopy teenage handwriting. I remember that assignment, a story composed of dialogue only. Not bad for a fourteen-year-old. Stilted language and made-up names, and a view of ancient Greece that was wildly inaccurate. How could anyone from Breck know anything about ancient Greece? Still, there was real longing here. The raw yearning that she felt. Her naked soul. A desire to escape the mundane. To fly.

Reading the story again, in her own curly scrawl, I feel that same love and fear as the first time. Suzie wanted to fly. Her fiction was truth.

“I can’t tell you what to do with your time off work,” Adam shakes his head Wednesday morning, “but I wouldn’t go visiting another guy’s wife.”

“Kent wasn’t home.”

“That makes it worse.” Kent has a violent temper.

“Suzie and I are just friends.”

“My brother lives over on Oak, and people talk.”

“It’s not like we’re dogs, sniffing each other up.”

“Kent will hear, Zero. Take my advice. Forget her. For her sake, keep your head outta the clouds.”

Some advice I just can’t take.

Janitors are like ghosts. We’re seldom seen. We limit our time in the halls to when the kids are in class. We enter the lunchroom after they leave, cleaning up like ants. Other than occasional objects of scorn, we’re simply invisible. I may be a ghost, but I can’t ignore this spiritual ache. My soul tells me she’s something I shouldn’t shut out. Something I need.

“Zero, you can’t keep stopping over like this.” She’s wearing sunglasses and a scarf, although it’s cloudy. And she’s inside.

“I remember you in Creative Writing Club, talking about how you wanted to get out of Breck. Leave this place for good. Spread your wings and soar.” We’re both still here. I hold out the story. “Remember this?”

I need to see her eyes to read her. The sunglasses remain ominously in place. “I can’t believe you kept this.” I wait until she finishes.

“Can I come in?”

“Zero, it’s sweet of you to hold onto this,” she hands back the story. “But things have changed. We’re not in high school any more. You need to move on.” She turns her back. She steps inside. “Don’t stop over again.”

I sit in my apartment and think about Creative Writing Club. How we listened to stories better than our own. Stories that took us to places we’d never go. Places far from Breck. How Suzie sat next to me, close enough to touch. To smell. How the hidden became obvious. How just before graduation her

secret life became so clearly public. How Kent had got her pregnant. I have to get out.

I drive to Target, east of town. It has a Starbucks, well lit. I see other people here, out by the freeway. Everyone on the verge of escaping, but ultimately turning back.

Open land begins just across the highway. As if big blocks are the end of civilization itself. Daylight lingers, so I drive further east a bit. To the clearing in the woods just a few miles along. I pull over. Watch the skies. I contemplate the horizon and all that it implies.

Why did we go to Creative Writing Club? I was destined to be a janitor, she to marry a bully. The air is still and eerie and fills me with a longing sharper and harder than shattered glass. I've read that being a janitor is the lowest job a working man can take. A cleaning man can't offer Suzie a way out.

Her story's on the seat beside me. I marvel at how one person can hold my entire imagination hostage. The wind billows long, dusky grass rollers across a beige land-sea. I'm a janitor. I clean up other people's messes. I've made a mess of this.

The darkening clouds part. A distant movement in the air catches my eye. I know what it is. It's Suzie, and she's flying. She's flying away from me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. Marvin Bruce has studied in western Pennsylvania, eastern Massachusetts, and southern Scotland. He has taught mythology and folklore in Wisconsin and New Jersey. He has published twenty-eight fiction stories in a variety of venues. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Write Well Award (Silver Pen Writers Association), and the Best of the Web Award, and has won prizes from Calliope, Danse Macabre, and Typehouse Literary Magazine.

A LOW-ENERGY NUCLEAR REACTION

JEFFERY JOHNSON

Richard Barnett's three colleagues in chemistry were all busy. One was on sabbatical. Another was up for tenure and needed to finish his current research and get published. And the senior member of the department who had just announced his retirement was such a goofball that nobody trusted him with anything. So, it made complete sense for a physicist to head the search committee that hired Jane Delgado for the opening in chemistry. Jane was something of a catch for CNW. Though she lived her entire life in the States, the daughter of a famous Mexican writer checked off a couple of significant diversity boxes – a woman and a Hispanic. But Jane was far from an affirmative action hire. The young chemist had gone immediately from graduate school at Cal Tech to a tenure-track position at the University of California, Irvine. But much to her surprise, she learned that, as was clearly stated in her application letter, the constant push to publish and secure grants was far from what had initially drawn her to chemistry and the academic profession in the first place. Jane discovered that she wanted to be a wife, a mother, and a teacher. So much to the dismay of her mentors at Cal Tech, she began a quest for a position at a so-called teaching institution, and she and Northwest were something of a perfect match.

Jane had been attending meetings of the Eastern Chemical Society in Boston, and the earliest she could get into Portland was nine-thirty. Richard agreed to meet her at the airport and drive her to Salem, where they had booked her a room. She had already Googled the entire search committee, so she spotted him as soon as she had picked up her baggage. "Professor Barnett, I'm Jane Delgado. Sorry, it's so late."

"Ah, Jane, nice to meet you," Richard extended his hand. "I hope the first name is okay. You're going to discover that everybody is on a first-name basis at Northwest. Even the goddamn President is Colin. And I'm Richard or Rich, or before it became so unpopular, Dick."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Rich," Jane smiled at the slightly off-color joke and shook his hand. "I prefer first names."

"It'll take us about forty-five minutes to get to Salem," Richard said as he grabbed her bag, "but almost everything decent will be closed by then. If you'd like something to eat or drink, we should do it here."

"It's so late. It doesn't have to be elaborate," Jane looked embarrassed. "But I'm famished. I can't eat before I fly, and I sure as heck can't eat on the damn plane. Flying kind of freaks me out, you know?"

Richard offered a genuinely friendly smile. "I usually sleep like a baby when I fly. My only worry is snoring too loud. I have just the place in mind. Do you mind starting your day of non-stop interviews with even less sleep?"

"That would be great," she returned the smile. "I doubt I'll get much sleep anyway. Interviewing kind of freaks me out, too."

"I hear you on that one," Richard conceded. "I sometimes think I'm still here at College of the Northwest because I dread the whole job search process so much. Not that I have anything against CNW, you understand? It's been pretty good to me. How's this for a deal? We'll go to Cassidy's, where you can get a great late dinner. Tomorrow, you will run the gauntlet. Meet, talk, and answer questions from everybody from the students, to the dean and just about every other administrator they can round up, to say nothing of the search committee and your future colleagues. Tonight you can interview me. I'll have a couple of scotches, enough so I'll be completely candid but not too much to get you safely to your hotel."

"That would be lovely," Jane could feel the tension from the day of flying, and her apprehension about the interview tomorrow start to dissipate.

They drove silently for fifteen minutes to downtown Portland and found a parking place directly in front of the restaurant. "You must be good luck," Richard bantered, "you never can find a place to park around here. We can eat in the dining room just over there or here in the bar."

"Let's just stay here," Jane responded. "How about that nice little table by the window?"

Before he could answer, a middle-aged woman came from behind the bar, "Professor Barnett, how nice to see you. It's been a while."

"Great to see you, too, Ronnie. It has been a while. Can we take that table there?" he gestured to the table Jane had identified.

"Take any you'd like," Ronnie answered. "I know you'd like a Black Label. What can I bring the lady?"

"A glass of chardonnay would be perfect," Jane responded as she took her seat.

"I'd hate you to think that every bartender in Portland knows my name and what I'll order," Richard was visibly embarrassed. "For many years, my wife and I had season tickets at Artist Repertory Theater, just around the corner there. We always came here for a late dinner after the play."

"I think it's nice," Jane responded honestly. "For a big city, Portland already strikes me as friendly."

Although he had promised not to be the interviewer, only the interviewee, Richard couldn't help himself. "We don't usually get candidates with your credentials. Two of your recommendation letters said they thought

you would certainly get tenure. Most of my colleagues can only dream about being tenured at the University of California, not trying to escape it.”

Jane smiled, “I wasn’t trying to escape Irvine. I quite like the place. I just came to realize who I was. I just turned thirty and couldn’t see myself in a non-sense research position for the rest of my career. I love classroom teaching, though I don’t get to do nearly enough of it. And to be completely honest with you, I want to have a family.”

“That makes sense to me,” Richard conceded. “There’s much to be said for a career at a place like Northwest. You already probably have enough publications to earn tenure. And I can promise you that you’ll get more than ample opportunity to teach. You do realize that our students aren’t quite up to the standards of UCI? Though between you and me, the science majors outshine the rest of the student body.”

Ronnie arrived with their drinks and took Jane’s order. “I’ve thought about all this a lot. Before I got the research fellowship in my first year of graduate school, I was a teaching assistant for Intro to Chemistry. It was a general education course for non-majors. I loved turning on the English and History majors to the thrill of science. I’ve read a bit about your student demographics. I realize they won’t have the same SAT scores, particularly in math. But I assume they’re still smart kids who want to learn.”

“Yes and no, Jane,” Richard looked very serious. “I want you to listen carefully to what I’m going to say. Yes, we have plenty of the kind of students you just described. The science majors, but also the humanities types. Even the Education and Business majors. But CNW also has way too many students who could never have gotten into the University of Kansas. That’s where you did your undergraduate studies, right?”

Jane simply nodded and gave the floor back to Richard.

“And certainly not Cal Tech or UCI. Most of them are good kids and not necessarily dumb either, though some of my colleagues can be tough on them. I have a friend who calls them mouth breathers. They’re just not very well prepared for college and maybe still a little lost about why they’re here in the first place. They’ll be in your classes, a lot of the classes you’ll have to teach. Are you ready for that?”

“I think I am, yes,” Jane’s tone was conversational but also deadly serious. “I’m going to brag a little. I’m a damn good teacher. I’ve known I wanted to be a teacher since I was a little girl. In grade school, I wanted to be a grade school teacher. In high school, I wanted to be a high school math teacher. As an undergraduate, I had no clue what I wanted to be, of course. But by the time I was applying to graduate school, I already knew I wanted to be a college teacher. I love research. Well, I love being in the lab and trying to discover something.

What led me towards this career was teaching, not grants or publications. I can handle your mouth breathers. I'll bring a lot of them out and even recruit a few as chemistry majors."

"My word," Richard was genuinely impressed. "Professor Delgado, I'll tell you something. You find a way to give that little speech tomorrow, and I can almost guarantee you you'll have a job offer. But I'm not living up to my promise. I said tonight, you could ask me the questions."

"You did," Jane replied. "And my big question concerns what we were just talking about. You're going to think I want it all, which I guess I do. I do want to stay active with my research. Is that realistic at College of the Northwest?"

Richard gave that some serious thought. "Yes, of course. The powers that be will be thrilled if you publish a lot of papers with the college's name on them. But there are going to be compromises you'll have to make. I'm sure you know this, but there are two huge impediments to serious scientific research at CNW or any place like it. You'll get a lab, but it'll be modest. And if you want to know the truth, its real point will be more to allow you to introduce your students to lab work than for conducting your own research. So you'll probably have to reach out to the University of Oregon or Oregon State and find a collaborator if you want access to a real research lab. Or maybe to industry. Some of my colleagues have gone that route. But the bigger problem will be time. They expect you to teach a couple of courses every term and a couple of labs. It's damn hard to maintain much of a year-round research agenda with that kind of workload. I'm sorry if this is news to you, but it's the truth."

"Thanks," Jane offered with genuine sincerity. "That doesn't surprise me, but it is kind of sobering. As long as that door's open, I guess it's my problem if my research goes nowhere. May I ask you something?"

Richard nodded, "I already told you. Tonight's your chance to ask all the questions."

"You've stayed active in your field," Jane began. "How did you manage it?"

"Well," Richard appreciated that she knew a little about his work, "here's my three secrets. First, I never allow myself to get caught up in that sandbox politics called self-governance. The only committees I ever agree to serve on are search committees, like yours, or ones that have half a chance of making me more money. Secondly, be a theoretician, not an experimentalist. All I need to keep my research going is a tablet and a sharp pencil. I don't even need to go to the library anymore. All the articles are available online. But the most important trick is to be flexible. When I was applying to grad school, I wasn't sure if it would be mathematics or physics. But the University of Virginia offered me the best deal in physics. So, I became a physicist. When I

was thinking about my dissertation, I couldn't decide between theoretical research, or experimental. But Don James got this great grant and offered me a chance to work with him, so I became an experimentalist. And finally, after I finished my post-doc and went looking for a full-time gig, my best offer was here at CNW. However, one look at the college, and I knew I'd never have the lab or grants to continue as an experimentalist. But it was still the best offer, so I just switched. Quit being an experimentalist and went back to being a theoretician."

"Wow," Jane was more than a little impressed, "you make it sound so simple."

"Nothing about it was simple," Richard continued. "I anguished about every one of those decisions. There was a lot of hard work involved as well. But, if you want to know the truth, there was also a hell of a lot of good luck. I can see now that I would never have amounted to much as a mathematician. And, Christ, I couldn't have gotten luckier with the grant and the post-doc. And how many people get to get up every Monday morning and truly look forward to going to work?"

The next day Jane did have the opportunity to make her little declaration about always wanting to be a teacher. And just as Richard had predicted, she had an attractive job offer before leaving Oregon. And so began a fruitful professional relationship based on mutual respect and shared affection.

#

Richard had an aversion to faculty parties. It didn't matter how a conversation began. It always came back to campus politics and usually the predictable academic class war. His colleagues were the virtuous soldiers for truth and enlightenment, and the goddamn administration was the penny-pinching enemy. Perhaps because he had briefly entertained a career switch to administration, Richard simply could not see things in those stark terms. If he were honest, he would have said that many of the colleagues he most admired at Northwest had been administrators.

But what the hell? For god's sake, it was New Year's Eve, and Wendy Boyd's party was a tradition in the Division of Science and Mathematics. Richard's wife, Martha, hated parties with his colleagues even more than he did. But she had been insistent. "Dick, listen to me. We have to go. It would be more than rude not to show up." And so they did.

Maybe it would be a good idea to get out. It sure as heck wasn't going to be a lovely evening at home. Richard and Martha were involved in a low-level fight for most of the holiday break. If you had asked either of them what it was all about, neither could have said. Richard didn't handle breaks that well. Most

of his colleagues saw the academic calendar as one of the most significant perks of the career. Two to three weeks at Christmas, another for spring break, to say nothing of the three months during the summer. Richard was a workaholic and a little OCD. He recognized that. The structure that academic life offered was his salvation. Set times for classes, set times for labs, and set times for his research. He survived the summer by creating an artificial regime. The mornings were for reading the literature. And the afternoons were devoted to doing the calculations and writing up his thoughts. And there was the travel. He and Martha shared little these days in what had once been a happy enough marriage. Sex hardly played any role any longer. And the simple, friendly affection between them that Richard could only dimly remember had ended years ago. What they did share, however, was a love of travel. So there was always a month-long trip somewhere. But winter break was always the hardest. Martha relished the shopping, decorating, and socializing that the season demanded. Richard simply endured as he would tonight.

Jane wasn't that big a fan of parties either. She liked most of her colleagues just fine and had no problem with the faculty gossip and campus politics. She was just naturally shy. Lurking on the sidelines, quietly nursing her glass of chardonnay, and observing more than participating was more her style. Her relatively new husband, Kyle Achenstein, was home in bed sick. So Jane had planned to merely make an appearance at Wendy's party and then plead the nursing duties of a good wife.

Richard noticed Jane from the moment she entered the door. "I'm sorry to hear that Kyle's not feeling too well," he began. "But it's nice to see you. Happy ... no, wait. Let me get you a glass of wine. We can toast the season properly."

"Thanks," Jane smiled, "that would be great."

"You're a chardonnay lady, as I remember." Richard wasn't precisely flirting, but it was in the neighborhood. And he hustled off to retrieve the wine. Returning in just a minute or so, he handed Jane the glass, raised his tumbler of scotch, and, in his most formal voice, began. "Happy New Year! I hope it's a great one for you and Kyle."

"Thank you so much," Jane returned the toast. "Happy New Year to you." She already knew enough not to mention Martha in her response. "I think this may be a wonderful year for all of us. You know Kyle's up for tenure at the end of the year, right? He's feeling pretty good about it."

"As he should," Richard nodded. "From what I hear, he's a sure thing. His colleagues in English all like him, and he's got some publications and great teaching evaluations. CNW would be nuts to lose him. And, god forbid, to lose you as part of the bargain. You'll be surprised at how much tenure will change

things. The security is great. And a little more money doesn't hurt, either. But you'll be able to feel Northwest start to get its claws in you. You'll get tenure too, I take that as a given, and then the place will have the both of you until you die."

"But that was sort of our plan all along," Jane gave him a quizzical look. "We don't want to leave. We're both thrilled with what we've got. We'll raise a family, grow old and fat, and probably never leave Sweet Home."

"Then I am sincerely happy for you," Richard meant it but couldn't help himself from adding an addendum. "But you know what they say. Be careful of what you wish for."

The wine was relaxing, Jane. "Oh, I almost forgot, and congratulations to you. I saw in the newsletter you have another publication," she said, raising her glass again in a second toast.

"Thanks," Richard did appreciate the recognition. "But it's kind of chicken feed if you want to know the truth. There are so many young theoreticians out there needing to publish to get tenure or keep their grants. And some of the work is kind of sloppy. You'd think peer review would catch it. But not always, of that, you now stand assured. I just kind of troll around the literature and look for interesting things. I then redo the argument and the calculations. Sometimes, I have something to add, but often, I simply point out the errors. This latest one was in a respectable journal, but they didn't catch it. The guy had made a simple mathematical goof, and when you corrected for it, the whole theoretical structure just fell apart. They had no choice but to publish my commentary since they had published the original cluster fuck in the first place."

Jane chuckled a bit. "Do you miss being a hotshot experimentalist? I heard you came close to the big leagues with your post-doc."

"I don't miss the experimental side of physics in the slightest," Richard replied. "I should have written a theory dissertation in the first place. I have great respect for experimentalists. Physics wouldn't be a science if we couldn't empirically confirm the great ideas. But what I love is coming up with those ideas, not testing someone else's. What I do miss, however, is having a vision to chase. The thrill of my post-doc was pursuing something huge, you know? Like saving the planet."

"Yes, well, that would count," Jane conceded. "Okay, my turn to be the bartender. I want a refill. Can I get you another scotch? Then I'd like to hear about those cold fusion days."

"Are you kidding?" Richard reflected. "A chance to drink more of Wendy's excellent single malt and relive my glory days with a lovely colleague." He was now definitely flirting, but innocently, he hoped. "Think Bruce

Springsteen would have liked the lyrics? ‘All I kept thinking about was cold fusion days.’”

“Uh, sorry, Rich,” Jane actually laughed, “you better stick to science. There are too many syllables in that line. I’ll be right back.”

Refills in hand, they went out on Wendy’s spacious patio. It was a very mild midwinter evening for this part of Oregon, but the only others outside were the handful of smokers. Finding a couple of lawn chairs, they began a conversation that would alter both of their lives.

“You’re too young,” Richard began, “to have lived through the heady days of the cold fusion extravaganza. How much do you know about that original work?”

“More than you might think,” Jane retorted. “Don’t forget that both Pons and Fleischmann were both chemists by training. We reconstructed the original experimental setup in one of my graduate seminars. Our professor had a good time making fun of how absurd the whole idea was.”

Richard smiled knowingly. “Yes, there was plenty of making fun back in the 80s as well. But there was also some genuine excitement. Partly, the results were so intriguing. But everyone also saw the implications. Christ, if we had a safe, inexpensive way of generating energy, it would have been irresponsible not to explore the theory fully. Can you imagine the economic consequences, to say nothing, of the environmental? And there were some true believers. Melvin Epstein, at Chicago, was one. He’s the one who hired me for my post-doc. Mel was convinced that the transition from hydrogen to helium should be approached as a problem in fundamental physics and not an interesting result in electrochemistry. He put together quite a team. A few theoreticians and a slew of us young experimentalists. He even allowed a couple of chemists to join us. You’ll be happy to know.”

Jane found herself both amused and a bit offended by the joke. “But the whole thing was a flop, right?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Richard smiled woefully. “We never figured out if the problem was with the basic theory or a lack of experimental ingenuity. Since I was an experimentalist back then, I preferred the latter diagnosis. But you know, I’ve always suspected it was theoretical. And that we were just missing something.”

“I was just beginning to think about my dissertation when I was in that seminar,” Jane took the floor. “I remember joking with one of my graduate buddies. The problem with this whole cold fusion protocol is that it’s not cold enough.”

Richard’s interest brightened. “Oh, we thought of that. The problem was that maintaining those temperatures during the whole process would have cost

us way more energy than we had any hope of generating when all was said and done.”

It was Jane’s turn to smile knowingly. “Well, you know, the chemistry of ultracold atoms has come a long way since the 1980s. You can’t believe the weird things they do at those extreme temperatures. And there’ve been great strides in evaporative cooling, as well. You might be surprised at how efficiently we can now generate ultracold conditions.”

And so many more glasses of wine and scotch were consumed, and 2010 mutated into 2011. By the end of the party, a fruitful joint research project had commenced.

#

It was hard for Jane to imagine how things had changed in just a few years. She was now the mother of two beautiful children, married, and a newly tenured associate professor. At the beginning of the fall term, her colleagues elected her the first woman Chair of the Division of Science and Mathematics. Richard urged her to decline since their joint research was starting to take off. “Christ, Janie,” he implored, “we just got another article published. We need to think about the sabbaticals and where we’re going. And we’ve got to get going with some real empirical testing. You’ll get caught up in the day-to-day campus bullshit.”

But it was to no avail. “Look, Rich, I know you hate the administrative hassles. But this is part of why I came Northwest in the first place. I want to live the whole academic life. I was honored when they asked me to be the chair. And unlike you, I don’t see it as all bullshit. There are times when a good chair or a strong committee can make a tangible difference. I promise you that I won’t let you down. Our work together is my first priority, just not my only priority.”

Looking back on it, Richard and Jane would have to admit they had been naïve and more than a little lucky. In the almost six years since Wendy’s party, they had become internationally known research scientists. It had begun with a relatively short theoretical article outlining their proposed method of achieving a low-energy nuclear reaction published in *Physical Review C*. Instead of being victims of academic theft from prestigious research laboratories, they received encouraging and sometimes constructive advice from colleagues worldwide. Some of these connections led to offers to submit further articles to even more prestigious journals and finally to their invitation to a joint, yearlong fellowship at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory.

The first month in Princeton had been an amalgam of excitement, panic, and exhaustion. Jane and Kyle had to find housing for themselves and the family. Kyle was not eligible for a sabbatical but had been granted a year’s leave

of absence and secured a one-year teaching position at nearby Mercer County Community College. That meant they had to begin completely new professional responsibilities and share childcare duties for a four-year-old and a three-year-old. Luckily, a colleague at the lab told them about a recently widowed neighbor who was interested in becoming a nanny. Richard's transition had been predictably easier. He had no children, and Martha had no interest whatsoever in packing up and moving across the country for eight months. She was content to keep her comfortable house in Oregon and let Richard make do in faculty housing on the Princeton campus.

The first months in the lab had been promising indeed. Within the first four weeks, they succeeded in recreating their modest setup from Oregon and got even more robust results. However, they devoted the majority of their time to trying to realize their inspiration for producing the ultracold conditions necessary for sustaining low-energy nuclear reactions. The project was a microcosm of everything that made their collaboration such a success. Jane, of course, brought her background in evaporative cooling, and Richard proposed the genuinely original idea of using electromagnetic fields to mimic the zero-gravity conditions that seemed to be required. They each made practical innovations that turned their invention from a promising theoretical concept to an operating laboratory machine. Although Jane had no formal training in electrical engineering, she saw how using a widely available semiconductor laser platform rather than the original photonic crystal lasers in their prototype would save them untold costs and produce greater efficiency. And Richard envisioned a design structure that reduced the size of their invention from that of a small SUV to something no bigger than a microwave. When all was said and done, the "zero-gravity, semiconductor laser, evaporative cooler" was their paramount success. And the patent they secured was the single most crucial part of their sabbaticals. The irony, of course, was that the device had dozens of commercial applications that had nothing to do with their cold fusion experiments. So, they seemed destined for wealth and fame regardless of how things turned out in Princeton.

The wheels started to come off in early October. With the switch to the zero-grav cooler, the results were uniformly disappointing. It made no sense. How could simply changing the size and power of the electrolysis setup so drastically affect the efficiency coefficient? Richard took the setback particularly hard. He spent hours redoing his original calculations and then converting them to the newly scaled conditions required for industrial applications. When it finally hit him, neither laughing nor crying seemed appropriate. He called Jane in the lab and asked her to meet him for an early lunch.

Jane arrived at Henry's Pub first and ordered a Cobb salad and iced tea. Richard showed up shortly after and simply ordered coffee. "We're still getting wacky beta reads," Jane began.

"To be expected," he responded with a tone that sounded a bit like defeat. "We're so fucked. And it's all because of a goddamn printer's error. Remember the first draft of the *Physics C* article? I went back and looked at the typescript of what we submitted. Our original beta coefficient formula used a value of .006 amps per microwatt. Everything we got back from them, the proofs, the online pre-prints, and the final hard copy changed that to .06 amps per microwatt."

Jane saw the magnitude of the error immediately. "How could we have missed it? It was our calculation, well yours, Rich, in the first place. But I redid all the math right there at your side, so I'll take equal responsibility. Why were we so blind? Everything now, the article itself, all our subsequent work, the grant application, it all looks like fraud."

"Yeah, I know," he agreed. "I think we were guilty of seeing more with our hearts than our heads. Well, and believing our own press. There it was in black and white, in a pretty good journal, the beta coefficient was .06. No wonder our results were so great. An order-of-magnitude change in energy input pretty much guarantees a huge increase in energy output. Fuck!"

"So," Jane asked the obvious question, "what do you think we should do?"

"I don't know," he responded. "I want to redo all the calculations from the get-go. And I also want some time just to think. Can you get away after dinner? Join me while I get thoroughly plastered?"

Jane, an instinctive fixer-upper, just smiled. "I don't think Kyle will have a problem looking after the kids for a few hours. I'll tell him we've got an emergency with our experiment. God knows that's the truth."

By the time they reassembled at Richard's apartment a little after eight, he was in a much better mood. "It's not as terrible as I thought. Our original calculations still pencil out. But we've got a lot of work to do to make this sucker efficient enough for industrial applications. I don't mind the work or the additional time, but I do wonder how much we'll get accomplished here on the East Coast." And with that, he cracked the virgin bottle of Johnny Walker Black. "You know me, always scotch. I've got some white wine in the fridge. Care for a glass?"

"Yes, please," Jane nodded gratefully. "I guess that is good news. Though it still feels like today was a disaster."

"Sure," Richard concurred, "a huge disappointment. In about a dozen different ways."

“What in god’s name are we going to do about all those earlier publications?” Jane cut right to the chase.

“We’re going to notify every one of those journals and NSF, too.” There was conviction in Richard’s voice. “Just as soon as we can. Then it’s sort of their problem what to do from there.”

“I’m sure that’s right,” Jane didn’t sound convinced entirely, “I just wish there was some other way.”

Richard had already drained his glass and began pouring himself another. “Well, there isn’t. We don’t want to sit around waiting for the shoe to drop. Trust me. I’ve been there. It’s better to face the music right now. It’s intolerable to spend all your time worrying when you’re going to be exposed.”

“Okay, then that’s what we’ll do.” The agreed-upon strategy seemed to help both of them relax a bit. “What did you mean when you said you’d been there?”

“Other than my colleagues in Chicago,” Richard began, “not a soul knows what we did. We cheated during my fucking post-doc. Of course, Melvin Epstein was in charge, but we were all complicit. Our original error was innocent enough, not so different from our little decimal place problem. But it made our projections look so damn good. Our grant was up for recertification, and Mel was insistent. We were to keep our damn mouths shut until the grant had been renewed. Of course, when it was, we all just continued to remain silent. By the end, all the cold fusion experiments had gone bust, not just ours, so no one cared about anybody’s calculations.”

“Wow,” Jane interrupted. “I can tell that scared you.”

“I’m no goody-two-shoes,” Richard reflected. “I’ve fudged on my taxes. And I even cheated on Martha once. But more than scared, I was just plain offended. It’s one thing to cheat on your wife, but quite another to cheat on your whole profession, your whole life, really. I said a few things, but the whole team thought I was nuts. They all had their careers to think about. By the end, I was a pretty unpopular guy.”

“Well,” Jane reflected, “I guess I don’t want to cheat on my profession and life, either. Hell, I don’t even want to cheat on Kyle. So, I’m completely on board. You compose the letter to NSF, and I’ll take care of notifying all the journals.”

###

The evolution from close colleagues to lovers transpired with the same natural rhythm as had the transition from colleagues to collaborators. The physical intimacy was a natural outgrowth of the intellectual intimacy that had defined their work together for the past six years. Richard was simply in awe of

all of this. Who could have imagined sex in the evening that was interesting and genuinely fulfilling, followed by more sex the following day that was even more interesting and fulfilling?

Jane was more analytical. This iteration of their relationship fundamentally changed her perception of who she was. Being unfaithful to her husband and involved with a married man was bad enough. But where did she stand with Kyle? If you'd asked her even six months ago, she would have said she loved him. But, if the truth were told, she seduced Richard, not the other way around. What did it say about her? She recognized that there were parts of her that she had either been too blind to see or had managed to hide from herself. She had never been particularly adventurous in bed. Certainly not the one in charge. But from here on out, she could never imagine a sexual future where she was not the architect. It wasn't so much that Richard was exceptionally skilled in bed, though he wasn't too bad either. She wondered if it was all because she had never been with an older man before or perhaps because she had never really been attracted to Kyle in that way in the first place. It was probably a little of both. But more than anything, she finally concluded, Richard was something of her sexual soulmate. He was always hungry and ready but perfectly content to let Jane initiate, take charge, and basically control their amorous adventures.

Just three months into their affair, they craved their chances together, and this weekend had been handed to them on a silver platter. Jane's parents had taken the kids for a week to visit Disneyland. And Kyle's softball team was off to a tournament in Salem. He'd be playing ball with his buddies all day long, drinking beer and playing poker in the evenings. She doubted he'd even call or text. Richard could have probably finessed a few days but didn't need to try. Martha's mother had taken ill on the Fourth of July, and she flew back to Wisconsin to be with her. They would have the next day and a half just to themselves. Or so they thought.

Jane answered her phone in the late morning and immediately recognized the voice. "Hi, Jane. I hope your summer's going well and that you and Kyle are settling back in." A call from Joshua Haidt on a July morning couldn't be good news.

"Hi, Josh, yes on both counts," she replied, "thanks. It still feels like I'm on sabbatical. It's going to be weird to get back into the grind next month. What's up?"

Haidt had reluctantly agreed to serve as acting chair during Jane's sabbatical with the complete understanding that she would resume the duties on her return. "Uh, well, I'm not sure if I'm calling to ask your advice or to give you a heads up. A little of both, I think. It's about Devon Brooks."

"Yeah, I heard about the tenure review," Jane said. "Kyle's heartbroken. He plays on his softball team, you know? They're in Salem this weekend."

"Well, I'm afraid it's a little more complicated than just a negative tenure decision." Haidt continued in a worried but slightly conspiratorial tone. "Any chance I could talk you into coming to campus today? I know it's summer break, but I'm trying to talk to all the senior faculty before I meet with the Dean on Monday?"

"Sure, Josh," Jane frowned at Richard, "could we do it this morning? I was kind of counting on a couple of hours of hiking this afternoon?"

"Not a problem. I really appreciate this. Do you know if Richard Barnett is in town? I've been calling him all morning. He's the only other senior colleague I need to talk to."

"Funny you should ask," Jane began her lie, "We were just going over our latest results. Still trying to figure out what went wrong in Princeton. Here, let me put him on." And she handed Richard the phone.

Richard listened to the acting division chair for a few minutes and broke in. "I'll just come in with Jane. I'm her hiking partner this afternoon. We do our best physics and chemistry tromping through the wilderness."

And so, Richard and Jane found themselves back on the college of the Northwest campus a little before noon. They entered the office of their nominal boss and exchanged pleasantries. Haidt began, "I suppose since the two of you have security clearance with the feds, it's okay for me to discuss some highly sensitive personnel issues with you together."

"Well, I don't know how top-secret our work is," Richard responded, "but we can keep our mouths shut when it comes to campus bullshit."

"Good," the chair almost whispered, "this could well end up in court. You know that Devon Brooks was denied tenure in the spring?" They both nodded. "This coming year is his last. But he's not going quietly. He's already filed a formal union grievance. More troubling than that, however, is that he's been spouting off about a lawsuit."

"Isn't that pretty normal in these cases?" Jane asked. "Surely the college has the right to decide who should and shouldn't be granted tenure."

"So what's the deal, Professor Haidt?" Richard adopted his I'm the most senior member of the faculty voice. "Was there anything problematic about the case?"

"Oh yeah," Haidt conceded. "For one thing, he has solid teaching evaluations. And he's got a couple of decent publications, though they both came before he joined us. The real problem is that he's a little bit crazy."

"I thought that was a job requirement for academia," Jane looked embarrassed at her failed attempt at humor.

“It all started last fall,” Haidt continued. “As you both know, neither the Biology program nor the Division of Science and Mathematics plays any formal role in personnel decisions. We interview colleagues as a courtesy, but there’s no vote or anything. Well, Sheryl Macintyre and Denny Walser came to see me in September. They said that CNW just couldn’t tenure Brooks. They said he was incompetent as a biologist.”

“Really?” Jane interrupted, “he always struck me as a little flaky but never as incompetent. You just said he has strong teaching evaluations and a solid enough publication record.”

“If only it were as simple as teaching and research,” Haidt retorted. “For one thing, he’s a religious zealot. And also a political whack job. He’s a birther, for god’s sake. And naturally, he’s not at all shy about any of this. Christ, he tweets more than Trump. But the killer for Denny and Sheryl is that he believes in intelligent design. And he brings this into the goddamn classroom.”

Richard may have considered academic administration a waste of time, but he would have made a good dean or provost. “Forget about the religion shit, and for sure the politics. You don’t want to turn this into some First Amendment debate. Stick with the issue of competence. He doubts natural selection, so he can’t teach biology at Northwest. Even there, I’d soft-peddle the intelligent design stuff and simply leave it with the very vague doubts about professional competence.”

“I agree,” Jane offered. “The biology major is the main conduit to medical school, dental school, and even veterinary school. Can you imagine sending our students to those environments where they have been taught to have doubts about the underlying paradigm of contemporary biology? It would be irresponsible. And in addition, we’d look like idiots. It’s just unthinkable.”

“You two nicely summarize the thoughts of most of your colleagues in the Division.” And Haidt asked with sincerity, “Would you mind if I quoted you in my meeting with the dean?”

“Not at all,” Jane replied.

“We’ll write him a damn memo,” Richard added, “if that’s what you’d like. Deans just love memos.”

“We’ll see. It might come to that. I wish I were more confident that upper administration will be on board. I think they’re scared to death of a lawsuit. Jane, I’m so sorry that I will be handing you this shitstorm when you return next month. I fear it’s going to be kind of a hellish year.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Jane responded. “I think you’re probably right about next year. I do appreciate the advance notice, though.”

And as they left the chair’s office, Richard turned to his colleague, friend, collaborator, and now lover and got in the good-natured, but also very

insightful, dig. “Well, madam chair, I think I’ve said this to you on more than one occasion. Be careful, be very, very, careful, what you wish for.”

Today’s hike was doomed to have a different agenda than what they had foreseen last night or earlier this morning.

#

It had not even been a year and a half since their discovery of the energy coefficient error in Princeton. What had seemed devastating at the time had turned out to be a godsend. The intellectual restart the episode necessitated caused both of them to look at the whole project with fresh eyes. Their basic strategy was unchanged. However, they realized now that they needed to alternate the energy input/output sequence to maximize the phase harmonics. This was yet another original discovery that led to three more publications and another patent that now looked to be potentially even more valuable than the zero-grav cooler. They had yet to produce an unambiguous low-energy nuclear reaction, but they were confident this was just a matter of time. So much of this kind of research was a matter of simple trial and error. Tweak the phase rate just the tiniest fraction, wait a month, and see the results. It was tedious, but such was the nature of laboratory science. They resigned themselves to the reality that industrial applications of their discoveries were probably decades out.

Richard had hired Barry Delbrück to represent him in what amounted to a nuisance suit over fifteen years ago. He liked and trusted him, and so asked him to help draw up the corporation papers for Ultra-Frigid Fusion, LLC. None of this was his area of law, and all the parties knew that things would need to change as the company grew. But right now, Barry was their lawyer, so Jane was a little alarmed when he called and said he needed to talk to them. Richard, of course, was dismissive. “I’m sure it’s just some detail. Don’t work yourself up over nothing.”

“I promise you I won’t,” Jane was annoyed, “as soon as I’m sure it’s nothing. I want to know what this is all about ASAP. Ask him if we can come in this afternoon.” Richard knew enough not to argue with Jane when her voice took on this edge, and he dutifully called Delbrück back. As luck would have it, the judge in the trial he was working had that very morning granted opposing counsel a continuance to track down a missing witness. So his calendar was clear, and he told them to come by his office at two-thirty.

He greeted them at the door. “Jane, how nice to see you. And you too, my friend. Come on in.”

“All right,” Richard, never one to beat around the bush, “what’s with all the official lawyer stuff?”

Not seeing any way to sugar-coat it, Delbrück just blurted it out. “You’re being sued. Well, that might be premature, but you’ve been officially notified of a legal dispute.”

“That’s not good,” Jane stated the obvious. “How serious is this? What did we do?”

“It’s your colleague,” Delbrück answered, “Marcus Alston. He says he contributed materially to your research and is entitled to an equitable share of the profits from any industrial applications of said research.”

“That’s a bunch of bullshit,” Richard almost yelled.

“Well, he got himself a lawyer, Cindy Cartwright. She’s a casual friend of mine. He told her his story, and she suggested reaching out to you directly. She knew I represented Ultra-Frigid and called me this morning. So, why do you say this is bullshit? He didn’t provide any help?”

“He showed us a nice, elegant way of solving a mathematical equation,” Jane answered. “We were appreciative and acknowledged his help in our first publication.”

“The Churchland equation,” Richard elaborated, “was central in the original Pons and Fleischmann research. I was telling him about what a mess the equation was in the gym one lunchtime, and he told me to drop by his office and he’d show me a cute trick. He’s a good mathematician, and his solution was, as Jane put it, elegant. But that’s old news. It goes back to the original Pons and Fleischmann paradigm, not what Jane and I created. We don’t even use the goddamn equation in our current models.”

“Okay,” and Delbrück reached into his desk and brought out a legal pad, “let’s get down to it. Does this equation ... what do you call it again?”

Jane and Richard started to answer simultaneously, but Richard deferred. “It’s the Churchland equation,” Jane stated. “It goes back to the Manhattan Project.”

“Got it,” and he noted this on his pad. “Does the Churchland equation play any role, whatsoever, in the zero-gravity, semiconductor laser, evaporative cooler? You really must find an acronym for that one. It’s quite a mouthful.”

“We thought about that,” Jane chuckled. “ZGSLEC didn’t seem much of an improvement.

These days, we just call it the zero-grav. The answer to your question is no, an unequivocal no. Churchland was trying to model mathematically what happened when hydrogen nuclei combine and fuse,” and Jane did the air quotes thing “into helium. You know, like, what keeps the sun going? Or the hydrogen bomb. Evaporative cooling has nothing to do with any of that.”

“Well then,” the lawyer went on, “we simply go tell him to take a hike on that one. Cindy is too good a lawyer to let him go much further down that rabbit hole. And what about the elephant in the room? Is the Churchland equation at all relevant to what’s going on with your cold fusion research?”

Now, it was Richard’s turn. “Only historically. Pons and Fleischmann argued that their partial solution of the Churchland equation helped them set up their original electrolysis experiment using heavy water. What’s weird about that is that a Swedish scientist tried something very similar much earlier in the late twenties. And the Churchland equation hadn’t even been discovered back then. When Jane and I decided to try to replicate all of this, all we did was take the original Pons and Fleischmann protocol as our starting point. Shit, that’s what every cold fusion researcher was doing. That’s what my goddamn post-doc was doing! We didn’t need Churchland for that. Neither did Tandberg back in 1927.”

“So why did you ask Alston for his help with the equation?” Delbrück continued his interrogation. “Why was it ever mentioned in your article?”

“I didn’t ask him,” Richard grumbled, “I was just bitching on the treadmill about how messy the mathematics was. Mark is the one who invited me to come by his office.”

“But I still don’t see,” Delbrück pressed, “why something you didn’t use found its way into a scientific publication.”

Richard was not hiding his displeasure. “That’s because you’ve never been a nobody at a marginal institution trying to get something way outside the mainstream published. Referees in theoretical physics journals love a lot of mathematical razzle-dazzle. We argued that a preliminary look at the Churchland equation substantiated Pons and Fleischmann’s contention. They were right, and it justified their original protocol. We were simply playing the academic game. Our idea was to go the ultra-cold route, and Churchland had nothing to do with our setup.”

“I’m sorry, guys,” the lawyer said, “but I want to be dead certain here. That original protocol, that’s the correct term, right? Christ, you scientists use as much jargon as we lawyers. How different was your protocol from Pons, and what’s his name?”

“At the start of things?” Richard conceded, “It was identical. That was the whole point. We argued that Pons and Fleischmann’s experiment would have worked if they had only done the electrolysis under ultra-cold conditions. Of course, now ...”

“Hold on a second,” Delbrück interrupted, “right now, I just want to hear about the original article.”

“Look, Barry,” Jane tried her hand since Richard looked on the verge of completely losing it, “our original research replicated their technique as closely as we could make it. Our theoretical contribution was to show how conducting their experiment with the deuterium and palladium at as close to absolute zero as possible would generate a low-energy nuclear reaction or cold fusion. The first draft of our article didn’t even mention the damn the Churchland equation.”

“What about the patents?” Delbrück had been busily annotating his clients’ answers. “There are now six of them relating to cold fusion, right?” Jane and Richard simply nodded. “Do any of them make use of the Churchland equation?”

“Nope,” was Richard’s one-word reply.

“Okay, and what were you saying about the current state of your research?”

“Well, lots of things have changed from that original article. We now put much more emphasis on the phase harmonics. And we don’t use natural palladium any longer,” Jane continued. “It’s too expensive and too toxic. We discovered that an isotope, ^{106}Pd , was a better conductor and had a larger covalent radius. As far as I know, no one has ever run 106 through the Churchland equation.”

“You both realize, I hope,” Delbrück smiled, “I have no idea what you’ve just been saying. But I heard you both categorically repudiate Professor Alston’s claim. I will so notify his attorney. The ball’s back in their court, then. We’ll just have to see what happens. I do think, however, that we should bring a patent attorney on board just to be on the safe side.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Richard conceded, and both he and Jane rose and shook his hand, “thanks for your time, Barry.”

But the lawyer got the last word. “I wondered when something like this was going to happen. You know everybody around here knows you’re about to become very wealthy? Many people will try to get their hands on some of that money. Jane, you’ll probably hear from an ex-babysitter back when you were six or seven, claiming that she gave you the whole cold fusion idea as a story to put you to sleep one night.”

“Damn,” Jane joined the game, “who told you about Carlota?”

#

The honeymoon was over, but not the intensity of the affair. The lovemaking was no longer as urgent or habitual, but it was still pretty darn good. What the last year had taught them only confirmed what they had each gleaned from Wendy Boyd’s New Year’s party. They were a great couple in almost every conceivable sense. They almost always complimented each other in bed, in the

lab, and now occasionally in the corporate office room. Common interests, of course, were part of the secret – not just the physical and professional, but recreational. They were both walkers, not casual strollers, but hikers. It's relevant to note that this did not mean backpackers. Neither had much interest in camping or nights in the wilderness. But to set out in the early morning and not return until time for Richard's scotch was the almost perfect day.

And what better place to hike than along the Oregon coast? Richard had discovered Manzanita years before the real estate boom. He could now kick himself for not grabbing one of the beachfront steals when he had the chance. But, of course, with the multimillion-dollar offers for Ultra-Frigid, he and Jane still had the opportunity. It would just no longer count as a steal. This was their third getaway in the magical last year, and this one had required only marginal lying. Richard's marriage was already in the hands of divorce attorneys, and Jane's seemed headed in that direction. All they needed to tell anyone who cared to know was that they were headed off to figure out some crucial business or research issue. And that was the god's honest truth. The fourteen-mile roundtrip trek from Neahkahnie to the Nehalem Bay jetty and back had previously led to decisions about impending lawsuits and changes, yet again, to their research protocol. This week's vacation would focus on the future. Should they sell the corporation or continue to manage it themselves? Was the cold fusion project leading anywhere productive? Should they cash in on that aspect of their research, too? And, of course, their future as a couple. Would they remain in Oregon? Would they marry? Could Richard adapt to being a stepdad to Sarah and Skip?

To say that two individuals make a great couple is certainly not to say that they are identical. Richard's highest priority remained to discover meaningful cold fusion. He continued to dream of the two of them in Stockholm accepting their joint Nobel Prize. He seldom mentioned any of this, even to Jane, but they both fully recognized that it was there. Jane also loved the prospect of fame and wealth, and she retained the true scientist's lust for discovery. But at the same time, she had never shaken the realization that led her from Irvine to the College of the Northwest in the first place. A part of her still desired the joys of marriage and motherhood. And she still loved classroom teaching.

"Alright," Jane began as they passed the Manzanita beachfront property, "tell me again about what Hawaii is offering."

Richard had made the initial contact. Not exactly behind Jane's back, but not with her full partnership either. Administrators at the big campus on Oahu immediately saw the advantages of taking on a couple of relatively young,

internationally-known researchers. The costs would be minimal, and the potential prestige unimaginable. It was pretty much a no-brainer.

"They are offering each of us full professorships. With tenure if we want it. All we'll be required to teach is a few graduate students. The lab will be adequate for most of our needs. However, we'll need to return to someplace like Princeton periodically. I told them that we'd only be available on a regular basis, Tuesday through Thursday, and they're cool with that. We don't want to live around Honolulu. It's worse than Los Angeles. I'd like us to get a place on the big island. We'll be able to return stateside anytime we want to. And even write off the airfare as a business expense. It's a dream come true. Well, at least my dream come true."

"God, Rich," Jane was genuinely considering, "I don't know. For the life of me, I don't know. We've talked about this endlessly, and I'm no closer to knowing what I want than when you first broached this crazy idea. Will you answer a couple of huge questions for me?"

"I can honestly say," Richard now turned thoughtful himself, "that I've truthfully answered every question you've ever asked me, going back to that first night at PDX. I'll be as forthright as I possibly can be. Ask away."

"What about the kids?" she began. "You've never had children. So if we're going to remain together, wherever that may be, are you ready to be a father at least half of every year? And if my lawyer is any good, almost all of every year?"

"Oh, I've thought plenty about that one," Richard considered. "Let's start with the easy part. I love you, Janie. I realize now that you're the only woman I've ever truly loved. So I get that loving someone means accepting everything about you, including the fact that you're a devoted mother. You're way younger than me, and contrary to the cliché, that's weird for me. We're both neurotic, but our neuroses are different, so we will be assuming a whole shitload of psychological stuff. And to get back to your question. I know how important Skip and Sarah are to you. I was never opposed to being a father. It just didn't happen for Martha and me. Which is a good thing now, I guess. I'll be learning as I go. There's no hiding from that. But, yes, I want you for as long as I live, and I understand it's a package deal. I once told you that part of the secret of my modest success was adaptability. I promise I will become the kind of stepfather you'll be proud of."

"Okay," Jane smiled, "you handled that one adeptly. And what about cold fusion? We hardly ever talk about it, but all of your discipline, as well as mine, think it's fruitless and already empirically proven wrong. So don't you worry that we're chasing a pipedream?"

“Sure, almost every day,” Richard returned the smile. “Surprise, surprise, I can be pretty arrogant. I think we’re right, and they’re wrong.”

“I prefer self-confident,” Jane responded. “It’s one of the things I’ve fed off from the very beginning.”

“You know,” Richard confessed, “that I’m overstating for dramatic effect. I’m very proud of the theoretical work we’ve done. I see it as my greatest achievement as a scientist. Sure, the zero-grav cooler will probably end up making us the most famous, to say nothing of the richest, but if I could only have one, I’d take our work on low-energy nuclear reactions even if it all does end in failure. But I’m not ready to admit defeat yet. I trust our calculations. I still believe we might get there.”

“How does this sound as a deal?” Jane tried to make her tone sincere and a little playful. “I’ll think about the Hawaii thing and give you an answer after we get back home. Let’s just enjoy these last few days here, and we can figure out what to do when we get back home.”

#

Those last days in Manzanita were not destined to be relaxing. The email had arrived late last night, but Richard only saw it as he was having his coffee early the following day.

Professor Barnett,

We are reaching out to you and Professor Achinstein with what we believe is a classic win-win proposal. We are interested in buying all of the relevant patents for the zero-gravity, semiconductor laser, evaporative cooler for fifty million dollars in cash.

We completely understand that you will need a little time to carefully consider all of this. We must insist, however, that you notify us of your decision before the end of the summer. Both tax considerations and board policy dictate this abbreviated timeline.

Our interest is exclusively in the zero grav cooler. We believe that the device has many industrial applications completely unrelated to your work with low-energy nuclear reactions. You and Professor Achinstein are encouraged to continue this line of research. Lonestar

Instruments will grant you unlimited use of your
zero-grav prototypes for the duration of research.
Please let me know if you have any questions.
Sincerely,
Joseph T. Robinson
Chief Executive Officer
Lone Star Instruments

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Richard muttered to himself. “Janie,” he half screamed to the back bedroom, “you better come have a look at this.”

Jane was not at all pleased by being summoned like this. But something in his voice told her that she probably needed to look. “What’s so damn important?”

“Just read it,” Richard turned the laptop toward her, “please.”

And she did read it. “What in God’s name?” she asked of no one in particular. “Fifty million dollars? Do you think this is for real?”

“Damned if I know,” Richard replied. “I don’t know what I think about anything right now.”

“Well, I guess,” Jane considered. “maybe, we should call Barry and see what he thinks?”

“That, Professor Achinstein,” Richard brightened, “is a damn good idea. I’ll text him and see if he’s available on the phone sometime this afternoon. But can we take a nice long walk this morning? I need to clear my head.”

Jane smiled, “and lower your blood pressure, I suspect. You text him, and I’ll get on my beach shoes.”

Barry Delbrück returned the text almost immediately and said he would make himself available at three. Their routine was firmly established by now. The couple walked in silence for the first fifteen minutes or so. Simply absorbing the sights, sounds, and smells. It was low tide, and the seabirds were going nuts. This was mainly because a bald eagle was invading the cormorants’ and gulls’ territory. They stopped and quietly enjoyed the raucous quarrel and the aerial acrobatics. Finally, Jane began, “do you think we should just sell? I know it’s corny, but maybe this is a sign.”

“I guess it could be,” Richard conceded, “but I’d like to see the next version with the varicap diodes. After that, I think we’re going to see a dramatic upturn in efficiency.”

Jane couldn’t help herself. She flat-out laughed. “Oh, Rich, you talk about the zero-grav like a proud father. If we sell the patent, lots of really smart people will be playing around with it. We might not even recognize it when it goes into commercial production. I think that’s probably a good thing.”

Richard didn't exactly laugh at himself, but he thoughtfully smiled. "You know me too damn well. I don't even want to be an electrical engineer. And I sure as hell don't want to be a businessman for the rest of my life. Besides, it would make things a hell of a lot easier in Hawaii. Maybe we should take a few months off from the cold fusion stuff and thoroughly research zero-grav's true worth. Just because some Texas CEO says we've received a fair offer doesn't make it so. And perhaps there are other suitors out there, as well."

Jane nodded, "let's see what Barry has to say. Oh, look," she interrupted herself, "the eagle's back." And with that, they clasped hands and walked for a good hour and a half without hardly speaking another word.

Barry Delbrück listened attentively as Jane read the contents of the email. "My friends," he began, "that is an amazing offer. What do you intend to do?"

Jane now acted as the spokesperson. "We're seriously considering selling the patent. But we need to figure out what it's actually worth. We're also interested in seeing if other buyers might be out there. The offer from Lone Star Instruments sort of came out of the blue. So it's going to take a little while, I think."

"Okay," Delbrück responded, "that all sounds pretty reasonable. But, as your lawyer, I need to remind you of a couple of things. First of all, if you wait too long, Lone Star might just walk. Fifty million's some serious change, and it's pretty much just sitting there for the taking. And then there are the divorces. Oregon's not a community property state. But since it follows the equitable distribution model, and all of the research and all of the patents happened while you were married, your spouses are entitled to half of what each of you will realize when this thing goes through."

"Jesus, Barry," Jane continued. "What do you think we should do? We're sort of out of our depth, you know?"

"I hear you," Delbrück agreed. "This is a first for me too. I have never had clients in a situation like this. But I have seen enough people do foolish things in haste. So here's my best advice, both professionally and personally. I'm not sure you should take months to decide what you want to do, but at the same time, don't act rashly. Take these last few days at the beach and try to enjoy yourselves. But also find time to seriously talk about all of this. If you can, ensure you're both on the same page about how you want to proceed. When you return, we will all get together and hash this sucker out. In the meantime, I will take a little cash from the Ultra-Frigid account and hire a friend of mine to start assessing the real value of your company and your patent. I think he'll be able to give us enough data to start having meaningful preliminary conversations. How does that sound as a short-term plan?"

Richard and Jane looked at each other and nodded. Jane reported from their end of the phone, "fine, Barry, just fine."

#

Jane insisted that they hedge their bets. Rather than resigning from their positions at the College of the Northwest, they both requested and were granted one-year leaves of absence. The three months in Hawaii were a blur. They signed their contracts with the University of Hawaii, met some of their new colleagues, and purchased a lovely beachfront condominium on the Kona side of the Big Island.

Chihiro Hagihara called Jane the day after they signed the purchase agreement. Chihiro was Jane's first hire after she became Division Chair and the two had become close friends. "Hi Jane," Chihiro began, "I have a couple of important things to discuss. I hope now is a good time. But first of all, congratulations on the new position."

"Thank you," Jane acknowledged. "I wasn't sure that anything could ever lure me away from CNW. But look at me now. A new job, a new home, pretty much a new life. So, what's up?"

Chihiro gave a quite audible sigh. "They both have to do with Marcus Allen, I'm afraid. He's very sick. I don't think he has much longer to live."

"God," Jane responded with genuine emotion. "That's terrible. Everybody knows he's suing us, I suppose. But I always liked Mark."

"Oh yes," Chihiro concurred. "He's a very nice man, and he's been a great colleague. But, Jane, here's the glitch. He has asked me to be a witness in the suit against you and Professor Barnett. I feel awful about this. You've been a good friend. And I probably owe you my job at Northwest in the first place."

"Are you allowed to tell me why they want you to testify?" Jane inquired.

"Just some technical stuff in mathematics," Chihiro said. "No one said I couldn't talk to you. I don't know if you know this, and I am truly sorry, but almost every mathematician here in the northwest who knows anything about the details thinks Marcus was poorly treated by Professor Barnett. You know what he told me?"

"Do tell," Jane could feel herself getting angry. "I'm all ears."

"He said he didn't want to sue you guys," Chihiro began. "He told me that he secretly hoped you would see the justice of his claims and invite him to join you as a collaborator."

"Chihiro," Jane consciously changed the tone of her voice, "look, I'm sorry I started to get annoyed with you. I realize you were just doing what any good friend would – keeping me in the loop. I've known him a lot longer than you, but I suspect you know him better. Do you think I should try to talk to Mark? Is he even well enough to see me?"

Chihiro smiled her acknowledgment of the apology. "He's pretty sick. But I believe he'd genuinely appreciate the chance to tell you his side of the story. I think it would be a very nice gesture. It might even make things a little easier for you guys."

Richard was initially skeptical. "Why would you want to talk with that cocksucker who's trying to shake us down?"

"Are we sure that's what's happening?" Jane countered. "It wasn't that long ago that both of us would have considered Marcus a friend, not just a colleague."

"Ah, Janie," Richard softened, "you're a nicer person than I am. Sure, go ahead and have your little tete-a-tete. I have no problem with that. But, I'm still going to be very curious how this could be anything other than a shakedown."

#

Marcus Alston's wife, Rebecca, met Jane at the door. "I'm not sure this is a good idea," she began. "He's been quite ill, you know? But Mark was pretty insistent. So, please, make this as short and stress-free as possible."

"I will," Jane nodded sympathetically. "I understand."

Marcus Alston was sitting on the living room couch in sweatpants and a tee shirt. He did not look good at all. He motioned for Jane to sit down. "Well, Madame Chair, a lot of water under the bridge, wouldn't you say?"

Jane smiled in spite of herself. Mark always could be a charmer when he set his mind to it. "I'm sure you already know that I'm no one's chair anymore."

"Yes," he nodded, "I'd heard that. Off to the big leagues, huh?"

"Time will tell," Jane replied.

"Indeed," he nodded again. "Look, I appreciate your coming by to see if we can clear the air a bit. Chihiro kind of leaned on you, didn't she?"

"Not really," Jane considered. "She's just a good friend who felt obligated to let me know a little of what's going on. I'm actually the one who proposed that we see if we could talk this whole thing out. Why don't we begin with your telling me your side of things."

"Sure," Mark smiled sadly, "Although I have more than a few issues with the two of you, I always liked you and admired the job you did as chair. Also, and I hope you won't take offense, I didn't exactly like Richard, but I do respect him. Just to be clear, I never said that you stole anything from me."

"That's not what our lawyer is telling us," Jane shook her head sadly.

"Well, then, you've been misinformed," for such a frail man, this came out with resolve. "You see, Jane, I don't have that long to live. I am responsible for leaving my wife and children in the best financial circumstances I can. And to be perfectly candid, I care about my reputation as well. I hate to sound vain, but I deserve to be recognized for my contributions to the cold fusion project."

“And what exactly are those contributions?” Jane struggled not to sound skeptical.

“Much more than the two of you were willing to admit,” it was easy to see that he was anxious to tell his story. “Your lawyer told mine that my contribution was simply demonstrating for Richard a way of simplifying a mathematical relationship first discovered by Emre Churchland. I did, in fact, show Richard how to approximate a solution to the parameter space of the Churchland polynomial. If that were the end of the story, I’d have had no quarrel with your footnote thanking me for the help that I provided. The Churchland equation, you see, is really a Mandelbrot set. That was the basic insight that Churchland first saw, though he never had the theoretical apparatus to so describe it. As soon as I started to work through the proof, I realized all of this. That was my single mathematical epiphany in an otherwise undistinguished career. I’ve read all of your subsequent publications, and although it’s true, you never mention, let alone explicitly use, the Churchland equation, the mathematical underpinnings all assume that all instances of cold fusion occur at the boundary of a fractal curve. And you got all of this from me. God damn it, you owed me more than money. As far as I know, none of this has ever been published. I should be up there with you when you win the Noble Prize.”

“That’s quite a story, Professor Alston.” Jane was taken aback. “I’m not nearly a good enough mathematician to assess its validity. But I can promise you that I will relay all of this to Richard. And, if need be, we will find someone with the expertise to either confirm or contradict your account. We’re not thieves, Mark.”

#

It took Richard about a minute to recognize the truth in what Marcus Alston had relayed to Jane. “God damn, I always knew I was missing something. I guess I must be some kind of a dickhead, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Jane rebuffed. “If he had come to us directly in the first place, instead of getting a lawyer, I doubt any of this would have ever happened. What do you think we should do now?”

“No,” Richard ignored the question, “that’s what I mean about being a dickhead. He did sort of tell me a few months later, but I’d already decided he was running a scam. He said something about fractal curves, but I completely dismissed him. I’m pretty sure I screamed at him. Like I said. Classic dickhead.”

“Oh, Rich,” Jane lamented. “You never told me that.”

“I wasn’t keeping secrets,” Richard said in a downcast tone. “It didn’t register that it was important. But what you told him is exactly right. We’re not thieves. I guess we’d better,” he paused. “No, correct that. I’d better go about

setting things right. Do you think it would be okay, though, if I take a week or so just to myself to do my theoretician thing? I'd really like to see what the calculations look like when we explicitly figure in the Churchland equation being a Mandelbrot set. Do you think this might be the breakthrough we've been looking for?"

"God only knows," Jane shook her head. "I need to get back to him, but I think I can buy you that week."

Richard's week predictably turned into three. During that time, two momentous events transpired. Jane got the call from Chihiro Hagihara early Tuesday morning of that last week. "Jane," she began, "I wanted to let you know that Marcus Alston passed away last night. I thought you'd want to know."

"God, I'm really sorry to hear that," Jane almost whispered. "I can't say I'm surprised, though. He looked terrible that last time we talked."

"Yes," Chihiro agreed, "I know. He told me that you contacted him, Jane. Thank you. I think it meant a lot to him."

"No, you deserve the thanks," the regret in Jane's voice was manifest. "I'm glad that I got the chance to talk to him. But, shit, if only he could have lasted just a little longer."

"Mark Alston died last night," Jane announced to Richard.

"Well, damn," Richard shook his head. "I would have liked to tell him I was full of shit right to his face. But at least he didn't have to hear the bad news. I'm afraid something else died last night. You'd already gone to bed when I finished the calculations. It's not just rest in peace for our colleague but for our life's work, as well. I think cold fusion at the level we were hoping for is impossible. Since cold fusion cold occurs at the boundary of a fractal curve, it's inherently unstable. We can sustain it for a couple of minutes, as we've already done in the lab. But the reaction will inevitably dissipate into chaos, just as I should have seen since we're dealing with a Mandelbrot set. For the life of me, I can't see any way for all of our labor to have any commercial applications, at least in our lifetimes. I think we struck out, Sweetie."

#

The meeting was guaranteed to be uncomfortable. But Barry had been insistent. "We need to get everybody around the table. I think all the parties are going to be pleased with the bottom line. If the two of you are ever going to be able to move on with your lives, I am convinced we need to see if we can get everyone on the same page. This is truly win-win-win-win."

After the obligatory round of introductions, Barry began things. "Thank you all for coming. What I am proposing this morning is just an initial session where we share some thoughts and information. I am assuming that Mrs. Alston will want to consult with her attorney. As will Mr. Achinstein and Mrs.

Barnett. At the same time, however, as Ultra-Frigid Fusion's attorney, and with the explicit approval of both Jane and Richard, I have been researching the corporation's real worth and what options all parties here today may have. I have to tell you, the news is pretty remarkable."

"Barry," Cindy Cartwright began, "when you invited us here today, you said you wanted to discuss a settlement in our suit against Ultra-Frigid Fusion. Could we please cut to the chase? What sort of figure did you have in mind?"

"All in due time, Cindy," Barry responded with more than a hint of condescension. "Here is my understanding of Mrs. Alston's case against the corporation. Her late husband claimed he contributed significant ideas to the cold fusion research program that Professors Barnett and Achinstein conducted. I think it is crucial at this juncture to distinguish between the research and patents dealing with cold fusion and the invention of the zero gravity evaporative cooler."

"We are not ready to concede that," Cartwright sparred. "All of those patents are the property of Ultra-Frigid Fusion, and our suit is against that entity."

"If I might interject at this point," Jane interrupted. "I had a long and candid discussion with Professor Alston just before his death. He was very explicit about his involvement with Richard and my research. He helped us solve an important mathematical problem involving the so-called Churchland equation. He felt very strongly that his contribution was foundational to all of our subsequent work regarding cold fusion. At no point did he ever even mention their invention of the evaporative cooler."

"Be that as it may," Cindy Cartwright, ever the negotiator, broke in. "Our position is that Ultra-Frigid is the defendant. We expect fair and sufficient damages for what we are confident we can prove are clear losses that Marcus Alston suffered at the corporation's hands."

Barry was in full combat mode now. "Well, that will be up to a jury to decide. We are willing to entertain talks regarding the worth of the cold fusion patents. But discussing a possible settlement concerning the cooler is a non-starter, as far as I am concerned. But all of that may be moot. If I may, let me tell you what I have discovered."

And everyone around the conference table nodded in agreement.

"Thank you," Barry Delbrück was clearly pleased with himself. "As I said earlier, I hired a consultant to assess the value of Ultra-frigid Fusion's patents. She said that in her estimation, the value of the zero-grav cooler was somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty million dollars. At that time, we were not asking about the value of the other patents."

This little tidbit took Martha Alston and Cindy Cartwright by surprise. “But I gather you have an update,” Cindy inquired.

Barry smiled. “Well, as you so eloquently put it, Cindy, let me cut to the chase. I have had extensive discussions with Lone Star Instruments. They had made an initial offer of fifty million dollars just for the zero-grav cooler patent. I apprised them of what my consultant had said. I also explained how the lawsuit from Professor Alston and his wife might complicate things. We haggled a bit, and at the end of last week, they presented a formal proposal to purchase Ultra-Frigid Fusion, lock stock, and barrel, all of the patents for everything, for one hundred and sixty million dollars. Therefore, I am proposing that we take that first eighty million dollars off the table, take the remaining eighty, and divide it three ways. Professor Alston’s estate would then be compensated to the tune of over twenty-five million dollars for whatever he may or may not have contributed to the cold fusion patents. I am proposing, therefore, a settlement of, say, thirty million dollars.”

Cindy Cartwright and Rebecca Alston looked a little overwhelmed. As did Kyle and Martha. “I must say, Barry,” Cindy composed herself, “that is a very interesting place to begin discussions. We would want to independently confirm all of this, of course. Mrs. Alston and I will discuss your proposal and get back to you within the week. I assume everyone would like to conclude this business as soon as possible.”

Cindy Cartwright and Rebecca Alston excused themselves to mull over -- how had Barry phrased it? -- the pretty remarkable settlement offer. Barry turned to everyone else. “Shall we continue our discussion just a bit more?”

Barry looked at the soon-to-be-divorced couples for nods of approval and received universal approval. “Cindy will try to nickel and dime us,” Barry proclaimed, “you can bet on that. But they’re going to accept the offer. Did you see the expression on Rebecca Alston’s face? I thought she was going to faint.”

“Yes,” Jane agreed. “She looked pretty taken aback. May I ask where this hundred-and-sixty million dollar offer came from? Why the dramatic change of heart from Lone Star? As far as I remember, their last offer was fifty million. Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not knocking fifty mil. But this is over three times that amount.”

“God only knows,” Barry considered, “when you’re dealing with a huge company like Lone Star Instruments. But my guess is that there are at least three things going on. One is, as we initially assumed, that the original offer was candidly lowball. I think they knew all along that the zero-grav cooler was worth closer to a hundred million. I also think they immediately recognized that the Alstons’ suit could totally muck things up. But the clincher is, I’m

betting, they saw the offer for the cold fusion stuff as almost risk-free. They probably have other buyers already lined up for those patents.”

“Just to be clear,” Richard interjected, “assuming we accept the settlement, Jane and I would each get sixty-five million dollars. Is that correct?”

“Yes and no,” Barry hedged. “Your simple arithmetic is correct. But there’s going to be some administrative costs. And I hate to be crass about it. There are also attorney’s fees. Finally, of course, there are your impending divorces. But I’ll let your attorneys worry about all of that. Don’t quote me on this, but I’d guess that each of you is looking at something in the neighborhood of thirty million dollars. Not too shabby, I’d say.”

“Dear God,” Kyle’s exclamation nicely summed things up. “I think we should agree to this. Or am I missing something?”

“No, Professor Achinstein,” Barry concurred, “I don’t think you’re missing anything at all.”

All attention, therefore, turned to Martha Barnett. “Any gut reaction at your end, Martha?”

It took her a couple of moments for her to respond. “I’m sorry. Yes, of course. I just can’t believe this. I never really took Richard’s work seriously.”

“I know that feeling, Martha,” Kyle agreed. “These past few months seem like some weird dream. You can’t call it a nightmare when you end up with this much money. But it still doesn’t seem real. All I want to do is put all this legal shit behind me and get back to being a father and a college professor.”

#

Marcus Alston received the professional acclaim he rightfully felt he deserved posthumously. Chihiro Hagihara accepted a half-year sabbatical and helped Richard and Jane write up a professional article using Alston’s prudently and meticulously kept notes. They all made essential contributions to the paper, but its foundation lay in Alston’s insight. All nuclear fission reactions occur at the boundary of a fractal curve. They gave the dead mathematician pride of place as the lead author.

Chihiro was not a physicist, so she didn’t see the most crucial result in the widely cited article, but the community of physicists and chemists certainly did. All of Richard and Jane’s calculations had assumed that the equation describing the cold fusion reaction would be well-behaved, but the Alston *et al.* article conclusively showed that it was pathological. Achieving a sustainable, low-energy nuclear reaction would take much more than the zero-grav cooler. As Richard had predicted, it would be decades, if ever, for cold fusion to amount to anything more than an intriguing theoretical possibility.

Not that Lone Star Technology cared that much. The zero-grav cooler turned out to be a game-changer. It lurks behind the scenes in tons of research on pharmacology and manufacturing, food science, and countless less conspicuous academic and industrial applications. Lone Star would have made a fortune, even if they had had to eat the entire add-on for the cold fusion patents. But of course, they didn't. As Barry foresaw, Lone Star unloaded those patents at a handsome profit to startups and other smaller enterprises. So, the future of cold fusion lies where it belongs – in the hands of young, creative scientists.

DEATH ACCORDING TO CLARICE ADAO

MAGGIE FELISBERTO

I think I was dead on the table. They won't tell me as such, but I have this lingering sense of the world without oxygen. I have never seen a ghost, but I feel ghostlike in the hospital halls, pale from post-surgery in a white gown with gaunt features. I needed so much blood, oceans of it, to keep me alive during the procedure. I needed blood and luck beyond my own capacity, blood and luck to skate the edge of death and come back to life on the other side. The doctors won't confirm it, but I know I was dead on the table.

Here is how death has changed me: it hasn't. I have decided to be the same person, the same Clarice as before the procedure, regardless of what may or may not have changed about me physically, including my flirtations with the grave. Before I was dead, I was a woman, and after my death I continue to be one woman amongst billions of women who have nothing and everything in common. How many women have had the same procedure done with no complications whatsoever, and how many have died never to come back?

No matter. I have died and come back, died and come back a thousand times over before in my soul. What's one more death, one little death, in comparison to the multitudes of deaths I've felt in the foundations of my being. What is an ocean of blood next to a tsunami of doubt? If anything, it's a validation that despite it all, I am still alive. The whole thing should be pretty invigorating, when I think about it.

I have been thinking about a lot of things lately, even before the procedure. I had been thinking about death, of all things, when I got the news that I needed surgery. I don't want to say I prognosticated it, but it's one correlation among many correlations that inevitably lead to the appearance of causation, and if it appears as causation, it therefore is causation, and therefore I caused my own death on the table by thinking about death in the run-up to the procedure.

These are the thoughts my sister calls "deranged." I call them complex, and I love them. Thoughts about death keep me alive, keep me wondering and guessing about the end so that the mystery remains a mystery, and I remain a young Miss Marple gathering clues by being nosy with death—nosy but not so deep in it that I can't look past my own nose. I had died in my heart and my soul, yes, but to die bodily remained as a great romance in the way of the Romantics. My sister is a scientist, and I am a folly.

I find myself more hungry than ever before. I fasted before the procedure, then subsisted after on fluids so much so that a permanent sense of lack fills my stomach. It is not a void, but a furnace, and I cannot shovel enough fuel into it to satisfy. I wish I could say this sensation was new, but it is only insofar as it relates to my gut. I have never been satisfied.

If I am to be the same Clarice as before, I should tell you what that Clarice was like, except Clarice is such a bore that no one would read her posthumous memoirs. I have lived a boring job and worked a boring life for so long, it cannot be overstated just how dull that has made me. I am a drag, a consumption of time so unremarkable that to notice me would give the same irritation as a mosquito flying on the other side of the net. I am nothing, and my death has not changed that fact.

I am nothing, and I am a furnace. I am a nothing-furnace burning through the meaning of my precious life. I don't know why life is precious, but I accept that it is because so many others say it must be so. To me, it's less that life is precious and more that it is fragile. Life is fragile, and it takes gentle but firm hands to keep it safe. My hands have never been firm, though they have been gentle enough to get me here. The doctor's hands were firm enough to bring me back when their gentleness failed them. And thus, I am alive, still a fragile, precious thing.

My sister is a scientist. She believes that life began billions of years ago, and that life will continue beyond the demise of humanity in ways that we could never predict. For her, life is made of cosmos and dark matter. Life is made of particle physics and biochemistry and stardust. My sister is confident in herself because she is confident in the universe. Science is about finding answers to the questions that make life so incomprehensible.

I never had a head for science. I'm more like my father, who is a professor of Brazilian literature. Literature is about taking the answers that we think we know and questioning them until they don't mean anything anymore, leaving you with nothing left but the questions. My sister could never handle this nonsense just like I could never handle the logic and security of answers. We are different people, and I think perhaps she is happier.

In fact, she must be happier, because I have sworn in the past to never be happy again. I often think, why would I curse myself with this, then I remember the way my happiness was torn from me like a wild animal tearing apart the carcass of its kill. I have never been happy, and every time I think I may have achieved it, happiness abandons me and I wish for death.

How cruel, to have died on the table only to be brought back.

How cruel, and yet, and yet–

And yet I find I relish being alive.

Life is strange. I have never relished any aspect of it before, and now I find myself starving for it. Each drop of water, each taste of lime green hospital gelatin fills my furnace with a desire for more, more. I cannot stop. My sister brings me a sandwich, and I savor the cold cuts and cheese and bread like they are the body of Christ himself. I do not believe in god, but I believe in the power of this sandwich to redeem my life of despair. I crave a plum or a nectarine, some tangy stone fruit to wash it down.

Life is strange. I want to gobble it up and consume it, to live it with vigor and in ways I've never even thought to try before. I want to ask those damnable questions until they turn into things of hope.

Death is strange. Even having been there, having spent precarious and precious minutes within it, I find death more foreign than ever before. Death is a question, one that I will ask again and again, but one which I no longer pretend to seek an answer for. Death is strange, is all the answer there will be. And the strangeness of death is the strangeness of life, and the two are one like the light and the dark holding hands into infinity.

I have tasted death, and now that I have, I am free to hunger for life.

This is how death has changed me: in every way imaginable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Felisberto is a queer nail polish enthusiast with a PhD in Portuguese literature and an MFA in creative writing. Her work has been published by Bridge Eight Press, Change Seven Magazine, Tagus Press and Routledge. She lives in Massachusetts with her sister and nine pets.

WATER SPORTS

DAVID SHESKIN

While Grogan was on his knees looking out from under the bottom of his stall, in the adjacent compartment Meyers' right eye was glued to the lens of a periscope prism embedded in a stack of books lying on the floor of the toilet located on the second floor bathroom in Rayburn Hall. As Grogan twisted his torso until his head was finally in a position that enabled him to see the identity of the man standing in front of the urinal, Meyers recollected what Pennington had said prior to leaving the two of them alone in the bathroom a few hours before.

"It won't take very much to fuck up boys. So let's be extra careful. I mean it, no shenanigans! I want both of you to act like scientists and make sure this study doesn't wind up in the gutter like some people would like it to."

Well, as far as Meyers was concerned it had looked like the gutter from the very beginning. But what of it, a job was a job. He'd known from the start that if someone happened to screw up it wouldn't be him, but instead would be Grogan, because the guy just happened to be positively off the wall. For sure the fucker was crazy. All he ever seemed to talk about was his wife and how some guy was schtupping her at least three times a week, and that if it was the last thing he'd ever do, he'd find the goddamn mother and teach him a lesson he'd never forget. God, how that man could rant and rave and somehow always sound as if he were in competition for being crowned the king of the sickies. Yet curiously, when Pennington was around he always seemed to be totally in control — always managing to project an aura of being moderately sedate and as scholarly as one should be if sometime in the near future he expected to be addressed as doctor. But once the old man departed it was bananasville, for without fail Grogan would go into his shtick, confronting Meyers (who for some reason he fathomed to be his very good friend) with such gems as, "Jesus Freddy, I've only been married to the broad for six months and already she's cheating on me. And it's not like I don't give her what she wants. Christ, I must lay her at least seven or eight times a week."

Perched on the toilet holding a stopwatch in his left hand, as he peered into the periscope prism waiting for the subject in front of the urinal to eject a stream, it was at once apparent to Meyers the reason for his partner's untimely acrobatics. The subject just now starting to piss had a schlong that was almost a foot long, and with Grogan's mentality this individual was sure to be perceived as a prime suspect in the question of his wife's alleged infidelity. This was because any guy screwing Grogan's old lady would as he put it many

time, “have to have at least a foot and a half of meat.” Although the party in question fell somewhat short of this dimension he was nevertheless more amply endowed than anyone Meyers had seen since the study had commenced the week before. Sensing that his colleague was in the process of doing something that would be more than just rash, Meyers dropped to the floor, and reaching over into the next compartment pulled Grogan back into the enclosed steel sanctuary whispering, “Cool it you goddamn idiot!” To his surprise not only did Grogan acquiesce, but by some miracle the person poised in front of the pissoir remained oblivious to all the commotion and summarily went about his business, after which a period of time Meyers to be precisely thirty-nine and one half seconds he zipped up his fly and without washing his hands exited into the hallway.

By now it was five o’clock, and because of the time, immediately after the subject’s departure Meyers hastily gathered all of his materials, and as he stuffed them into a large tan attach ease he knocked on Grogan’s compartment saying, “It’s time to quit. Let’s get the hell out of here,”

As the two of them emerged into the hallway, Grogan grabbed Meyer’s arm shaking it vigorously.

“I’m sure that goddamn mother must be the one who’s sticking it to Diane!”

Still seething because of what might have happened, Meyers, red in the face and breathing as if he been running for the last four hours instead of recording data on urinary duration, yanked free of his grip.

“Christ Grogan, don’t you have any brains in that thick skull of yours? If that guy had found out what we were up to it would have blown everything, and I mean everything! I couldn’t give a fuck about this idiotic study, but if we screw it up it means that old fart Pennington is going to make sure that both of us never get our doctorates. Now why the hell don’t you think of that the next time you see some guy whose dick just happens to be a little bit longer than yours or mine.”

Predictably, instead of defending his behavior or at least still exhibiting some residual anger, Grogan merely grinned.

“Shit man, speak for yourself. Sure the guy was big, but just because you ain’t don’t put me in the same class with you and all the other small fry.”

It was really hard to believe that this man was a doctoral candidate. After all, to get as high as he had in the educational hierarchy one might have assumed a modicum of intellectual skills. Yet for some reason the person, at least in Meyers’ presence, seemed to speak more like a longshoreman than a psychologist. The one thing Meyers really wanted to do was to knock the guy flat on his back, and just once and for all maybe shut that garbage trap he

called his mouth. But unfortunately, once again he was obliged to consider reality, for after all, Grogan was a classic mesomorph — an ex-football player with a frame that was at least six feet two inches of solid muscle, and since Meyers himself had never bothered to learn the art of self-defense he felt ill equipped to be the one to instruct Grogan in the fine points of etiquette.

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Back in the psychology department, Pennington, who just happened to be a world renowned Nobel laureate, sighted his two assistants returning their equipment to the supply room.

“Well boys, how did things go?”

Meyers, trying his best to smile, responded, “Okay I guess. During the first half hour or so I had some trouble with my stopwatch, but after that things went pretty smooth.”

“Pretty smooth? Look, we all know things have to go extra smooth. I take it then that no one suspected what was going on?”

“Not to our knowledge.”

“Good. Now let me see your data.

Meyers handed Pennington three large sheets of ruled paper upon which were scribbled all sorts of numbers. At the top of each sheet in dark ink were headings indicating three columns which from left to right read *latency of urination*, *duration of stream* and *time spent washing hands*. As we scrutinized the figures Pennington remarked, “I wish to hell we had pictures of our subject. It would sure make the study a lot more meaningful.”

Of course Grogan just stood there grinning like an idiot, and Meyers was sure Pennington would interpret this as the man’s way of acquiescing to what he had just said. Because of this Meyers felt obliged to respond.

“I really don’t think I’d feel comfortable if we did that. After all, wouldn’t it constitute an invasion of people’s privacy?”

Unable to resist the opening Meyers had unwittingly provided him with, Grogan suggested, “Well, if that constitutes an invasion of people’s privacy I guess the only thing we’re doing right now is invading their privates.”

To Meyers’ surprise Pennington chuckled. Slowly but surely Meyers had lost all respect for this so called master scientist who years before he’d have considered it a great honor to work with. Of course he knew that if certain of Pennington’s colleagues had been around, the man would have been sure not to have let Grogan’s remark alter his sobriety. But in the presence of his lackeys he could afford such a luxury. Having had a good laugh, Pennington wrinkled his brows and with his hands on his hips said, “Look boys, let’s face it. This is touchy research, very touchy, and the more I think about it the more apparent it becomes to me it’s not the sort of thing you can do more than once.

So this study is probably going to be the only chance we'll have, and because of it we have to, in fact we're obliged to, maximize our data, and sometimes that means doing something you ordinarily wouldn't want to do. Yes, I would say that this is the classic case where the end definitely justifies the means."

"But pictures Dr. Pennington? It could cause a lot of problems. What if information leaked out — it would prove embarrassing to more than a few people."

Meyers couldn't figure out what it was about his remark that Grogan found so amusing. On the other hand, Pennington who continued to lecture him remained deadly serious.

"I don't think we really have to worry about those sorts of *leaks* Mr. Meyers. After all, I would expect that all of us are sufficiently mature that whatever happens within the confines of this research will remain strictly confidential. Now getting back to what I said before, it's more than obvious to me that urination is a complex chain of ritualized behavior that's intimately related to one's personality. Admittedly, studying such behavior does present problems. I've never denied that for one minute, but by God man, considering the fact that we really might find out something awfully important, don't you think it's worth the risk? Hell, I'd think that after spending a whole week in the bathroom observing subjects, by now you'd realize the significance of what we're doing. Anyway, I figure the time has come for us to finally get down to brass tacks and study this thing the way it should be studied. So as far as I'm concerned the only logical thing to do at this point is to go full steam ahead and get a personality profile of each and every subject. And to do that we'll need pictures so that later on we can know exactly who it is we have to test."

A compulsive ingratiator, Grogan saw this as the perfect time to endorse what Pennington had said.

"I agree with Dr. Pennington Fred. Research is research, and just because we happen to be dealing with a sensitive area, it doesn't mean that we should make concessions that will prevent us from getting the critical data."

Incredible, thought Meyers. How well this Neanderthal can speak when he has to. Yet his thoughts were interrupted when Pennington handed the data sheets back to him remarking, "Well then, it's settled. From now on we take pictures. It'll take me a day or two to work out the logistics. Until then both of you sit tight. No sense getting any more data until we're ready to go full throttle."

Snapping his heels together and turning around in an almost military manner, their mentor headed towards his office. Stunned, Meyers turned to Grogan.

“Why that little bastard! Where the hell does he come off doing something like that. The fucker didn’t give a shit about anything I had to say. His mind was made up a long time before that. And you Grogan, you just played right along with him.”

“Jesus Freddy, you and I both know you can’t argue with the man. He’s the coach and he lets you know it, so why not string along with him and make things easier?”

He wished he could tell Grogan that maybe that was the way *he* did things, but some people had principles, and that it was a hell of a lot more important for a person like him to stand up for what he thought was really right rather than always kissing a person’s ass in order to get what he wanted out of him. But he couldn’t, because for five years he’d worked his ass off to get his doctorate, and nothing, not even something like having to take pictures of people in the pisser, was going to get in his way.

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A few days later Pennington called Meyers into his office.

“Meyers, starting on Wednesday we’ll begin collecting data on two thousand subjects. I’m putting you in charge of things over in Rayburn Hall. I want everything strictly copacetic. If you see or hear of anything that might screw things up make sure to let me know right away. We’ve got a great setup here, so let’s make sure we make the most of it.”

That the guy was an absolute fanatic was obvious. Meyers knew Pennington had paid off the head janitor as well as a few of his assistants to cooperate and not interfere with the study. On more than one occasion he’d made it clear to Meyers that he considered the bathroom in Rayburn Hall his own sacred turf, and now that the study was ready to resume Pennington stressed this point more than ever.

“Nothing and I mean nothing will get in our way! It’s imperative that we get maximum use out of our facility.”

The facility, specifically the second floor bathroom in Rayburn Hall, was in Pennington’s opinion the only one on campus suitable for this particular study. As he put it, “A three-two ratio of urinals to toilets, with the stalls facing the urinals and sinks — let me tell you, it’s the perfect setup, but not a common one. Usually you find four-two and two-one combos, and then of course you have the biggies —bathrooms with five, seven or ten stalls paired with an equal or greater number of urinals. Yet half the time they build such bathrooms the stalls are facing the wrong direction. In Rayburn Hall though the layout is perfect.”

Apparently Pennington had wanted a setup where two observers could operate comfortably yet anonymously within one bathroom. In this instance it

was easily done by placing an *Out of Order* sign on the door of one of the stalls. As for the other stall, the plan was for it to be operational but seemingly always in use. When Meyers had questioned the latter strategy, suggesting that people might get suspicious if they waited around and no one came out of the stall, Pennington said, "People don't wait around very long if they have to take a shit, and since only one stall is functional you can take my word that if someone doesn't come out of it within twenty seconds or so, whoever is waiting will make tracks for the next closest john."

Yes, whatever else one might have said about Pennington, the man left no stone unturned. Before beginning a study he made sure to research anything that might possibly interfere with its success. This became even clearer to Meyers when early in the research in a moment of impulse he'd suggested to Pennington that perhaps homosexuals would use the bathroom for certain activities. But his mentor silenced him quickly by saying, "I've checked this out. Queers generally avoid a setup that has less than three stalls. And since we'll only have one that's supposedly functional, well, forget it, it's just too tight a setup for them to want to fool around in. And besides, if you look around carefully the walls are pretty well free of graffiti. If homos were frequenting the place they'd say otherwise."

That evening Pennington met them outside of the Rayburn Hall bathroom. Once inside, puffing up his chest, pointing to a small innocuous looking rectangular box positioned above the urinal nearest to the door, he proudly announced, "Well boys, there it is. You could never tell just by looking at it that it was a camera, could you?"

"Jeez," said Grogan, "you can't see the lens or anything else for that matter."

"Correct, you can't see a damn thing except for a little black box, and the only time the lens shows itself is for a split second when the man inside one of the stalls activates the shutter."

Still amazed, Grogan inquired, "But how can you take pictures in here without a flash. Is it light enough?"

"Last week it wasn't. But today it is. Apparently you haven't noticed that the intensity of the illumination has been increased appreciably since the last time you were in here. Sixty candlepower to be exact. And when you take that into consideration along with the fact that we'll be using extra fast film, well, our pictures should come out as clear as crystal."

As he said this, Pennington removed from his pocket a photograph of someone standing in front of one of the urinals with his hands on his hips looking up ominously into the lens of the camera. Closer inspection revealed the subject to be Pennington himself.

Grabbing the picture out of his hand, Meyers, his face red and his voice uncharacteristically hoarse, blurted out, "Why that's a picture of your whole body from the knees up. With shots like that we'll not only get a person's face, we'll also get his penis!"

"How astute of you Mr. Meyers. Your acumen never ceases to amaze me. But don't fret about it, it's just a new twist I thought of a few nights ago while I was taking a bath. As you know, originally I was intent on placing the camera by the door, but after thinking about it I figured what the hell, as long as we're putting a camera in the bathroom why not go all out and get some solid data on penile dimensions and relate that to everything else we're studying"

"Taking pictures of faces is one thing. I mean that in itself is bad enough. But a man's penis! Christ, don't you have any respect for people's privacy? Science or no science, it's wrong Dr. Pennington, it's just plain wrong!"

The tolerant smile gone from his face, Pennington looked Meyers directly in the eyes.

"I'm afraid your sermonizing comes a little late Mr. Meyers. After all, unless you happen to be a complete idiot, I'm sure that from the very beginning it should have been more than clear to you that preeminent among the things we planned on doing here was invading the privacy of our fellow human beings. You know, it may come as a shock to you Meyers, but that is precisely what the business of psychology is all about. So if you happen to find invasion of people's privacy unpalatable, or perchance, if you just have a particular hang up about scrutinizing the male genitalia, perhaps it would be best for all concerned if you threw in the towel and left Grogan and me here alone to work things out by ourselves. But I can assure you of one thing young man, if you ever fancy yourself becoming a psychologist you've got a hell of a lot of thinking to do about what this discipline is all about."

Meyers knew the bastard had him backed into a corner, and that he'd reached one of those rare moments in life when you are actually conscious of the fact that the very next thing you say will most likely have an irreversible impact on you destiny. So during that split second before he responded to what Pennington had said to him, he said to himself, is it in fact a psychologist I really want to be, and if not what is it then that I want out of life? And when he concluded that in the final analysis he was a man with little or no tangible ambition, except perhaps for being self-supporting, he could only ruminate about the large sums of money and hard work he'd invested in his overly liberal education, which to date had seemingly given him little else except for a series of continual headaches and a large and often bleeding ulcer. So realizing that prudent men didn't do something so rash as to throw away that which they had spent the better part of their adult life achieving, he took a

deep breath, and although fully cognizant of the fact that he should really be walking out the door, instead he told Pennington, "I'm afraid I owe you an apology Dr. Pennington. I just got carried away and lost my head. But you're right about what you said, and I can assure you that you can depend on my full cooperation from here on in."

God, how he hated himself at that moment. For being such a pragmatist. And such a coward. But what really piqued him was that he just knew behind him that asshole Grogan was standing there with a shit-eating grin plastered across his fucking face. And he knew that for the next half-hour he'd just have to stand there like a goddamn jerk feigning attentiveness as he listened to that sanctimonious bastard Pennington review the experimental procedure they were to follow over the course of the next three weeks.

Specifically, that he and Grogan would switch stalls every few hours, and that the duty of the man in right compartment would be to use the periscope prism in order to observe the urinary behavior of each subject, which he'd the record on a separate sheet of paper along with information documenting how many people were in the bathroom at the moment that particular subject commenced what Pennington liked to refer to as a *urinary episode*. All this information would then be passed to the man in the adjacent stall who would record the data in the appropriate column of the master sheet which would be clipped to the door of his compartment. That man would also be expected to take a picture of each subject the moment he heard the sound of his urine making contact with the porcelain of the urinal, as well as coding each photograph so that later on all the pictures could be matched with the data for the appropriate subject. Of course, upon receiving them, Pennington would give the facial portion of the photograph to other graduate assistants who would then track down each and every subject, and using some false pretense induce them into taking a battery of personality tests which upon analysis would be related to all the bathroom data, and in the process undoubtedly reveal what Pennington expected to be a penultimate truth about the human race. And if perchance when it was all over, that which they had been up to proved to be little more than an ill-conceived and futile exercise, no one would be any the wiser, because Pennington and the two of them would be the only people who could possibly be privy to what the hell had gone on in that godforsaken bathroom during the winter of Meyers' twenty-fourth year.

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*All those mirrors on bathroom walls,
disclosing men with hairy balls,
Always right and never wrong,
they show whether a dick be short or long.*

*Yes, here the truth hangs out for all to see,
as men pull out their meat to pee.
And all the while as this occurs,
inside the stall a body stirs.
For an eye is pressed against the door,
with the hope of seeing more and more.
And when at five the day is done,
we pack our bags and*

More than just slightly spaced out, Meyers contemplated the wisdom which had just flowed from the tip of his pen. Inside his jacket was a half empty bottle of scotch and two small plastic phials containing an assortment of multicolored pills. For the first week and a half he'd been the model of social decorum, discharging his duties in the fine tradition of an Einstein or Edison. Yet, since in this particular instance, the phenomenon under study was, to say the least, far removed from that which most scientists occupy themselves with during their waking hours, perhaps, in retrospect, one really couldn't blame the man all that much for lapsing into this state of almost total dissolution. In view of this, during the past ten minutes he passed on to Grogan in the adjoining stall various slips of paper that were either blank or had scribbled upon them hieroglyphics that were no less absurd than the nonsense he had just inscribed upon the wall of the toilet.

No doubt this sudden metamorphosis could be attributed to a culmination of a variety of hostilities. For sure, it had something to do with the fact that all during the previous week, Grogan had taken it upon himself to, as he put it, "add an air of realism to the study." This touch of authenticity involved his producing with his lips all variety of sounds which were intended to communicate to the subjects of this so-called experiment that a body was indeed present in the left stall fully engaged in meeting nature's call. Understandably, each time Grogan saw fit to fabricate the sound of flatulence, Meyers' insides shuddered, and the man could not help but wonder what he had ever done to deserve such a fate — to be stuck in the bowels of this bathroom working in synchrony with this undignified boob.

But in the final analysis he supposed it was his conscience that had gotten to him. Somewhere along the line he'd realized that not only was what they were doing wrong, but it was definitely not the sort of thing to which he wanted his name appended. Unable to muster enough courage to quit, he'd turned to various chemical substances for motivational support. Now, curled up in the security of his stall, his sole concern was being able to find some word that rhymed with *done*, thereby allowing him to finish the limerick he'd

just composed. But as the man floated within the depths of some psychic oblivion he suddenly felt something tugging at the cuff of his trousers, and looking to his left saw what appeared to be Grogan's face staring at him from under the bottom of the stall.

"What the hell is wrong with you Freddy?"

"Oh fuck off Grogan."

"Hey look, you know I'm all for a little fun, but man, you're really messing things up. You've already screwed up the data on ten subjects."

"Bug off you turd! Why don't you just crawl back into your hole and blow a few more farts."

"Man Meyers, if you weren't drunk I'd kick your ass. I can't leave you in here like this. As soon as that guy pissing finishes I'm getting you the hell out of here."

On saying this, he grabbed Meyers by the legs and dragged him into his stall, whereupon he lifted him onto his shoulders and within a few seconds carried him out into the hallway, where who of all people should happen to run into them but Pennington himself. Of course the old man demanded to know what was going on, and Grogan really had no choice but to tell him the truth, and when Pennington asked Meyers for his side of things, the latter informed Pennington that, among other things, he was "a fucking pervert and a power crazy psycho," whereupon the man turned red as a beet and without hesitation told Grogan to deliver the drunken carcass he was carrying to the infirmary, and that first thing in the morning he should report to him immediately because the two of them had a lot of work to do, and that the top item on the agenda would be to break in a new man since Meyers was finished, completely finished, not only with the study, but at the school itself.

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The next morning when Meyers went to his office he found a note attached to his door informing him that Dr. Pennington wanted to see him immediately. Since he vaguely remembered that the day before the man had said something about him being all washed up, he couldn't imagine what it was he could possibly want with him. Yet in spite of this, he went anyway, maybe just so he could find out if he had it within him to tell off the great scientist when he was sober. On entering his office he saw Pennington sitting behind his large mahogany desk talking with Grogan. Smiling out of the side of his mouth, Pennington said, "Well, if it isn't Mr. Meyers, and doesn't he look like a godawful mess."

"The note said you wanted to see me."

“Not really, I just wanted to make it perfectly clear when you were sober that you’re finished around here. Nothing personal, mind you. But let’s face it Meyers, you don’t have what it takes to be a top researcher.”

Laughing, Meyers pointed to Grogan and said, “And I suppose he does?”

Looking like an affronted parent whose favorite child had just been insulted, Pennington scowled and said, “*You* have one hell of a nerve making cracks about Grogan. At least the man does his work and isn’t idiot enough to make a fool of himself. He may not get quite the grades you get Meyers, but as far as I’m concerned I’d rather have someone like him working for me than a misfit like you. At least he’s dependable and isn’t constantly bitching. You know, ever since we started on this project you’ve been nothing but one big pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, well that’s all very interesting. Was that all you wanted to see me about?”

“I feel sorry for you Meyers. You know, you really blew it. If you’d bothered at all to look at the data we’re getting you’d have seen that we’re on to something really big. And you could have been part of it. But no, you had to mouth off, and then yesterday you went and made a complete ass of yourself. Well, maybe after all this is over and you’ve had some time to think you’ll have learned a lesson from all of it.”

“Frankly Pennington, the only thing I’ve learned from this whole fiasco is that Stanley Gibble in the biology department has the longest schlong among the faculty in the natural sciences, and that Edward Kiestler, our esteemed dean, has one hell of a time getting started anytime he comes into a bathroom to take a piss. Outside of crap like that, I don’t think your fucking study is going to tell anyone anything!”

On hearing what Meyers had just said, Grogan gasped in an attempt to prevent himself from laughing. Looking over towards him, Pennington raised his eyebrows in disapproval, but quickly turned his attention back to Meyers.

“You really are a lost cause Meyers. I’d of at least thought you’d have had the good sense to cut through all the toilet humor. I don’t know who you think I am, but in case you haven’t noticed I’m not an eighth grader passing through some preadolescent stage of development who happens to find something amusing about people taking a piss. I suspect that from the very beginning Meyers that’s been your problem — you’ve never grown up.”

“On the contrary, if anybody hasn’t grown up I’m afraid it’s you, not to mention of course Grogan over there. You know Pennington, you’ve got this half-baked notion that the penis is some sort of fucking magic wand, and that pissing is some goddamn sublime act. Well, next time you take a leak why

don't you take a good long look at what you've got between your legs, and maybe once and for all you'll get the message that probably the only reason you have this incredible fixation about pricks and pissing is that once upon a time when you were a little boy somehow you got the idea that someone short-changed you down there."

With that, Meyers gave the man the finger and slammed the door to his office as he walked out.

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The following Monday Meyers entered the bathroom on the second floor of Rayburn Hall. Everything was the same. One of the stalls had fastened to it an *Out of Order* sign, while of the floor of the other rested that familiar stack of books. The only thing Meyers wasn't sure of was who it was the old man had gotten to take his place. But, no matter, even if the poor jerk happened to be some innocent, it was just too bad for him, because whoever it happened to be today just wasn't going to be his day. Pretending to take a leak, Meyers positioned himself in front of the urinal furthest from the door. Within a few seconds a scholarly looking man in his late forties entered the bathroom and joined him in front of one of the other urinals. And then a younger man, probably a student, entered the bathroom and headed towards the unmarked stall. Just as the student observed that it was occupied and turned to leave, Meyers spun around facing the stalls and yelled, "Hey, there's someone in there looking at us as we piss! And the fucking mothers are taking pictures!"

With that, he jumped on top of the sink and ripped the camera down smashing it to the ground, whereupon an open cartridge of film rolled out onto the floor. Rushing over to one of the stalls, he kicked over the stack of books in which the prism was embedded, and using his fists began to pound on the door of both compartments.

Looking thoroughly confused, the student looked at Meyers and said, "Hey man are you crazy?"

Picking up the prism from the floor, Meyers held it up to the lad's face and screamed, "Crazy, huh? What the fuck do you think this is? It's a goddamn telescope or something. There's a bunch of fucking perverts in those goddamn stalls getting their jollies watching us take a piss! Come here and look for yourself."

Grabbing the boy by the wrist, he pulled him towards one of the stalls and using his foot with one swift kick forced open the door, whereupon they were confronted by Grogan who was squatting in a semi-fetal position on a board atop the toilet. After a moment of hesitation, however, the latter looking petrified and thoroughly confused lunged viscously towards Meyers' throat sending both of them crashing to the floor.

By then a number of people had already entered the bathroom to check out the commotion, and as Meyers and Grogan grappled with one another on the floor, the older man who'd come into the bathroom about the same time as Meyers, approached the other stall, hit it once with his open palm and said in a firm voice, "You in there, this is Dean Kiestler. Come out and show your face!" And the last thing Meyers remembered seeing that afternoon before Grogan knocked him out with a solid right to his jaw was the picture of a penitent looking Pennington emerging from the other stall to be confronted by a roomful of angry men.

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When it was all over Meyers had some very sore ribs and more than a few broken teeth. Grogan, although unscathed, was brought before a school tribunal, where it was decided to suspend him for the duration of the semester and all of the following year. And what of Pennington? To be sure, the man had his day in court, but because of what had happened, things were different for him than they'd ever been before. After all, he'd been caught in the act, and Nobel Prize or not, it was one thing to be designing controversial studies, but quite another to actually be spending you time in toilets observing subjects, especially if they happened to include the dean of the college, who, God knows, had enough trouble pissing even when he was left alone. Yes, all in all what happened seemed to have brought Pennington down to the level of the common man, and because of it he'd lost the immunity his elite intellect had once bestowed upon him. So, in spite of the fact that the man put up a vigorous fight, in the end he succumbed and was forced to tender his resignation, after which he was dismayed to discover that because of all the adverse publicity which had accompanied what had happened, no school in the country wanted anything to do with him. Because of this he had little choice but to look towards distant frontiers and when last heard from he was reputed to be in the employment of some run of the mill Brazilian university which happened to be situated in the heart of a rain forest. Rumor has it that the man's spirit is as strong as ever, and because of it he is still actively pursuing his favorite line of research — in fact, at last word the man was said to be evaluating the tenability of the hypothesis that the annual and often catastrophic flooding in the Amazon is the direct result of nothing more than certain Indian tribes doing you know what a bit too often in the mouth of that long and almighty river. And because of this, it would appear that he is destined to spend long periods of time perched atop a tree peering through a telescope in order to observe the excretory rituals of certain primitive people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor emeritus of Psychology at Western Connecticut State University, David Sheskin is the author of *The Handbook of Parametric and Nonparametric Statistical Procedures* (Chapman and Hall). Also a writer of fiction and an artist, his creative works have appeared in numerous publication such as *The Los Angeles Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, *The Font*, *The Dalhousie Review* and *Cleaver Magazine*.

ONE SHOT

ALEX LR

They lodged at the best hotel in Otranto, where I worked, after school, to earn a little cash on the side, helping out my cousin Annamaria at reception, mainly running errands for guests. I was barely sixteen but nobody seemed to mind; we needed the money at home. My little part-time job had become a necessity ever since my dad's pizzeria had gone bust. From April to October, Otranto is filled with visitors, and I could receive many gratuities.

She was tall and leggy, walking around barefoot whenever she could. Her eyes were a deep blue, always wide open, as in a daze. Her hair was waist-length, straight, honey-coloured.

He had his heavy camera with him all the time, along with other equipment—things I wasn't even sure had names.

I had seen her face on the covers of countless magazines. Her name was Anoushka, and she was German. You could never forget a face like that.

There were others with them: Suzie, who always ran around carrying huge bags filled with clothes—she wouldn't let anyone touch them—and a young man, George. I couldn't quite fathom what he did.

Annamaria filled me in.

"Anoushka—you know her face, no? Isn't she beautiful? The long-haired guy is the photographer, Raoul. He's French-Moroccan. George, the English guy, is his assistant, and the girl in high heels is Suzie, the stylist. Then there's the make-up artist, Carmen, but she's staying with 'friends'—she's from Rome."

"They're doing a fashion shoot for *Vogue Italia*. But she, Anoushka, is constantly fighting with Raoul. Twice already she's disappeared for the whole day with a German guy on a motorbike."

Anna always had the latest gossip on the hotel guests. She had performed badly in her high school exams the year before, university was out of the question. She was earning good money at the hotel. She spoke fluent

English—her parents had migrated to the US, and she was born in New York. Then they all returned to Otranto by the time she was ten.

Suddenly, there was a commotion. Anoushka sprang up from her chaise longue, shouting, “F*** off! I am not doing this.” I didn’t speak much English, but I understood.

“No, listen, you can’t do this to me! It’s what Francesca sent us here for,” Raoul said, gesticulating wildly.

“I am not spending the day topless in the f*****g heat. I can’t go back to Milan with a sunburn. I have shows—I’m opening for Donatella. I’m leaving. I’m done.”

She strode across the room, furious, tapping on her mobile.

Five minutes later, a guy appeared. They spoke in German. He was much older than her and reeked of money. They left together, and Anna whispered, in case I hadn’t followed the exchange, “The German is a producer – and Anoushka’s lover”. She had her sights set on the big screen.

Raoul slumped in an armchair, then he saw me and motioned for me. He looked me up and down, assessing.

“Please, sit down,” he said. Then, unexpectedly: “Can I take a picture of you?”

Without waiting for a reply, he began giving instructions while he shot away.

“Stand there—no, further to the left. Yes, that’s great. Now look into the camera. Don’t look at me—only into the camera. Yesss, the camera loves you,” he murmured, checking the shots.

I felt oddly comfortable, not at all intimidated.

“Look up, look over my shoulder, lean forward, smile, don’t smile.”

He called Suzie, who had missed Anoushka’s tantrum.

"I've found a new model," he told her. "Bring the clothes. We'll make them fit—she's an inch shorter. Thick dark hair, olive skin. Call Carmen. We'll do a test shoot in the morning—Francesca will agree."

A new model? *Me?*

I blinked and swallowed.

"*Monsieur?*" He turned towards me.

"Oh, *daRling*," he said, with that strong, very un-English 'r.' "Call me Raoul."

"Raoul," I repeated, feeling odd about not saying *Monsieur Raoul*. "The thing is... my parents..."

He interrupted. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

He frowned. "Of course, your parents. Let me speak with them. You will be paid, obviously. It's for *Vogue*. Let's go to your house now. I'll ask Suzie and Carmen to join us."

What could I say? Anna was watching, her mouth wide open. She quickly stepped up.

"I'll come too," she said.

Oh no. Now everyone was getting involved.

"I'm *sooo* happy for you," she added.

No, you're not, I thought. I could tell from her sullen expression.

I could feel the excitement, the pull of something bigger than myself. But did I really want it?

Then I remembered Anoushka's words. *Topless. Oh my god.*

My parents *must not* know. I whispered as much into Raoul's ear.

“Good thinking,” he said, smiling.

At first, predictably, my parents said no, even seemed angry. Mine is a Catholic family. But when they heard how much money I would earn, my older brother decided there was no shame in posing for a magazine. On the contrary. “It’s a good job” he said. “You’re a lucky girl. We must celebrate”

They all smiled. My mother decided she’d cook for everyone, while Raoul discreetly slipped cash into my brother’s hand.

I *was* topless in some of the photos, covered in sand, but the images were stunning. Ethereal, untouchable. *Was that really me?*

I saw my own face staring back at me from magazine stands. Only it wasn’t really *mine*. It was a version of me created by someone else.

I became a sensation, bagging a *Vogue* cover on my very first—and only—photoshoot. I realised that modelling was not for me and quit. I graduated, the first in the family, and went on to be a bio lab technician.

From that shoot I learned an important truth, which has stood me in good stead: you can be who they think you should be. But never should you forget who you are, when no one’s looking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex LR (she/her) is a former university lecturer with a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from SOAS, University of London. A fashion activist committed to diversity and inclusion and greater visibility of older women, Alex has blogged, written for magazines and journals and is the author of books on fashion published by Bloomsbury and Rizzoli New York. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

NOT FAR FROM THE TREE

JOHN FRIEDMAN

From his place in the line of passengers arriving at the Raleigh Airport gate, at first Will caught only the large cardboard sign *she* held above her head. On it was the name "Altissor." Because of the crowd, he did not at once recognize her, especially as she was the last person he wanted to see. Far off across the room she looked around for him anxiously. He saw through a camel's hair coat, edges flying open, long legs. She wore a brown, pill-box Jackie Kennedy style hat.

The intercom's high-pitched crackle announced flights boarding or departing. A row of posters on the walls touted Raleigh's Research Triangle and told you how to find Hertz or Budget counters. And then there she was, nearly in front of him, abashed, still holding the sign up in the air.

Closer to her now, he saw under the coat a charcoal grey sweater, a plaid skirt and loafers with stockings. Casual, but not careless, she wanted her faculty status made clear to him.

Suddenly, something about her springy, lilting walk toward him, the straightness of her back, the curve of her throat and the angle of her head, curiously seeking him, made Will think of her mother, Rose. The girl resembled her at near the same age, heart-stoppingly similar. There were the same slender, lithe outlines, shoulder length wavy hair, a wide, ironic mouth, and luminous skin.

"Are you Professor Altissor, *William* Altissor?" she asked, out of breath, looking up at him. "I'm Hazel Aphthorn, in Classics. I'm here to pick you up. Professor Coupaye couldn't come today. Of all things, she has terrible food poisoning. I know she'd want to be here to welcome you to Blanchette College, but I'm going to have to do it for her." She smiled at him.

They shook hands while looking around for the baggage carousel. "That's fine," he said. "I don't want to bother people. Maybe tomorrow. I'm sure she'll be better by then." It must be especially ironic, he thought, for his old graduate school friend, Lilliane Coupaye, to have food poisoning. She was a terrific cook and had once made him a *tripes à la mode de Caen* which was the best dish he had ever tasted.

He came back to Hazel, touched by her earnestness. She was staring at him, still holding her sign stapled to a long stick, as if part of a political demonstration somewhere. As they clumsily retrieved his bag from the conveyor, they even bumped heads in a Marx Brothers sort of way. She wanted to take it, but he reached it first.

He could not imagine any comedy in his life associated with Rose, but here it was with her daughter. He still was not quite over the shock of actually seeing any emanation of Rose, any reminder of a period in his life which had destroyed his marriage and paralyzed him emotionally for so many years. He actually dreaded walking next to Hazel in the airport, his stomach tight with acid.

"In the meantime," Hazel was saying, as she guided him quickly past the incoming passengers. "I'm supposed to get you settled and then to show you around campus tomorrow. Though I've not been here so long as to know everything. How was your flight?"

"The usual, shoes and belt off, long sit in the middle. I read." As Hazel looked down at the book he was holding, Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Will saw for an instant another of Rose's mannerisms, looking askance at things. *What was genetic in people and what was simply the results of upbringing? Speed in race horses, a great nose for quail in a pointing dog. These could all be passed on in breeding. But could a walk, could a laugh, could a nerdy manner be transmitted like that in people?* He wondered. *Whatever enabled it, it was eerie.*

"You should have a good audience. This morning, I told my Latin class it was non-negotiable. That if they weren't there, every one of them, at the lecture to hear you, it would be death, or worse," she said giddily. Her nervousness was obvious in her voice, in the way she fidgeted.

Will, towing his suitcase behind him towards the parking garage, thought of Rick Blaine in Casablanca: "of all the gin joints in all the towns," why did she choose this one? And, of course, Googling the University of Texas, Austin, Classics website last spring, he saw that Hazel had got the job at Blanchette. Just as he Googled Rose occasionally too, as humiliating as it was to do it. It was even more so to admit it to himself, typing the letters of her name on the keyboard, as if sounding out random yet familiar notes on the piano.

Learning that Hazel was now teaching at Blanchette was why Will nearly declined Lilliane Coupaye's invitation to lecture on Montaigne's Classical reading, a talk to be jointly sponsored by French and Classics. He had originally told himself the chances of running into the daughter were slim. And yet, here she was, walking along beside him.

He chatted idly as they approached her car, neatly tucked into a compact bay next to several closer full-sized empty spaces. So, she was a rule follower like her mother as well. It was a white Honda Civic. "Have you been here long?" he asked, putting his bag in the trunk, though he already knew the

answer. The chords of Sam Cooke's "I Don't Know Much About History" from a CD player in the dash filled the car as she backed out of the space.

"Nah, I just got my degree last May," she said. "And this is my first full-time job, though I TA-ed in Greek and Latin in Austin. It's pretty exciting, but I have a lot of work, grading and they give junior faculty these duties whenever there's a visitor like you." Looking away from the mirror at him for a second, she said with embarrassment, "Oops, sorry, I hope you know I don't think this is a chore."

"No, not a bit." He turned to watch her drive. He was comfortable enough now to tease her a little. "I just hope I won't need *that* much care." He was enjoying the words to the song. Glancing over at her, he tried not to dwell on her profile, her bold, even prominent nose.

Hazel took him to the Red Roof Inn the French Department had arranged for him, a huge pile of stucco and balconies. Several sixteen-wheel tractor trailers were in the parking lot, idling.

"I know it's not what you'd call luxurious, but I hear it's OK" She gave a strange, stilted laugh and seemed very vulnerable as she appealed to him about the motel, as if somehow his opinion of her would hinge on his comfort. She was toying with a loose button on the camel's hair coat.

"I've slept in far worse," he smiled at her broadly. "You've really been very thoughtful to do all this and I can imagine you're busy with your teaching." He went to the trunk to collect his bags.

They agreed she'd pick him up after breakfast there and show him the campus before his lecture, followed by the faculty dinner at the Tip Top Steak House in the town of Blanchette.

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So, Hazel was about thirty years old. He could easily have been her father instead of that stick, the shipping historian Apthorn, Will told himself. A man of seventy in a sleeveless fleece and jeans, tall, neat, and polished, he was only a few pounds heavier than he'd been with Rose. Greyer certainly.

He took stock of the room, staring into the wall mirror above the bureau at his eyes, puffy from worry and travel. *Il ya des valises*. It was a face, he thought dispassionately, on which emotional experience had stalled quite a while back. Stalled with Rose. He had no children. His long-divorced wife had died. Most of his scholarly friends had faded away after his retirement. Women had loved him once, he knew, and they might do so again. But now he suffered from that most Dantescan of punishments, desire with no hope, with remorse, with shame. Still, he thought, more cheerily, it was going to be interesting to watch Rose's daughter on his visit here.

Will put his few things in the bureau and hung up the suit, shirt and tie intended for the lecture. He puzzled, sitting on the bed, at the way things had turned out. If Hazel was about thirty, it must have taken her a little longer than usual to get her degree at Austin. He remembered vividly getting a note from Rose enclosing a blurry photograph in 1984. Her gold-colored glasses frames were slipping down her nose. She was holding the infant Hazel wrapped in a bunting. It was the first time he had heard from her in years.

In the 1990s, through casual questions to friends, he had kept up with Rose's career change from Classics to Information Technology, her two marriages, and her children. He wondered if Rose cared, or even knew that he had finally acted boldly in divorcing Paulette.

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As he stood in the parking lot, having breakfasted at the nearby Waffle House, he watched Hazel roll up in her little white car, brakes squealing.

"How'd it go?" she asked, as he got in, nodding towards the building before she backed out of the lot.

"It's quiet and the bed was good. What can you say about Red Roof Inns? They're pretty generic." She smiled at this and turned toward him. "I don't think our budget can sustain anything fancy, but they're going to spend real money on you for dinner. Since I've been here, I've already heard good things about the steak place we're going to tonight, and they are supposed to have a good wine list. I'm a vegetarian, so I wouldn't know, myself."

"Oh, I hope I won't have to feel guilty," he said, turning to her playfully.

"Nah," she said, smiling at him. "You'll be fine."

With Rose it all began in August of 1974 at a movie screening done by the University of Michigan French Department. Besides his regular courses, he liked to teach film. The first week of her senior year, she approached him in the auditorium, introducing herself. She needed his permission to audit his graduate class in Roman Literary Influence on the French Renaissance. The next day, she came to his Office Hour, and then, when they extended their talk in a coffee shop off campus, she mentioned in a flood of other personal details she was a vegetarian. Well, no doubt she would certainly have raised Hazel to share her values. So, not surprising.

It was bizarre though, as was most everything else about this visit. Will realized then that he had not actually addressed Hazel by her name or title

since they had met, and he wondered if it was because he feared he might by accident call her Rose.

He had already asked her about the small campus art museum that held some Edward Hopper paintings. Hazel took him there, but they had to wait a while till it opened at 10. They sat on a bench in front of the building, housed in a small Ante-Bellum white frame house, looking out at the small lake and rush-filled stream running through the center of Blanchette's Gothic Revival campus. Bronze equestrian statues of Civil War figures with raised sabers guarded each side. A pair of swans at the narrower end of the stream back-paddled against the current invitingly, the curves of their muscular necks intersecting now and then as they hunted for food among the reeds, their eyes constantly circling the horizon whenever they raised their heads out of the water.

He was so aware of Hazel's presence, her warmth, the imagined texture of her camel's hair coat, that he tried to diffuse his unease. "What was your dissertation on, by the way?" Her face lit up with pleasure at this question by someone who could understand the answer.

"I wrote on cosmetic lore and material culture in Ovid's *Amores*. "She laughed with embarrassment. "OK, I know, I know, it doesn't really sound like an Amazon page turner, but I loved writing it." She got up to settle her coat around her legs. "I actually grew up with this stuff. My mother was a Classics major in college, so she read me the *Iliad* instead of Maurice Sendak. I guess she passed on her tastes to me."

She leaned back and crossed her legs, then changed direction, looking over at him curiously. "By the way, I see you taught in Ann Arbor most of your career. Weird, you know, because that's where my mother got her degree in 1975. I bet you didn't know her though? Rose Hoffmann. She was *Summa cum Laude*. She kept her maiden name."

"Well, it's a huge place." Caught, Will waved his hands vaguely, as if bestowing a blessing on the enormous crowds of students streaming across the Michigan campus quadrangles since the 1970s. He wanted to be up and gone, walking in the museum looking at the Hoppers, but that would be worse. He tried to imagine being anywhere else, but the beautiful, clear North Carolina morning light, and the girl, her voice, were insistent. Behind their bench, acorns falling from a pair of large oaks bounced on the pavement. Banks of clouds shaped like croissants rolled over the campus on the wind.

She left it. Will watched Hazel's slim ankles, her loafers, the leather a little scuffed as she crossed and uncrossed her feet. Now she was studying the swans. Even the ankles were like Rose's, he thought. There was something in

the lyrics of the *Greek Anthology* about girls with lovely ankles, Sappho maybe, and he was about to ask her, but it would seem strange.

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As Will sat next to Rose's daughter in the morning sun, his history with the mother came back to him, first in single images, and then in a rush of feeling. He and Rose parted in the summer of 1976, when he began a 1200-mile leg of the Bike Centennial ride where thousands of cyclists were crisscrossing America from coast to coast, or as Will was doing, from Kentucky to Virginia.

After graduation from Michigan, Rose had been admitted to McGill University as a first-year graduate student in Classics, had gone to Montréal to rent a cheap apartment near Parc Lafontaine. She said she would miss him and think of him constantly during the summer. She would "spend this time apart," filling the various mail drops the Bike Centennial people had arranged for them in little Appalachian towns along the route with letters and packages of cookies. She would be in Illinois with her mother before going back to McGill in August, and then, in the fall, he would stay with her for a few days in her new place. Will already knew how iffy it was. He'd have to be blind not to notice the little ways in which for several months she had been drifting away from him.

After pedaling up the three-mile grade with its many switch-backs to that first town of Feely, Kentucky, most of its houses built on stilts to keep them out of the frequently flooding creek choked with household trash, he walked at a rapid pace with the other riders to collect mail in the store housing the post office. He could not believe these first climbs could be so demanding, but he was, in fact, the oldest guy in his group. He hoped he didn't look stricken when he realized no mail was waiting for him.

This was the pattern for the next two weeks. He would arrive at these little post offices and, getting stamps and envelopes, drop off his letters to Rose. At night he wrote her of the things he was seeing and hearing, like the twang of a banjo on someone's front porch after a mile-long descent into a mist-filled valley. He wrote her on scraps of paper, on wrappers of things, on postcards of kitschy rural Kentucky scenes in fly-specked Kodak blues, on which he scribbled up and down the margins and across the pictures. Soon, his messages ended with strings of question marks. By mid-summer, it was clear she was not going to reply.

A friend at McGill mentioned that in late July he had spotted Rose sitting with her medieval Latin professor in the guy's library carrel, and they looked pretty *close*. She'd moved on, and ironically, to someone like himself.

As soon as he returned to Michigan, and his wife, Paulette had left for work, he turned on the small desk lamp in his little library off the living room

and sat in a pool of light, dialing Rose's number at her house in Illinois. It was a Monday and he thought her mother, a librarian, might also be at work. But it was the mother that answered. He stared down at his bare feet, still blistered and sore from the month of riding. Asking for Rose, he heard commotion and whispering on the line. As the familiar voice said questioningly "Hello, Will?" he knew he couldn't speak. He would simply weep into the phone, so he hung up. It was, he thought, the worst moment of his life. On the cool, polished oak floor in front of him were his sweaty fearful footprints, tracks to mock him in his outsized folly.

Surfacing from these recollections, he looked for Hazel, who had walked over to the little stream to examine the swans. They expected breakfast handouts from museum visitors.

He was sure Hazel knew nothing of his history with Rose. As she stood in the sun, outlined against the pond with its pair of white paddlers, its few mallards, drake neck feathers breaking up in shards of iridescent green, Hazel would never imagine her beloved mother having brought so much misery thirty years ago.

He thought about looking in the mirror in his motel room, about aging, getting past the point of desire. Though on a downhill slope, he was not there yet, he could see, as these memories of Rose flooded back into him. He wondered at how he had held on to all this so long. These forces in him, in Rose, and he was sure, in Hazel, had that power, even if briefly, to charm, to fascinate. For him to be once again the intensely desired object of another person, still seemed mysterious. And to feel in himself, even now, as he had in his days with Rose, the reciprocating force of that desire for the mother in the daughter. She was back from the water.

"Do you think they really mate for life?" Hazel, nodding at the swans, asked suddenly.

"Yeats thought so anyway. 'Lover by lover, / They paddle in the cold / Companionable streams or climb the air,'" Will quoted thoughtfully. Hazel smiled at him in delight, deeply moved by the aptness of the words.

It was only 9:45, so they still had some time until the museum opened. They discussed her dissertation. She was revising it for an Italian press, and he made what he hoped were some helpful comments. He heard about her advisor, who had been wonderfully hands off and let her follow her material wherever it led her. For her, graduate school had been an altogether happy experience.

"I was lucky to get this job," she explained. "When I finished, the only other thing was a sort of postdoc in Austin, and, I, I wanted to get away from there. I was . . . with a guy and . . . it was not going well. So, it was easiest to

leave the *place*. I guess you'd call, it", she laughed a little, shamed at her admission, "geographical ghosting."

"How'd that work out then, for you, or for him?" he asked neutrally, watching the swans who, disappointed of food, turned their attentions to some reeds.

"Well, I'm here. But you—" it was as if she suddenly remembered her official role, "Professor Coupaye said you've been retired quite a while?"

"Yeah, it's nice to have so much time for research, though of course, travel money has dried up and I had to give up my office and my library carrel. But I work a lot with digital scans, and it can be done at home. The talk for this afternoon was mostly put together that way." They

watched as a student worker unlocked the museum, but still they sat. The activity at the door made the swans face them, their bills in parallel, remote in their arrogance and self-absorption.

"You know," she blinked in the sun. "I hope I can say this to you. I think I can. You seem like really different from what I expected. Younger, closer to my generation."

"You mean less stuffy, patriarchal?" He laughed.

"Well, call it that too, but somehow you look at me as if you totally know me. As if a lot of the introductory chat between people like us, when they first talk, "have you read Joan Didion's whatever?" and do you like Rhiannon Giddens' newest album?" has already been dispensed with. But I'm certain we haven't met."

"No, I'm sure not. I would've remembered."

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The Chair of French, Lilliane Coupaye, was still indisposed. It appeared he was not going to see her on his visit. Will had been missing her fluttering Parisian scarves, the frosted highlights to her hair, her look of the stylish young mother she had once been pushing a stroller in the Parc Monceau. He had talked with her over the years about Rose, but never gave a last name or mentioned the daughter. She had told him once love could be *la merde avec la merde*, as if she knew.

Instead, he was introduced to the audience by a Racine guy, Michel Nancier, a Breton from Rennes, who acted as if Will ought to recognize who *he* was, even as he read Will's listed accomplishments, his degrees and grants. There had been a hint of dogs lifting legs on fireplugs as Nancier tried to size him up while chatting before the talk. But Will, who had seen this behavior

many times at other small colleges, made it clear he had no designs on Nancier's turf.

The lecture went smoothly. His complex but forceful PowerPoint showed for comparison in hyper-text many passages from Seneca's moral treatises and how Montaigne had smoothed, adjusted and reworked them in the *Essais*.

Hazel walked in early with a dozen of her students and sat them in the front row. She was joking with them and they appeared really to like her. He turned to her from time to time as he spoke, watching her expressions as he clicked from image to image. When he was done, the audience posed lots of questions, but Hazel simply smiled appreciatively and applauded at the end. She waved as she led her students out.

For the dinner at the Tip Top Steak House, Hazel, having changed her clothes and shoes, was much less *bas bleu*. She wore a maroon rayon dress with charcoal *petits pois*. And her high heels changed her posture and gave her hips a flare. Her arms were bare and slender in the dim lighting. From her wavy hair, wound in a chignon, wisps anarchically escaped and curled against her face, which was cosmetic-free in a way that only a young woman could bring off.

As the guest of honor Will was seated along the middle of the table. To his left was Nancier, who, his work done, seemed more interested in a conversation about money with a Dean going on across from him. To Will's right was a professor of Spanish Golden Age literature, whose name he never quite got. Mola, maybe. He had an old-fashioned gold front tooth. As they chatted about the lecture, this man was asking if some of the same computer techniques could be applied to Juvenal's *Satires* and to his particular interest, Luis de Gongora. As Will answered abstractedly, he glanced at Hazel, who as the only attractive and youthful woman at the long table, was getting a lot of male attention, her wine glass constantly filled. He could hear her laughing every so often, a beautiful sound.

"Your *cicerone*," Mola was saying, all of a sudden. "We were lucky to get her. She's been a real hit with the students, and Classics could use some livening up. She has already upped their enrollment for next semester, I hear. FTEs, FTEs . . ." he waved his fork, his tooth glinting. Will agreed that she was charming, and that she came from the very department of an eminent gadfly of academic life, William Arrowsmith, the translator of Classical texts. Hearing Mola's remarks, he felt a sudden and unexpected burst of pride, as if Hazel were his and Rose's child and he was getting a good report of her.

Thinking about Rose, which his time at Blanchette had caused him to do far more than he liked, reminded Will of the sad aftermath of some small-

town fireworks display. First the flash, the spume of iridescent stars, and sparks falling, but then the sodden ash and paper shells of the rockets lying spent in the rain. His romance with Rose had been like this for him, but he was oddly buoyed with pleasure at seeing how well the infant in the bunting had turned out. How she carried in her walk, her openness, her quick wit, her mother's very best features.

Tip Top Steak House had delivered as promised, Will had to admit, looking at the remains of the prime rib on his plate and wondering how Hazel had enjoyed the lasagna they

had brought her specially. Several bottles of a very nice Margaux, *Paveil de Luze*, 2014, mostly empty, stood up and down the table with purple drizzles staining the labels.

Will, watching Hazel whenever he reached for his water or the lovely wine, thought there were moments when he was with Rose. As if time had not passed. In the hum and buzz of conversation, Hazel shone with the same excitement he remembered seeing on her mother's face when they were first learning about each other in stolen moments and borrowed beds around Ann Arbor in 1975.

When he made Blanchette's official goodbye, Nancier passed him an envelope with his honorarium. Then he nodded at him with a Gallic grin, "*ça va et ça marche?*" as Hazel came from the coat check room carrying a scarf and looking around.

It was the first time they had had a chance to talk since the lecture. At the door, he took her scarf and draped it over her shoulders. He stepped back, "I hope it's politically correct to tell you how you rule that dress. My era," he said lightly.

She was looking directly at him now. Her eyes, almond-shaped, and languid from wine, gleamed in the light from the foyer wall sconces. "Yes, I saw it in a thrift shop in town a few days before you came and I tried it on," she laughed sheepishly. "You can probably tell from my clothes I go there a lot. But then, I didn't wait too long before returning this morning to buy it."

She was flushed at how he had noticed the dress and tugged at the fringe of her scarf. "For tonight's occasion."

"I'm suitably impressed." He leaned towards her to admire the scarf's pattern. "I like thrift shop stuff too, something about lives lived in the clothes. They're almost like portraits."

She thought about this a moment and then changed the subject. "And I loved your talk. May I call you William?" She burst out, turning toward him, as they walked toward the parking lot. "And how you got all those passages to line up. Cool. That was the most solid kind of evidence. I think my students were blitzed and they certainly went for the PowerPoint. It was terrific scholarship."

"Actually, I prefer Will, and I guess it's going to be Hazel from here on," he said, a bit taken aback by her enthusiasm, by her attention focused on him in such a narrow and powerful beam. She was far less reticent than when she had first picked him up yesterday.

He said, smiling at her, "I'm happy that you think it went well today, and I'm sorry Mme. Coupaye couldn't attend. You know, since she suggested I give the talk here in the first place."

She drove him over to the Red Roof Inn. An Über would take him to the airport the next morning early, they had agreed, so this was goodbye.

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They sat in the deserted lot in front of the red door to his room at the end of the block. It was number 30. He wondered if that signified anything. Hazel showed no desire to leave, and he thought best to follow her mood. So, he leaned back against his headrest too. Only faint truck traffic on the interstate a few miles off and the tick of the cooling car motor broke the silence. He saw, next to his messenger bag just behind her, in the back seat, the end of the long stick with the sign "Altissor" attached like some flag signaling *terra firma* on an antique map.

Hazel was stimulated by the evening, the wine at dinner, the candles on the table whose soft light showed her off so well. She wanted to talk. After a moment, and without saying more, she slid her seat back in its rails as far as it would go. Glancing over her shoulder at him, her eyes were evaluative, her lips ironic, as if to say "Here we are, look at us."

"I know this is going to sound weird," she finally broke out in a self-conscious tone, "but I want us to keep in touch." She gestured with her phone. "Can I give you my number, and there it would be? And I also know how *generational* this way of doing it is," she said mockingly, looking at him. He passed his phone to her, thinking she probably had her number in a thousand phones.

“Call it just the excitement of the day, but I’ve not been so . . . at one with myself since coming to Blanchette, so free of assessment. Know what I mean? I’m always on the spot, being one of the few women on the faculty here and the only one in Classics, which is a kind of boys’ club everywhere.” She took his hand in both of hers for a moment. Her hands were warm and he could feel all the fine bones in her fingers. Then she fiddled her number into his phone. He put it away and reached over to touch her cheek. The softness of her skin was shocking to him. Her head angled back, her eye lids half closed, she looked over at him as if she expected more of this.

“Hazel,” he said, as casually as he could, “I’m touched. I don’t hear things like that these days from anyone of any age. I’ve had a great time and I’m delighted to have met you. But I think I’d better get going as my Über is coming early.” Then he said softly, musingly, more to

himself than to her, “Not far from the tree.” Startled, she glanced at him, her eyes now open and suddenly intense, as in one motion he lifted his bag over the seat and got out, closing the car door carefully.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John B. Friedman's work has appeared in *Academic Fiction*, *Accent*, *December*, *The Greyhound Journal*, *Inland*, *The Maryland Literary Review*, *Northwest Review*, *The October Hill Magazine*, *Oregon Centennial Anthology*, *Perspective*, and *Quartet*.

DREADFUL TO BEHOLD

AIDAN ALBERTS

VINCE

McMurdo Sound

11 March, 1902

Able Seaman George Vince tries his best to hurry down the icy slope despite his slippery fur boots. Snow blows around the return party like pale yellow wraiths and visibility can't be more than a few feet in each direction. The claws of negative thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit wind scrape through his outer Burberry jacket and his fine-woven cotton trousers. He shivers as the gust cuts into his woolen underlayers. Tightening his fur-lined hood around his scarred head, he spots another foothold to step onto.

Rather than being miserable, Able Seaman Vince smiles with pride, thinking about the great honour it is to be a part of the British Royal Navy. He is even more happy about the grand privilege of being selected by Captain Robert Falcon Scott to participate in the Discovery Expedition to Antarctica. Recently members of the Expedition fell into despair about their discovery that Antarctica was indeed not a smooth flat highway as hoped, but rather a frozen desert. A frozen desert that happens to be covered with ridges, fishhook sastrugi, hummocks, and dreaded crevasses. Able Seaman Vince chose not to dwell on these unfortunate facts but continued to beam about his present luck. George Vince couldn't be more pleased to be on this short exploratory sledge journey. The frostbite of his extremities and the shrieking banshee wail of the blizzard be damned.

When the blizzard intensified, First Lieutenant Charles Royds, who was the leader of the shore party, had ordered George Vince, Lieutenant Albert Armitage, physicist Louis Bernacchi, Irish Seaman Tom Crean, and five others to turn back to their ship RRS *Discovery*. Lieutenant Royds, Chief Engineer Reginald Skelton, and physician Reginald Koettlitz would be the ones to press on and complete the original objective of the shore party.

The nine returning men marched through this squally white world. They had had no choice but to obey the First Lieutenant's orders and leave the shelter of their tents and head back to the ship.

In the worsening blizzard, they had no idea where they were in relation to the vessel.

“Be careful and step slowly,” said Lieutenant Armitage to the line of men following behind him. “The slope is getting steeper.”

George Vince planted his finnesko boot hard in the icy footprint that Armitage had just left behind. Vince breathed out with relief as he searched for the next spot where his foot could find purchase.

Thank goodness, thought George. Just one step at a time and then some hot seal stew back on Discovery.

George felt something hard grip his shoulder from behind, disrupting his thoughts of a prepared meal.

It was the ice-covered glove of the physicist, Louis Bernacchi. He was third in line in the obscured chain of silent men. Able Seaman Vince turned his head slowly so he would not lose his precarious balance. Squinting in the swirling white powder that was being blown off the ground, George was barely able to make out Bernacchi’s ice-encrusted mustache. Blizzards here were nothing like George had experienced in England. These cursed storms felt somehow foreboding to him.

“Take your time George,” said Louis, displaying to George the underside of his hobnail boots. “Your finnesko boots have no traction compared to mine. Let me go first so that I can give you a hand as the slope gets steeper.”

George Vince nodded and moved in a way that allowed the physicist to step past him.

As Louis helped George descend, Irish Seaman Tom Crean appeared out of the white wall of suspended snow dust right behind George. He spoke in his County Kerry accent which gave his voice a relaxed and unhurried feel no matter what the circumstances.

“Don’t mean to rush you George,” said Tom. “But this is quite the fiasco, is it not?”

“I’d agree with that,” said George shifting his weight on the slippery ground.

“Well it’s my lot to help you,” said Tom. “Even if that means your old Tom takes an untimely slide down this hill.”

George grinned, as his smile exposed saliva that froze instantly.

Columns of snow began to blow even fiercer. Visibility shortened and now George could not even see or hear Tom Crean.

“It’s alright,” yelled George over the howl of the phantoms raking at each other in the surrounding blizzard. “I’ll be careful.”

The invisible procession of snow men continued onward. Louis could no longer aid George in his descent because the slope had become much steeper and the viable footholds grew more seldom. Vince slipped and he

almost flew forward if not for plunging his arms backward into the snowpack. Panting with fear, he collected his wits and continued climbing down the sheer face.

The twenty-four-year-old man thought of his happy childhood back in his parent's gardener's cottage. The cottage had been on the grounds of a house called Cedars in Blandford, Dorset, England. He remembered playing on his little cottage's grass lawn on warm days. He would watch the colourful fish dart around in the lily-pad-blanketed pond. There was something formative about those days when he would trip and bloody his face but grin and bear it. He learned hard lessons when he would quarrel with the neighbourhood kids because they liked to harass his family's pointer, Achilles. Returning home with black eyes and a body covered with purple bruises, his mother Elizabeth Vince would clean him up and demand to know who beat him. Young George would lie and say he did not know. Even at a young age, he had learned to settle scores in the way he thought a *real* British gentleman should.

George Vince peered ahead and saw glimpses of Lieutenant Armitage and Louis Bernacchi through the intensifying snowstorm. They were a few footholds down ahead of him and George needed to catch up. He took a lunging step and felt his boots slide on the ice once again.

What a calamity, thought George.

Descending as carefully as he could down this steep slope, George got within arms-length of Louis Bernacchi. He could hear the approaching crunching footfalls of Tom Crean behind him.

As George took a large step forward, he heard the cry of his leading Lieutenant.

"Halt!" screamed Lieutenant Armitage.

Unfortunately, there was no time for George to stop his momentum. The two men in front of him dug their hobnail heels in and leaned back against the near-vertical slope. As George slid he tried to dig his feet into the icy ground but his fur boots could not gain traction. His frosty gloves pulled off as he dragged his hands down the slope.

Lord have mercy.

Through the wreathing snow, George could see the black water of the icy sea at the bottom of the seacliff approaching quickly.

As the slide turned into a tumble, George heard and felt the sound of his snapping bones. Trying as he might to slow his fall with his arms, gravity propelled him down the full three hundred feet of the seacliff.

An ice shelf extended outward at the base of the cliff. He bounced off the shelf and was thrust into the frigid sea. The bitterly cold water swallowed him.

Able Seaman George Vince was instantly swept into a swift current and pushed under the sea ice. He frantically grasped at the irregular surface of the ice above him. He tried to kick with his legs but received no help from the useless limbs.

George found himself in a small pocket under the sea ice. He coughed out saltwater and inhaled the frigid air. His heart thumped uncontrollably and he could feel his life's warmth dropping rapidly.

That is when he saw it.

The translucent blue sheet of ice appeared to have a bright light shining through it. In the glassy, almost mirror-like surface of the ice, he could see an image of his face and chest bobbing in the dark sea. There was something markedly different about his appearance.

George saw a reflection of himself staring back. It had white orbs for eyes that were glazed over and pupil-less. His lips were drawn back to reveal splintered teeth. This thing that looked like him but was not him breathed out a carnal gas that filled the air pocket between the water and the ice. *How dreadful to behold*, thought George.

Along with these fumes of decay, new thoughts entered his mind that were not his own.

This is your end.

Forgotten is your ambition.

Forgotten to history.

Forgotten by your kind.

Forgotten even by these dark waters.

In terror, George hopelessly fumbled along the bumpy underside of the sea ice, as he tried to feel for a bigger break towards the surface. The Seaman felt the fatigue of his lower half beginning to creep up into his flailing arms.

Appearing in his mind was the image of his black-and-white spotted dog Achilles. Toward the end of Achilles's life, the dog's back two legs had become paralyzed. Carrying the pointer's back half with a towel for a week, George's father had chosen to free the dog of its constant pain. The dog had been brought to the backyard by his father, and in the ensuing moments, young George had heard the bang of his father's rifle. He remembered hiding in his room, underneath his covers, and crying until he had no more tears left to shed.

Now, thrashing his arms in an attempt to survive, George realized that he had become like Achilles. His legs were crooked horrors and squiggled like jellyfish tentacles. He swallowed the salty water as panic set in.

No George... Relax, panicking will not help.

Suddenly, his outstretched arms could no longer reach the ice ceiling. The water surged and pushed him with great strength. Sliding along the underside of the sea ice, he surfaced into a larger pocket of air and opened his stinging eyes.

He saw that he had emerged into an underwater ice cavern. At this point, he did not know if he was still alive or in some fleeting nightmare where he would thankfully wake up in his swinging hammock aboard the *Discovery*.

This was no dream.

George could barely peer around at the surrounding curving walls of ice. The delicate blue walls danced with ribbons of refracted light. A brilliant display of gentle pinks, burnished copper, and deep purple shadows shimmered and then shaded into a rosy-coloured ambience. This exhibit of beauty made him want to weep but he did not possess the energy to do so.

He didn't have long to take in his surroundings as a large white mass surfaced into the cavern. Waves formed as this thing roiled the icy water. Peering at the sleek curved form of this creature, George discerned that it was a pale whale. A killer whale to be sure, as he could see the white patches near its eyes. However, this Orca was different as its black pigmentation had faded. The cavern was illuminated just enough so that George could make out its black eye, which seemed to be searching into his soul.

Seaman George Vince did not fear the beast. He knew that these whales were highly intelligent creatures, unlike the Great White Shark. As the curious animal seemed to crane its head at him, a deep moaning of the ice resounded. It was a sound that possessed an arousing yet hideous bass that vibrated the cavern. The Orca submerged itself with great speed as if fleeing from an incoming predator, although in nature none should exist.

George floated on his back now and only moved his arms enough to keep his head above water. An unwelcome presence entered his mind once more.

I am your death.

The ice cavern screamed and then collapsed. Smashing him beneath the sea surface. George felt something sharp grip onto the remains of his deformed legs. It pulled him deeper into the infinite waters of the sea. He had no strength to resist whatever had seized him. The violent chill of the Antarctic deep water robbed George of his vital force.

EVANS

The Return From the Pole

17 February, 1912

Even in Petty Officer Evans's dreams, he could not escape the man-hauling of the heavy twelve-foot-long sledge. For the past month, he had been strapped into his harness as he heaved forward. His sweat would soak his wooly undergarments and boots and as the moisture froze, frostbite would blacken his skin.

Evans slept and his wounds oozed pus on his feet and fingers. His nose was blackened with severe frostbite. He had gone from the biggest man on the trip, weighing about two hundred pounds to the weakest at one hundred and thirty pounds. Only a few days before, this strongman had developed a huge blister on his foot which delayed the party from breaking camp. His body was preventing the expedition from making progress on their hundreds of miles-long march. Despite all of this, he refused to give up and die here while his mind was still intact.

Edgar Evans had carried on man-hauling more than eight hundred miles to reach the South Pole. At the end of this colossal effort, he was horrified at the sight of the Norwegian flag planted before his arrival. In times of his constantly disturbed sleep, he dreamt of his fair wife, Lois Evans, and the everlasting love they shared despite nearly being on opposite poles of the Earth. They had three children together, two boys named Gwynant and Berwyn and then one girl named Margery. He had not seen them for more than two years; in his dreams, he could see their endearing faces smiling at him and he wondered how much they had grown.

On this one night, the vision of his children shifted and his dream took a terrible turn. In place of his children's mouths were pitch-black lines. As each child of his began laughing, their mouths gaped open. Inside their mouths was a birds-eye view containing all the terror of this Antarctic land.

In the next moments of the dream, Edgar Evans found himself in his sledge harness, his full weight leaning forward on his skis as he trudged alongside the Captain of the Expedition, Sir Robert Falcon Scott. Without warning, the two of them suddenly slipped over the invisible edge of a crevasse.

The fall lasted a couple of seconds until the tracing line rope made a whipping sound. The rope went taut and swung them like a swing. Evans slammed his head into the crevasse ice wall and everything seemed to spin round and round. Scott crashed into him and the two men hung suspended by

their harnesses over hundreds of feet of open air, saved only by the line attached to the sledge.

Edgar Evans awoke. The dream was real, the fall into the crevasse had happened a few weeks before. He sat up in his stiff reindeer fur bag.

"How are you feeling Taff?" asked the doctor of the expedition, Edward Wilson who slept next to Evans in the sledging tent.

"I am feeling quite well Billy," said Evans, denying the pain of his fingers that were missing their fingernails as well as his frostbitten nose and feet.

His four companions, Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Edward Wilson, Henry Bowers, and Titus Oates examined him carefully. None of them truly believed that he was well.

"Let us get going," said Evans. "There is no time to waste."

The five men broke camp. Beginning their march, the explorers realized that the surface was awful. Newly fallen snow clogged the sledge's skis and runners, making the man-hauling a Sisyphean effort. In this land of haze and overcast skies, the sledge groaned for half an hour more with Evans in the harness. Edgar Evans heaved until his body could no longer pull the weight. He left the sledge-hauling to the other four men and trudged alongside the wooden craft without skis.

Stumbling in the sledge's wake, Evans found it difficult to keep up when the others were moving so *fast*. He picked up his feet through the claggy snow powder despite the shock of intense agony that came with each footfall.

The boundless fields of shattered ice appeared violet and purple in the clouded-over lighting. The mellow silence of the white plains was only broken by the grunting of his comrades and the creaking of the jostling sledge. Lumbering after the sledge, Edgar Evans managed to catch up to the stout Henry Bowers. An incredibly important thought emerged in Evans's mind.

I could really use a piece of string.

"Excuse me Birdie," said Evans. "Do you have a piece of string that you can lend me?"

Henry turned his head to the side. Evans could barely make out the man's face through his thick fur hood. What he could see was that Henry's face and aquiline nose were drenched in sweat from the heavy labour.

"Come along now Taff," cautioned Captain Robert Falcon Scott from the other sledging harness. "We need you to move as quickly as you can."

"Yes Con of course," said Evans with a cheerful smile on his face.

Pushing onward, the four man-haulers continued to soak their woolly underlayers with perspiration. The sweat penetrated through the wool and dampened their windproof Burberry jackets as Evans began to fall behind.

Wait for me...

Plodding in the thick snow embankment, Evans watched as the sledge gained one hundred yards of separation...Then two hundred yards...The Seaman continued to lift his feet which felt like they were bound by leg irons. Antarctic fog lowered obscuring the sledge and black silhouettes of the weakened men. Evans was completely engulfed in a world of grey. Lacking direction, the dehydrated, sick, and frostbitten man began to spin both in body and mind.

Evans fell forward and his face struck cold, hard ice. The impenetrable fog blew in circles around him and then lifted. Bringing his arms forward into a push-up position, the Seaman tried vomiting but nothing came out. He angled his head so that he could see forward.

Captain Scott and the three others were three hundred yards away and still man-hauling away from him.

"Wait for me," called Evans, though his voice was no more than a dying man's whisper.

Evans could feel his heat being sapped out of his cooling body into the ice below. His frostbitten feet, hands, and nose flared with unimaginable pain which sent his concussed brain into a tailspin. He felt more queasy than he had ever been on any of the Royal Navy's ships in the gales of the Southern Ocean. He crawled forward on his elbows because the agony in his legs refused to allow him to stand.

If they just see me crawling they will turn around... Won't they?

Evans was determined not to fall out of his comrades' sight. He was confident that his friends would retrieve him. How could they not? He was not only the best man-hauler on this expedition, but he also had the strongest will to survive. He knew that his only weakness was the damned double-digit negatives of this ninth circle of hell.

"Wait!" His cry was no louder than the whinny of Titus Oates's poor pony Christopher. Months earlier, Christopher had given up hauling the sledge and was shot for food.

Evans wormed forward on his belly, losing his mittens in the process. He dug his fingers into the snow and ice as all sensation left his hands. With great effort, Evans managed to squirm a few feet forward.

"Wait!" His low voice was lost in the wailing of the wind.

I am only thirty-five years old, he thought furiously. I can't die today.

Using his chin as a lever in the ice, Evans tried to propel his frail body just a few inches further. His neck muscles fatigued and so Evans bit down on the ice. The frozen earth's chill bolted up through his teeth like an electric

shock. He tried digging his chin into the ice again. He moved his body another half an inch. The fog descended and completely enshrouded him.

Gasping for air, the whiteness overtook everything he could see. Clawing at the ground, his mangled fingers leaked red from where his fingernails should have been on the white canvas ground. His mouth was parched and he longed for a sip of water. His stomach burned with desire for real food, not pemmican—the mixture of precooked dried meat and lard that they had been rationing all this time. Evans's thoughts turned to the pony meat of Christopher and the other deceased sledging beasts. That was real sustenance, unlike the putrid taste of seal liver and blubber.

"Wait!" called Evans.

The sun pierced through the ice-crystal wall of fog, forming an upside-down rainbow. Evans saw a rim of diffused light encircle the pale white sun in the sky. The refracted rays formed a halo that looked to be an eye with a darkened iris and glowing pupil. Evans believed in this moment that God had turned his gaze to him, and would now save his faithful soul.

Staring directly at the light, Evans realized the awful menacing glare it gave him. This was not the eye of his Christian God, this seemed to be some satanic corruption of a malevolent being. Evans bared his frozen teeth at the cursed pale yellow star. He tried to raise his arm to wave to the others for help but the limb lay dead at his side.

If not for your zeal, you would go unpunished.

The thought did not arise from Evans but it came from the howling of rushing ice crystals that engulfed him. Evans hated this place, this land had broken his body and spirit. He wanted to be back in his hometown in Wales or in New Zealand or any place that was not constantly trying to kill him.

Though he could not see Captain Scott or the others through the white gloom, he called out.

"Wait!"

The halo surrounding the star turned blood red. Five forms emerged out of the swirling mist in front of Evans. He painfully cocked his neck to a position where he could make out the approaching figures.

There was a version of himself, his wife Lois, and his three children. The five visitors were a few feet before him, standing in a way that made it seem that they were preparing for a family portrait photo.

Lois had a black look on her face. Margery held her mother's hand and stood a few feet tall with a pink bow in her hair. Gwynant and Berwyn stood side by side and looked ice-blue from the cold.

The Edgar Evans that he saw standing next to his wife was much more muscular and bull-necked than his current state. This was a family man, a proud father, and an officer of Britain's Royal Navy.

Evans thought of how he had convinced Lois to agree to a pact, a marriage covenant that granted him the ability to join Scott if the Captain ever called upon him again for an expedition. Lois had reluctantly agreed to the pact and years later Scott had contacted Evans. Leaving behind his family, Evans had always felt a pit in his heart, an absence of love. His drunken nights in the port town of Lyttelton in New Zealand would sometimes end with a back-alley knee wobbler, a sleepover in a dockyard doxies' room, or a fling with a Māori girl in exchange for some beads. His drinking had become so heavy and severe that one time while returning to the ship, he had fallen into the sea. For several months he had experienced "romance" in this way while the expedition geared up for Antarctica.

In truth, he believed that he committed adulterous actions and he regretted having left Lois. She was a loyal wife and a marvelous woman, faithfully raising his children on the other side of the world. He remembered their wedding, it had been beautiful as it took place in the tiny medieval church of St. Mary's. Evans felt a keen sense of humiliation.

"I'm...Sorry..." mouthed Evans. His family stood and was unresponsive.

Shame. Disgrace. Dishonour. A blemish to your kind, wiped away by death.

Opening his eyes, the fog had completely blown away and his family was gone. Incredible weakness weighed down his body.

Evans managed to climb up onto his knees which he spread apart to keep from collapsing. He would try to stay upright to stay in view as he could not be sure if the others could hear or see him over the cracking of the ice field.

He heard the swish-swish of skis approaching as four people grew near to him.

"Christ, Evans," said the familiar voice of the Captain. "What is the matter with you?"

Evans looked at his leader with a wild look in his eyes. His hands and nose were black as coal and ice had crept into his disarranged clothes from his desperate crawl.

"I...don't...know," said Evans.

It took Captain Scott, Bowers, and Wilson to lift the ragdoll man to his feet. Taking two or three steps, Evans sank to the icy earth in complete collapse.

"Titus," said Scott. "Stay here with Evans while we get the sledge."

Lawrence “Titus” Oates nodded and knelt to hold Evans in a position that allowed him to breathe.

Scott, Wilson, and Bowers raced back to the sledge as fast as they could on their skis. As Captain Scott returned to the duo, he noticed that Evans was unconscious.

“Hurry,” said Oates. “We need to get him onto the sledge and back to the tent. He needs to be warmed up.”

The Captain nodded and it took all four of them to hoist the man onto the sledge. By the time they reached the tent, the sick man’s skin had paled of life, and his eyes were closed. Dragging the immobile body of Evans into the tent, Scott realized that his friend was comatose.

“*Hurry*,” said the Captain. “By Jove, he’s dying.”

The four surviving companions huddled around their dying comrade in the tent. They kept him company until Evans slipped away from this world at 12:30 A.M. Half an hour after Evans’s death, the four survivors packed up and marched onward over the pressure ridges. They easily found their next depot of stashed pemmican, horseflesh, biscuits, and paraffin oil. The four cooked a good meal, wormed their way into their frozen sleeping bags, and mourned poor Evans as each bone-tired individual descended into the realm of sleep.

OATES

*Thirty-Five Miles From One Ton Depot
Friday March 16, or Saturday 17, 1912*

Coming from a family of landed gentry, a man named Lawrence “Titus” Oates had always sought out adventure and ways to serve the British Empire. His father died when he was only sixteen, and Oates became the Lord of the Manor of Gestingthorpe. This inherited title could not and would not satisfy his ambition, for he had come from a long line of great men. An Oates had fought in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and in the year 1270 Hugh Le Fitz Oates had accompanied Edward I on a crusade to the Holy Land.

In likewise manner, Lawrence Oates had signed up for Captain Scott’s British Antarctic Expedition to be the first to reach the South Pole and he had sweetened the pot by contributing £1000 to this mission. However, events had not gone according to plan.

Sitting in the ice-covered pyramid tent on the last day of his life, he stared at his bare feet. A blizzard shrieked its death screech outside the tent and battered at the canvas walls. The temperature had consistently been in the negative forties and the effect was evident on Titus’s feet. His toes were blackened stumps and where the frostbite touched healthy skin, big bubbles of pus ballooned. This turned man-hauling into absolute suffering. A few days before, Titus had asked the expedition’s doctor, Edward “Billy” Wilson a question.

“Do I have any chance Bill?”

“I don’t know,” said Dr. Wilson. The tone of his reply revealed that he had no chance of survival. Everyone including Titus knew this basic fact. Even without his burden, the three other surviving men thought that they stood no more than a dog’s chance at making it off this cursed continent alive.

Titus had always known death as a close friend. Now sitting on top of his icy sleeping bag, he thought about his days as a soldier, serving in the Second Boer War. Ten years prior, he had been deployed as a soldier to Transvaal, the Orange River Colony in South Africa.

He thought about the words he had said to his brothers-in-arms when they had been surrounded by the Boers in that god-forsaken riverbed. *We came here to fight, not to surrender.*

Titus had been in command of a patrol of fifteen soldiers. With their backs pressed against a mud mound, they clutched their Lee-Enfield rifles to their chests. Most of the men’s rifles came with bayonets attached, and every steel blade was dripping red with fresh blood.

Their situation was dire. One of their soldiers was captured, and four were wounded which left only ten soldiers fully combat-ready. All of them were scared, except Titus Oates. Boer Mauser rifles thundered from the top of a nearby hill, and bullets whizzed a couple of feet above their heads.

The barrage suddenly ceased. At the sound of a single man's running footsteps, Titus peered over the inadequate piece of cover.

He saw a disheveled, khaki-uniformed soldier sprinting toward them. Titus quickly realized that it was their captured friend.

"Sir! Sir!" called the released prisoner. "They want us to surrender."

The man dove into the cover of the mud mound, panting for air.

"They want *what?*" said Lieutenant Oates.

"Surrender," repeated the man, "They say that they will show no mercy if we do not lay down our arms now. They ceased fire only momentarily so that I could reach you, and they demanded that I return to relay your answer."

"No," said the Lieutenant, gesturing to his men huddled around him. "Who has the spare rifle?"

One of his men crawled over to Titus dragging an extra Lee-Enfield with him.

Titus reached out for it. "Hand it to me."

Passing the rifle to Titus, the Lieutenant thrust the firearm into the freed soldier's arms. Titus kept low to stay out of the hill's line of fire and placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

"We will kill the Khaki Hooligan Dutchmen to the last man," said Titus. "Even if it means that we will die here."

Titus swung his Lee-Enfield bolt action rifle up toward the hilltop. Resting the rifle on the top of the mound, he looked through the circular aperture sight. He spotted Boer movement about three hundred yards away. One soldier's head was exposed and his broad-brimmed hat, the kopje breek, gave his position away.

Titus operated the rifle bolt and chambered a .303 caliber cartridge. Lining up his sight and adjusting for wind and bullet drop, Titus squeezed the trigger.

The firing pin released, striking the primer at the cartridge base. A mixture of lead styphnate, barium nitrate, and antimony sulfide ignited in a chemical reaction as the primer exploded. Gunpowder in the main charge flared orange and in rapid combustion produced a large volume of gas. Gas propulsion of the bullet sent the projectile into the rifle barrel. Interior grooves within the barrel forced the bullet to spin as it ejected from the Lee-Enfield.

The spitzer bullet traveled past the rotting corpses of both Brits and Dutchmen. The Northern men in the coming months will decompose and over time reincarnate into Southern trees.

The pointed bullet found its target. Traveling at twenty-seven-hundred feet per second, the metal bullet smashed through skull bone, through pink matter, and exited out the other side. A fourteen-year-old boy's life ended in less than half a second.

"Another Boer vanquished," said Titus proudly, ejecting the empty cartridge case and seeing that his target had fallen.

The firefight continued in this manner, with each of Titus's men taking turns to peek over the mound to shoot. Until once again, the shots raining down on them from the Boers came to a halt. Titus heard approaching footfalls in the drought-cracked mud on the other side of the mound.

The man blended in well with the landscape in his khaki trousers and tan long-sleeved shirt. The white flag he waved gave him away.

"Sir," said the Boer. "I come unarmed and with a written message from my commander."

Like the released British soldier, the Boer also panted in the African heat. He extended the message out to Oates.

Titus quickly read the note and then discarded it. He looked the messenger in the eye and said, "We came here to fight, not to surrender."

The Boer nodded and was allowed to retreat to the top of the hill.

Titus and his men continued to fight the Boers for six more hours before reinforcements arrived. They successfully resisted their enemy while wounded and without water under the hot South African sun.

Oates did not escape unscathed. One of the parting shots fired by the Boers struck him in his left thigh. The sniper bullet shattered his femur. This injury still affected him in Antarctica as his left leg was now one inch shorter than his right, leaving him with a permanent hobbling gait.

Back in the present moment and sitting in the sledge tent, Titus was sure that he, Captain Scott, Wilson, and Bowers had fought like hell just as he had done back in South Africa. Despite the constant setbacks and insurmountable challenges they had encountered in this land of ice, they had given their best effort like true Englishmen.

Oates knew that his sledge party had plenty of bad luck. The unimaginable nightmare that the Norwegians might reach the South Pole first had come true. They constantly had to spar with the ever-worsening conditions of the terrible sledging surface and the terrorizing effect of this ice-planet weather. They had pushed onward even with the sledge capsizing multiple times. They had climbed out of predatory crevasses on more than one

occasion. All of them had suffered from the constant torture of frostbite and starvation.

Titus understood that his time had come. Staring at his dead-frozen feet, Titus knew that there would be no more marching for him. The others had urged him to continue marching, but the Soldier understood that none of them could stomach telling him the truth. A week before, Dr. Wilson had distributed thirty Opium tablets for each man and kept a tube of morphine for himself. Now each member of the doomed expedition possessed the ability to end their own lives.

That was not the way Titus was going to go out. He would face death as a Christian man, as a British soldier, and as a true explorer of the British Empire. Titus would not hold his friends back by continuing to be a handicap; he would not rob them of their last chance at salvation.

Looking at the world of whirling white snow outside the tent, Oates had already made his choice. He had just awoken from a long sleep and from which he had hoped he would not wake up. However, now that he was awake and once again feeling all the agony of his injuries, he was ready.

"When you all make it out of here," said Oates to the three men sitting around him. "Tell my Mother that my last thoughts were of her."

The three men nodded.

"Yes, of course," said Scott.

Titus's face illuminated with a strange grin and he rose to one knee as if to leave the tent into the raging blizzard, "I imagine that my regiment would have been pleased knowing that this is the way I met death."

"Don't go," said Bowers, "there is still hope. We are only a couple of pony marches from the next depot."

Titus shook his head, still managing his odd smile. "There is hope, but only for you three. My lot has been cast and God is calling me home. I have marched to my limit, and my body has broken down."

"No," said Wilson. "You must come along with us."

The Soldier rose to his feet. He swayed but managed to stay upright as he visibly grimaced.

If I stay, they will all die.

Captain Scott, Bowers, and Wilson stared at their brave friend with wan faces, seeing their fate in him as if he were a mirror.

"I am just going outside and may be some time," said the Soldier, stepping through the tent flap and closing it behind him.

Lawrence Oates staggered forward into the whiteness. Each step sapped him of his warmth. The tent slipped out of view almost instantly as the blizzard wrapped its cold mouth around his body and began to devour him.

The Soldier was resolute in limping as far as he could so that the others would not have to bear the sight of his lifeless body when they emerged. Stumbling through the thick snow drift, Oates knew that he did not have long to get some distance away from the tent.

Raising his right foot for yet another step, Oates's descending foot did not connect with the icy ground. Instead, it plummeted into open air. Tripping over the edge of an unseen abyss, Titus felt gravity hurl his weight downward.

Crevasse, thought Oates.

Nature's perfect snare engulfed Titus Oates. As the man fell, he was shocked by the extended duration of his free fall. *Hit the bottom...Hit the bottom... and kill me instantly please.*

But Titus did not hit the bottom. He could feel the icy air whip past his face and this bottomless crevasse seemed to never end.

Plunging into a freezing wet womb, subglacial water rushed around his body as he sank deep into this...

Lake? Underground reservoir? What the hell is this place?

For the first time since leaving the tent, Titus fully opened his eyes. He held his breath underwater but wanted to gasp at what he saw.

A curved arc of bright orange light made the icy water glow. The earth at the bottom of the crystal clear lake resembled brilliant molten blood. Turning his head side to side, he saw shapes falling alongside him. Thousands of them. He quickly realized that the forms were human, and each descending corpse left behind a streak of ruby red. There were men and women who must have been from some future age in tattered green camouflage uniforms, patrol caps, and combat boots. Falling as well were sailors still wearing their tricorne hats, dark blue trousers, and jackets with brass buttons. Just out of arm's reach, were brown heavy-set men with facial tattoos, flax skirts, and carved pendants made of bone and green stones. There were scores of different types of fallen warriors, too many for Titus to count.

These rigor-mortised bodies continued to sink all around him in this necropolis of souls. The deepest bodies vanished into the blinding vermillion light.

Titus tried desperately to swim upward with his useless arms. The effort was futile, some unknown force pulled him down. As his faculties began to slow to an almost complete halt in this freezing Styxian water, the lake vibrated with an intelligible sound.

Flesh to dust. Bones to Ashes. Die in glory and enter the Stronghold of the All-Father.

The body of Oates was sucked into the crimson magma at the bottom of the subglacial lake and then was no more.

SCOTT

The Last Camp, Eleven Miles From One Ton Depot

Thursday, March 29, or Friday 30, 1912

The next month after Oates's courageous sacrifice was marked by awful sledging surfaces and terrible temperatures of negative twenties during the day to negative forties at night. Everyone suffered from frostbitten extremities and they were starving despite the careful rationing of the fuel and the stew fry of pemmican and horseflesh. The three surviving members of the expedition were now Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Henry Bowers, and Doctor Edward Wilson.

For Captain Scott, the last four days waiting out the tempestuous blizzard in their pyramid sledge tent had been dreadful. Both Wilson and Bowers found the hopelessness of their situation soul-crushing, but for Robert Falcon Scott, the failure of their mission took on a whole new meaning. He had led these young men to their premature deaths. He was responsible for the mess that they were in, he knew it and he owned that miserable fact.

He would not let the hand of history write his story.

For the past four days he wrote, despite his grievous injuries—his foot was frostbitten to the point where he could no longer walk. He wrote despite the incredible finger-freezing chill of the air. The Captain journaled the circumstances and happenings that led them to reach this unfortunate conclusion. He penned letters to his wife and Sir Clements, the President of the Royal Geographical Society, who had put him in charge of this expedition. Scott wrote proudly of Wilson, Oates, Bowers, and Evans to their soon-to-be bereaved families. He asked his nation to raise his boy, Peter Scott because he would be unable to. He addressed a nation that could not accept failure with his head still held up high.

In his writings and actions, Captain Scott proved that Englishmen can still die with a bold spirit, fighting it out to the end.

Setting down his journal, Captain Scott huddled against both Bowers and Wilson who were in their sleeping bags. The three shivering men were out of food and were incrementally freezing to death.

"Well," said Captain Scott. "I believe this is it for us."

The gale shrieked outside and rattled the tent walls. Bowers and Wilson looked at Scott from their burrowed positions in their icy bags. Dr. Wilson's voice quivered from his reclined position.

"God help us indeed," said Wilson. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

"Amen," said Captain Scott and Bowers in unison.

"We are very near to the end," said their Captain, "I should like you two to know how splendid you both have been. You two are the best of comrades and the staunchest of friends. I am grateful to have finished this journey with the two most gallant, noble gentlemen I have ever met."

Birdie beamed, his long beak nose the only thing showing from his sleeping bag.

"I would have liked to see my mother and sisters again," said Birdie. "My mother Minnie, Edith, and Hilda would have enjoyed hearing all that we have done and been through. I do think that I will miss them greatly——"

The wind scraped hard across the tent walls.

Bowers swallowed in a throat that had not drunk fluids in a long time.

"I believe that God's mercy will see us all together again," gasped Bowers, "once all of our mortal coils have come to an end."

"Yes," whispered a weakening Wilson. "His Mercy will."

With his energy waning, Captain Scott scrawled a final entry into his journal.

Since the 21st we have had a continuous gale from W.S.W. and S.W. We had fuel to make two cups of tea apiece and bare food for two days on the 20th. Every day we have been ready to start for our depot 11 miles away, but outside the door of the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.

R. SCOTT.

Last Entry

For God's sake look after our people.

Shutting his journal closed and placing his three notebooks in his wallet, the Captain croaked in a cold voice, "I fear we have shot our bolt, but we made it to the pole and made the longest journey in the world."

A sound of agreement came from Wilson's bag. Not a word came from Birdie.

"Birdie?" said Captain Scott.

Feeling the twenty-eight-year-old's icy bag, Robert Falcon Scott realized that the young man had grown cold and departed. With his sleeping bag closed over his head, Scott knew that the man died in his sleep.

Captain Robert Falcon Scott felt every urge to weep but his body was far too dehydrated to shed tears. He threw back the flaps of his sleeping bag and opened his coat. The leader was furious at his Lord for taking young, ambitious life away so soon.

The ways of Providence are inscrutable and wicked.

Captain Scott sat upright, wanting to face death like a true Englishman. His black, blistered, and forlorn foot screamed with pain with each of his small movements. Sitting on his rear, he placed a hand on Dr. Edward Wilson's closed sleeping bag and knew in his soul that his silent friend had also slipped away from this world.

Captain Scott felt the eerie and uncanny feeling that though his two companions passed away, he was not alone.

Scott squinted in the low light and looked through the slit in the tent flaps. Something moved out in the blizzard on the ice. He blinked and then the only movement was the whirling drift. The blizzard continued to shriek its banshee death wail.

There it was again. A vague outline, an apparition of sorts, a formless blackness among the endless world of white.

Captain Scott threw his little wallet containing his three notebooks behind him right beneath his improvised scarf pillow. He lay down, his shoulders covering the wallet. He flung his arm across the lifeless body of Wilson.

Deep cold, unlike anything Scott had experienced out here in the winter plains of Antarctica, pierced into his fluttering heart; bringing an end to the life of the greatest explorer that this world had ever known.

The Finding Of The Dead

Eleven Miles South of One Ton Depot

Eight Months Later

Lieutenant Atkinson realized with rising shock that the cairn in front of him was Scott's sledge tent buried underneath layers of snow.

"Lashly," barked the Lieutenant. "Help me get the snow off the tent."

Chief Stoker William Lashly rushed toward the white cairn-looking mound and aided in sloughing off the fallen snow. The tent flaps now exposed, Lieutenant Atkinson pulled them back and saw the bodies of Captain Scott, Doctor Wilson, and Lieutenant Bowers.

Saddened, but knowing this had been the fate of their comrades, Lieutenant Atkinson, Lashly, Dr. George Murray Levick, and Apsley Cherry-Garrard recovered all their gear and dug out their buried sledge. They found Scott's writings in a wallet beneath his shoulders. Also in the tent were thirty-five pounds of fossilized geological specimens that Wilson had requested to have hauled from the moraines of Beardmore Glacier. With everything gathered up, the crew covered the corpses with the outer tent. With the search party standing in a circle, Lieutenant Atkinson read the Burial Service in his deep, authoritative voice.

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." The Lieutenant paused and flipped to a different bookmarked page of his King James Bible. He cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Breaking out of the funeral circle, the search party proceeded to build a large snow cairn to commemorate their fallen brothers. A rough cross made of two skis was placed on top.

Lieutenant Atkinson placed a metal cylinder on the cairn which contained a note that summarized Scott's party's demise as described in the Captain's recovered journals. The recorded note was signed by all members of the search party. With respect paid, Lieutenant Atkinson decided to march twenty miles south to search for the body of Lawrence Oates. They found nothing more than his frozen sleeping bag, which Scott had hauled and abandoned once it became too much of a burden. A cairn was erected in the general area of Oates's disappearance with a small cross placed on top. Another recorded note honouring Oates's bravery was left on this cobbled-together gravestone in a metal cylinder.

On the second day of the search expedition, Lieutenant Atkinson and his crew headed back to McMurdo Sound. Passing the Last Camp, they bid their final farewell to their Captain and two fallen friends. Lieutenant Atkinson would reflect, "There alone in their greatness they will lie without change or bodily decay, with the most fitting tomb in the world above them."

#

The following January, the *Terra Nova* vessel arrived to retrieve the survivors of the British Antarctic Expedition. The surviving men were elated at the sight of the wooden ship. Those who had not gone to the pole had spent the better part of the year sheltering in the *Discovery* Hut. Before the men left the icy land of Antarctica, they erected a cross on Hut Point overlooking the Great Ice Barrier of the McMurdo Sound.

The cross, standing nine feet in height, was made of Australian jarrah wood and was planted on Observation Hill's summit. Engraved on the cross in memory of the deceased, are the words.

IN
MEMORIAM
CAPT. R. F. SCOTT, R.N.
DR. E. A. WILSON, CAPT, L. E. G. OATES, INS. DRGS.,
Lt. H. R. BOWERS, R.I.M. PETTY OFFICER E. EVANS, R.N.
WHO DIED ON THEIR RETURN FROM THE POLE,
MARCH 1912.
TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO FIND,
AND NOT TO YIELD.

VINCE'S CROSS
McMurdo Sound, Observation Hill
Present Day

Atmospheric scientist Solomon walks up Observation Hill and approaches George Vince's oaken cross standing nine feet tall. She reads the inscription.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
GEORGE T. VINCE, A.B. R.N.
OF THE

“DISCOVERY”
WHO WAS DROWNED NEAR THIS SPOT
MARCH 11TH 1902

The scientist pulls up the zipper of her neon orange parka as the screeching wind whips past her exposed face. The air temperature hovers around negative twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit and the icy lashes of the gust have a sharp sting. She peers out into the distance and sees the ghostly white mountain range across McMurdo Sound. Much nearer to her is the Great Ice Barrier which floats atop the Antarctic Sea, preventing access to the interior of Antarctica by way of ship. Shivering, the scientist thinks of Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s eight-hundred-mile man-hauling march to the South Pole.

As daylight fades, the brilliant sky shifts color as the sun dips toward the horizon and the polar world turns green and pink. Floating in the vivid blue sea, ice floes are backlit by this pink lighting and cast mauve shadows. The wind picks up strength again and bites her face and toes. Thoughts of the warm seventy-degree dormitory convince her to start the trek back.

I’ve got to get going.

Bundled up in her parka and balaclava, the woman’s peripheral vision catches movement to her right. She sees the surfacing of a pale white whale in a black tongue of open water. The scientist strides faster to tell her dormitory-confined colleagues of the extremely rare sighting.

The End

OFFICE HOURS: A GHOST STORY

STEVE SIMPSON

Professor Edgar McHaley died on November 7, 2006, but like many emeriti faculty, he still dutifully came to his office every morning at 7:55. He often stayed late into the evening, poring over seminal works in folklore studies.

Professor Edgar's office had previously belonged to the department chair of romance languages and literatures, but once he hauled in his tomes and steel-reinforced bookshelves, no one dared move him out, even after his death. Instead, the outer office, formerly for department admins, had been converted to shared graduate TA offices, though most TAs refused to work there. They swore they could hear shoes shuffling back and forth at night, and the clink of glass on glass as someone refilled from a decanter. Janitorial staff refused to enter the office, except once to burn sage and set off the building's fire alarms.

Derek Leonhardt was the only one who had ever spoken to the late Professor Edgar or had seen him since his death. At the time, he was a first-year TA and hadn't yet been brought into the loop on why none of the other TAs used the office. But he was often out-of-the loop on many things in life. It was midafternoon on a Tuesday, and Derek was skimming through a fresh stack of freshman English essays. Professor Edgar's door opened, and he tottered out, his full orange beard disheveled, his Harris tweed sports coat threadbare and tight around his belly.

"I am expecting a student to come by with a paper," he said. "If I'm not in, please ask her to leave it on my desk."

The encounter, as trivial as it might sound, was shocking in real time. To begin, Derek hadn't been aware that this door in the TA office even led to another office. He assumed it was a closet, and an unused one at that, as directly in front of it sat a box of outdated composition readers and an old, wooden coat rack. When Professor Edgar opened the door, the coat rack tipped and clattered to the floor, and Derek spilled a hot cup of Starbucks all over his stack of essays. Professor Edgar was kind enough to close the door behind him, though the box of textbooks remained pushed away from the door with about a year's worth of newly disturbed dust showing the box's path. After calming himself with a few *what the fucks*, he knocked lightly at the door and tried the knob. The door was securely locked.

Derek brought up the encounter with his advisor, a stern film studies professor with owl-like tufts of hair on his balding head and veins in his neck

that bulged every time he said *Foucault* in class. His face was unreadable. He borrowed a set of keys from the department administrator, walked briskly with Derek back to the shared office, kicked the box out of the way, and opened Professor Edgar's door. His hand felt around for a moment until finding the light switch.

Professor Edgar's office lay buried in books and papers. Anywhere a book could sit, it sat. Not only had he supplemented the standard fare of office shelving with his own steel compact shelving, but he'd placed thick, roughly cut plywood planks between shelves and built bridges of books, which bowed precariously beneath the weight of dusty hardbacks. His desk was unusable, stacked as high as it was with paper and empty tobacco tins. A recliner sat in the corner next to an antique floor lamp with books piled on either side. Just beside it sat a small, metal serving cart with a glass tray, two tumblers, and a crusty ring about the size of a decanter.

"Professor Edgar didn't have anyone to manage his estate," Derek's advisor explained. "He had two children from a past marriage who didn't want to advise on his effects." He paused. "For a variety of reasons, no one ever took the effort to relocate his things... and so here we are. The Dean asks about the office from time to time, but she's not allowed us to replace retiring faculty anyway, so it's a moot point..."

"But I can assure you that no one has used this office for the last decade."

And that settled that, until a week later when Professor Edgar again upset the coat rack opening his door. Derek had had a long night and was nodding off at his desk when the coat rack clattered, and Professor Edgar emerged, once again leaving instructions in case anyone came by with a paper. And from that point on, Derek encountered him regularly. In the morning, Professor Edgar came through and disappeared into his office. Derek saw patches of light and shadows beneath the inner office door when he left in the evenings. He never saw Professor Edgar leave, but sure enough he would always return in the morning. Derek got to saying hello, which received only a kind nod and grunt from the old folklorist. In fact, Derek sensed an overwhelming irony that the dead professor was easier to find than most living faculty members, many of whom were already insisting on exclusively online office hours. But then, true to form in death as in life, Professor Edgar hated technology almost as much as he hated university service and faculty senate committees, and would fight to the death and beyond to avoid all three.

Derek never knew how to broach the subject with others as to whether they, also, could see Professor Edgar. How do you even ask someone if they see dead folklorists? He watched others' reactions when he saw Professor Edgar

in the hall, but students generally stared at their cell phones, ghost or no ghost, and faculty were clueless about most things in the land of the living and wouldn't recognize a good haunting if it came with a flourish of trumpets and a hearty *Tada!* Derek tried a few ideas out on other students in his gothic novel seminar —maybe professors never really leave when they retire, he opined. Perhaps they just folded themselves into the library stacks and faded away. No response, though a couple other students asked him afterward if they could bum a joint.

He did, however, believe that at some unconscious level the entire department *felt* Professor Edgar, even if they did not see or acknowledge him. After graduating and staying on as an English Instructor, Derek had more access to water cooler talk among faculty. He kept a list of frankly bullshit reasons why people said no one ever reclaimed Professor Edgar's office. Most, like his advisor, blamed the mysterious deadbeat heirs, though why the department never asked library staff to come in and haul away his books remained unanswered. And later, after a miserable year as an English instructor, Derek took a job in the university archives and offered numerous times to box up Professor Edgar's things. But folks hemmed and hawed and came up with sundry reasons why that would have to wait, though it was a remarkable idea, they all agreed. According to some, the room was infested with mold, or the floor had structural issues. The associate department chair swore that he had a memo from Facilities Management somewhere saying that they detected sagging in the floor and put that part of the building on their renovation list, though if this were true, Derek guessed, more concern would have been expressed about the department's specialist in Shakespeare's contemporaries who occupied the office directly below. Few people liked him, to be fair, but just because people stopped inviting him to department parties didn't mean they wished him to be buried in an avalanche of Stith Thompson Motif Indexes.

And of course there were the myriad unexplained phenomena that all seemed to indicate Professor Edgar's presence. Some were subtle, such as the conference room coffee maker that always brewed extra strong coffee—Professor Edgar's favorite—regardless of how few grounds were added. At first, they all blamed the Hispanic literatures specialist for the horrid coffee, but it soon became evident that it really didn't matter who made the coffee, or what brand of coffee they used, or even whether you swapped the old, crusted model out for a newer one. Even the Keurig coffee tasted awful. And then there was the fact that the building lost power every time someone brought up course assessment in department meetings. Even though it happened three times that Derek could remember, no one really discussed why. At some point,

the department curriculum committee chair simply suggested that they move assessment meetings to the library since it had better “resources.” And better coffee. Starbucks.

And then there were the weird issues with cell phones in the building. Most blamed it on the thick walls, though they really weren’t all that thick. You always saw frumpy professors slogging down the hall fussing with their cell phones and asking if you could hear them. And Google maps never worked. Ever. Try coordinating a luncheon at a Thai restaurant in uptown while inside Hamilton Hall, and you’d end up at a hot dog joint downtown. It was reliably bad.

Professor Edgar was a quirky but completely benign revenant. After leaving for the archives, Derek would still stroll through Hamilton Hall when he had the chance to see if he could spot Professor Edgar, or to see how long it took for new TAs to stop working in the shared TA offices.

Things took a sinister turn five years later with the arrival of Chancellor Snively. Chancellor Snively was a known firebrand, a mover and shaker as he was described in the public sessions during the interview process, a real “hands-on” administrator. To the Regents, Snively represented the sort of change that the University sorely needed, with flagging enrollments and deepening deficits. The university was collapsing under the weight of itself, one regent told the university community when announcing Chancellor Snively’s hire, and this was the sort of leader who could right the ship.

Snively’s first moving and shaking happened with middle management. He moved the whole bag of current deans and directors, turned it upside down, and shook the whole lot of them out onto the street with their careers stuffed into neatly packed brown boxes. New deans were brought in, all from prim East Coast state colleges, dressed in black suits and sharp glasses, armed with bullet-proof spreadsheets, enrollment and retention data, and vague academic credentials. They hit the campus in a cluster and scattered like billiard balls to every corner pocket of the university.

Next were matters of space. Ancient geology professors whose rock samples had sprawled into adjoining labs soon found themselves duly excavated, their specimens piled into a dumpster behind the building. Lunch rooms were appropriated and converted to classroom space, as were conference rooms, laboratory supply closets, and department libraries. The Department of Economics was folded into Management, their building repurposed as a dormitory. Or as a *residence hall*, as Snively insisted on calling them. A quarter acre of compact shelving was removed from the

library, the collections boxed and sent offsite where they could ostensibly be summoned by grad students, or traveling wizards, or the rare Google-resistant bibliophile.

The university was being folded inside out. Derek's office was moved twice in four months, until they finally just cleared out some vertical files in storage in the library basement and dragged his desk and all his post-it notes and white gloves down there. It would be more efficient for him to be near the collections, he was told. Derek was pretty sure they'd just box him up and put him in storage at some point.

But perhaps the strangest development since Chancellor Snively's arrival were the Visitors. Derek wasn't quite sure at first what to call them — he had never noticed them before. It started with the old man with a tattered newsboy cap and a monocle who sat on the bench outside the student union holding the end of a small pendulum in his hand, watching it tick back and forth endlessly. University towns attract a disproportionate number of strange ducks, and Derek thought nothing of it at first. Nor did he think twice about students avoiding the bench where the monocled man sat, as that is generally how Abercrombie and Fitch-wearing students treat such folks. But then came the man who paced back and forth in front of the classics library with his hands folded behind his back, pipe jabbed in the corner of his mouth, mumbling to himself in French and Latin, and occasionally Old Norse. And then the return of Dr. Loraine Wigglesworth, the brilliant but eccentric astrophysicist who would pause her cutting-edge research on dark matter to rehome stray cats that came into her yard... Every stray cat. This all started a week after Hamilton Hall closed mysteriously for "HVAC renovations," though many suspected as the chain link fence and sheeting appeared around the perimeters, that Snively might have had larger plans for the building.

Derek spent an afternoon researching whether there was a collective noun in the English language for a group of old Professors—a murder of crows, a kindness of ravens—before finally creating one himself. *Oddity*. Indeed. An *oddity* of old, dead faculty gathered in the quad, pacing, lecturing, grading papers, reading books, measuring invisible substances carefully into invisible glass beakers. As the oddity grew, a cold hush fell over campus, and black clouds gathered overhead. The quad emptied of students and the usual annoyance of hawkers selling posters, tie-dyed sheets and big woolly sweaters. The street preacher remained the longest, though after another week, even he found the weather too cold these days for the proper saving of souls and relocated outside the Hookah shop just off the edge of campus.

While waiting in coffee lines, Derek overheard students complaining about how dreary the weather had been, and how much construction had

overtaken the campus. Entire routes through campus were warded with a gauntlet of orange cones and fencing. Gaping holes appeared in the sidewalks. No one had the foggiest idea where and when shuttles came and went, including the shuttle drivers, who also congregated in coffee lines and spoke conspiratorially about the changes they've seen on campus. The entire campus panicked the day Main Street completely disappeared from Google Maps, though it later reappeared followed by a campus-wide announcement from University Communications assuring the campus community that the street was indeed still there, and that it was just an unfortunate software glitch, according to Google.

No one, however, was prepared for the events that transpired the day Chancellor Snively set his sight on the English Department, and he and his army of black-jacketed administrators laid siege to Hamilton Hall.

The English department was alerted via a University Communications memorandum in March of the intent to "remodel." This should have come as no surprise, as crew from Facilities, accompanied by a university architect, had scoured the building a month prior, taking measurements and chattering in hushed tones in the hall. The Department would be moved into a temporary "bubble structure" near the university pool in May after the semester's end. They would share the space, they were told, with the university daycare, and their bathrooms would double as changing areas for the swimming pool. Aside from the squeals of delighted children and a few misplaced pairs of men's Speedos, this arrangement was acceptable for the short term. Though as the University delayed remodeling for much of the summer, faculty started to suspect that something was rotten in the state of Denmark. Sure enough, the local newspaper announced the plans for a new University STEM Workforce Center and Maker Space at the end of Fall term, and it became clear that the English Department would continue to encounter mostly naked students and community members in their restrooms for the foreseeable future.

The day construction was set to begin, Snively and his hoard of dark-coated, spreadsheeted administrators showed up early and clustered around the entrance of Hamilton Hall. It was a windy and blustery day, and the tarps covering the old hall's bare bones flapped with vigor. University Communications showed up, all set to film a groundbreaking session with cranes and construction crew in the background.

Snively stood at the ready with his golden shovel, but there was not a crane or hard hat in sight. The contractors were set to arrive at 8 a.m. sharp. But 8 soon turned to 9, and then 9:30. At 10, Snively's secretary arrived and quietly whispered in his ear. He cocked his head in disbelief, and she repeated it.

Apparently, all of the construction equipment and machinery had arrived safe and snug at 8 sharp up at the large, rival university. They were wondering when Snively and his damned golden shovel would show so they could get to work tearing shit down.

Snively took out his phone and plotted a course via Google Maps between the contractor's headquarters and his beloved university, and sure enough, Google led them straight to the English Department building at the rival state university. The large rival university's English faculty had already started protesting the unexpected arrival of construction equipment and had called an emergency session of their Faculty Senate.

A temporary setback, sneered Snively, who had his admin create and email a flawless set of directions in PDF format to the proper site. The next day, he raised his golden shovel and ushered in an army of dump trucks and cranes and men in hard hats marching like Thoreau's ants throughout the worksite. Cameras flashed, and Snively's teeth gleamed, and his minion of dark coated administrators clucked like hens laying platinum eggs.

Construction commenced and thundered forward for a week until the onset of Kittengate.

It was a Tuesday morning. Chancellor Snively had been hobnobbing with Senators the night before and was expecting to sleep in and start late. His cell phone rang. Then the land line. Then his wife's phone. He ignored those, sat upright in bed, ruffled his graying hair. He heard the ding of alerts on his computer as he shuffled downstairs to make coffee, and his phone buzzed incessantly in the pocket of his silk pajamas.

"What the fuck?" He answered casually. Then spit out his coffee.

He turned on the local news, as it seems most of the local stations had already caught wind of the story and were stationed outside of Hamilton Hall.

Overnight, the construction site was overrun by cats. Not just a couple. An old-fashioned, biblical plague of tabbies, torties, Siamese, Maine coon, orange, gray, black, striped. They dangled off of exposed beams, pawed at power tools, chased each other, and caterwauled lasciviously. A beat reporter for the local NBC affiliate stood in the misting rain with cranes rising apocalyptically in the background, trying to be heard in her microphone over a mangy gray cat perched on the fence post behind her, bleating like a goat.

"Cats," she said. "Hundreds of cats have beset Hamilton Hall, home of the English Department. Construction has *paused* on the new STEM Workforce Center until a solution can be found for this *meow*-lange of kittens."

By the time Chancellor Snively arrived on campus, a cat pun graced the front page of every major news venue, and swarms of students with cell

phones clogged every artery leading to the English department. Selfies and cute cat footage abounded. YouTube exploded. Snively wormed his way through and into the construction fence, where the foreman barked orders to construction workers pausing to record the cute antics of the furry invaders. Snively's swarm of administrators were all on their phones, calling local shelters, zoos, local cat whisperers to find a solution to the *cat*-astrophe.

"What the *fuck*?" Said the foreman as Snively stumbled forward. "Where the *fuck* did all these cats come from?" He turned to his assistants, who were trying unsuccessfully to chase the cats into a large bin. "And someone tell me why this coffee always tastes like *fucking shit*!"

Derek watched from afar. The oddity of professors were sprinkled throughout the crowds of YouTubers, and he swore he saw Dr. Loraine Wigglesworth threading throughout the masses, cat in hand.

The real storm started at midday when, pestered by throngs of reporters about what he planned to do with the clowder of cats, he first asked, in a hot mic, what the fuck a *clowder* was, and then said he didn't care.

By 1 PM, the local chapter of PETA hit campus, along with a persistence of student protestors. The student newspaper reported that the administration sought to offload the kittens in buckets to shelters for mass execution. A University Communications email touting the virtues of no-kill shelters went largely unread, as with most University Communications. By and large, people think the worst of administrators, and most saw the makings of a kitten genocide. The campus Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) placed an emergency call to contacts in Memphis, TN, to see if this was something it should be chiming in on. The Governor started receiving emails from concerned parents about the inhumane treatment of cats. Kittengate was the last thing the Governor needed, and she phoned the Chair of the Regents and told him to put a lid on it. Right *meow*, she almost said.

It took several days to clear the cats and most of the YouTubers. At that point, the only remaining onlookers were the dead faculty who paced and wandered and hovered by the worksite. The contractor complained to university officials that he had trouble keeping workers on the site, not just because of the cats and the oddly horrible coffee, but because they claimed to *feel* a sinister presence, or perhaps not quite *sinister*. One worker described it as the sort of guilty you felt when you got called into a teacher's office and asked why your essay was identical to something found on Wikipedia.

The Regents called Chancellor Snively into their office. Metaphorically speaking. It was really a cushy conference room. Chancellor

Snively's conference room, in fact. But Chancellor Snively felt the pins and needles in his ass as he duckwalked in.

"What the *fuck*?" Was all they could say, though luckily the coffee tasted much better.

Construction outlasted Kittengate. And it slogged on, despite the weird phenomena, like missing hammers, and weird noises, and radios that played only angry Danish speed metal. And the STEM Workforce Center powered on.

Though seeds were planted, and the chatter in Starbucks lines and in local op-ed pages centered on whether Snively was fit for office. Memes of Snively doing awful things to doe-eyed kittens haunted social media.

Derek sat dreamily contemplating these matters during an extra long ride into work on the university shuttle, which had followed a poorly-marked detour and had ended up on the freeway heading north toward the other State University. In the reflection of the shuttle window, he saw the scruffy face of Dr. Edgar sitting beside him. He turned. Dr. Edgar looked forward, a leather satchel placed across his lap. It had been raining, and Professor Edgar's coat and beard were scraggy with wet. His umbrella, which had seen years of service, was in a half-open/half-closed state in the shuttle aisle.

"I hate service," fumed Professor Edgar.

Derek cocked his head.

"Say again?" Said Derek. He looked behind him and clutched his ear like he was talking on an ear piece.

"Service." Said Edgar. "University policy — 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service. But I hate the service. And wish I had more of the teaching.

"I stay in my office so they can't put me back on the Faculty Senate," he said. And Derek blinked, and Professor Edgar was no longer there.

Back on the Faculty Senate, thought Derek. When had Professor Edgar ever been on Faculty Senate?

An hour later, when the shuttle rumbled by the Library, Derek hopped off and tumbled down the steps to the lower levels, the university archives. Campus urban legends declared the lower levels to be eminently haunted, though Derek could now say with certainty that the archives were perhaps the *only* place on campus that were not haunted, unless you held the belief that the gnome-like staff of the university archives were otherworldly creatures. But the basement sure seemed like a haunted place. Concrete floors, cold, steel shelving, flickering overhead lights that gave the impression of torch-lit hallways. Derek felt like he was exploring catacombs beneath ancient Rome.

The archives were not haunted, but they still had ghosts.

The Faculty Senate records from 1951 to 2010 devolved from brown, leather-bound tomes to warped, plastic three-ring binders in the latter years, before moving to digital files only. He blew the dust off the records and stacked them on an oak table beneath a swinging, naked lightbulb. No one could ever fault the faculty senate archives for being too eventful. Decades of curriculum changes, petty grievances, riveting accounts of math professors who took the floor and never gave it back. But he found it.

2001.

Professor Edgar, who swore never to serve on a faculty senate committee, actually chaired the Faculty Senate for the Spring semester. The elected chair, his dear friend from the Department of History, had suffered a massive stroke, and Professor Edgar reluctantly stepped in in his place and finished his term. He swore as he banged his first gavel that he would never do anything of import. And technically he didn't.

However.

April 2001.

University turmoil recycles like bad fashion, and this had been another tumultuous time. The University truly had no idea what shit was about to hit the fan nationally in the coming months. It was roiling in its own shit. The previous chancellor had resigned after a vote of no confidence from the Faculty Senate, having driven the school into millions of dollars of debt with building projects. Apparently, tensions boiled over when plans emerged to construct a new Design Studies building with no right angles—a big, roundish monstrosity that looked like a zit in need of popping. In theory, this was all behind them—they had a delightfully boring interim chancellor and were searching for a safe, conservative chancellor who could bring them back into the black and not do anything too controversial. Really, the minutes from that Spring semester were trivial.

But then there was that one Space Utilization Committee report. Derek blinked. He spent a week poring over Faculty Senate minutes up to the present day, Regents' meeting minutes, old student newspapers, administrative memoranda. Most likely, no one even remembered this one little report, with its one action item that passed the Faculty Senate unanimously, and was approved by the Regents. It was a highly unusual report that was a product of a particular context, a particular semester of faculty fist raising, but then like many faculty senate motions that are raised in a heated moment, it fizzled out and was forgotten. Yet the policy remained in effect.

Derek copied the document thrice. Each was placed into a manilla envelope. The first was sent to the current Faculty Senate chair, the second to the Chair of the Regents, and the third to the local newspaper. And "sent"

meant that Derek slid them anonymously under doors, or mailed them without return of address, all the while wearing dark glasses and a trench coat. Pure spy craft. He had no intention of letting anyone know that a lowly archivist had put his oar in the water.

The local newspaper truly didn't know what to make of the top secret set of boring meeting minutes that slid across their desks at first, but they caught on after the results of the next University Faculty Senate Meeting... Sort of. The packet was initially poo-pooed by the Regents, but it hit the Faculty Senate floor with the heft of a dozen wet sea lions. The senate was all set to discuss whispers that the History Department was to be "right-sized" and its building converted to a campus wellness center. The Faculty Senate Chair happened to have a special place in her heart for these orphaned policies that no one seemed to remember. What the Faculty Senate Chair determined upon receipt of the documents and a little further research was that the university had agreed in 2001 that no major university building project would proceed without a majority vote of the faculty senate. The faculty senate discussed the records, held several meetings with university administrators, and then, with a resounding bang of the gavel, successfully passed a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Snively. The Regents Chair secretly wondered whether this mysterious policy was really even binding, but by that point, he was so fed up with Chancellor Snively that, for this and other problematic building plans, he asked for his resignation.

The local newspaper sort of understood what was going on, and after pondering the political nuances of faculty shared governance, boldly declared, "Cat Killer Canned."

Snively resigned. His administrators disappeared into the shadows. Or went out to haunt other small colleges around the country. But in another stroke of irony (or karma, perhaps), Snively retained tenure in the Department of History. Getting ousted from his roost was followed soon after by bouts of reflection and introspection. Snively, it turned out, was an engaging lecturer who made European History truly jump, jive, and wail in class, and after several years, most students didn't even realize that the frumpy historian struggling with the classroom technology in the front of the class had once been Chancellor. They only knew him by his memorable lectures and his surprisingly good Rate My Professor scores. Who knew that there was still a ghost in the old machine!

Derek thought about it from time to time. He often ate his lunch outside the half-finished Hamilton Hall. The English Department had been officially moved into an old dormitory. Hamilton Hall lay indefinitely unfinished, surrounded by fence and tarp and the occasional braying cat.

Once, while eating a ham and cheese sandwich, he looked up to see Professor Edgar walk by.

Professor Edgar stopped.

“That student,” he said. “Finally turned her paper in. Comma splices all over the place, and spelled like she was inventing a new language.

“But it was *brilliant*.”

He started walking, stopped, and turned. “Reminds me why I still even bother to do this.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Simpson is Professor of Communication and Dean of Arts and Sciences at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, where he regularly uses spreadsheets for evil purposes. He lives in the desert with his wife and two cats.

HOMO PROFANUS

ALEXANDER B. JOY

And if the body were not the soul,

what is the soul?

Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric"

Welcome, sisters and brothers and beloved others, to the National Paranormal Society's 220th annual convocation! I'm honored to be named your keynote speaker – though I do wonder who must have declined the honor first in order to make that possible. Ha ha! In any case, I'm pleased to announce a sizable increase in Society membership this year, which climbs despite, or perhaps *because*, confirmed ghost sightings have continued their precipitous, decades-long decline.

You're undoubtedly aware of the crisis gripping our field. History is littered with accounts of ghosts – many of which were, in their day, deemed factual. Setting aside obviously fictional literary examples, we have centuries of newspaper stories reporting apparitions and hauntings, memoirs recounting revenant spirits, tourism guides and local legends denoting haunted sites, and plenty of other allegedly nonfiction texts that document paranormal occurrences. You know, too, that through the Society's methods, we have confirmed a great number of these texts to be accurate and factual.

Yet the number of these accounts dwindles with each passing year. Public skepticism does not seem to be the culprit; the ludicrous and inconsistent beliefs held by the growing anti-vaccine and flat earth cadres, for instance, suggest that people remain prepared to entertain ideas infinitely more far-fetched than the prospect of earthbound souls. Rather, the cause appears to be that the ghost population – if you'll forgive the biology-inflected term – is on the wane.

The quantity and frequency of ghostly events *should* have risen proportionally with the human population, as time has swelled the ranks of the dead and supplied no shortage of people to encounter their lingering spirits. But instead, we've witnessed the opposite: the natural degradation and dissolution of extant ghosts has continued unimpeded, but deaths from our era have not begotten new ghosts to compensate. Now the worldwide ghost population has dramatically thinned. Even our host city of Boston, once replete with hauntings that date as far back as the colonial era, today retains only a single confirmed specimen: the so-called "Fenway Rusalka," who stalks the waterlogged ruins of Back Bay.

The trend is clear. Ghosts are disappearing, without being replaced. In time, we might say that ghosts – again, pardon the expression – are doomed to extinction.

What, then, has triggered this decline? As an evolutionary biologist, I've devised a possible explanation. And I am afraid that my answer carries implications far more frightening than any ghost.

Let's begin with some data. If I may direct your attention to the screen behind me... This slide depicts the estimated ghost population in a given decade, as inferred from contemporary accounts. Observe the conspicuous downward trajectory, culminating in *zero* new ghost sightings over the past several years.

Now let me overlay some key historical moments. Note how the ghost population's decline surprisingly *doesn't* coincide with the scientific method's emergence (which we might call the advent of skepticism). In fact, it holds steady for several decades thereafter. The first pronounced drop doesn't occur until the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade. We behold similar collapses following the Indigenous genocides in North America, World Wars I through III, and the Great Arctic Melt – though you'd imagine such heinous, high-fatality events would have *raised* the ghost population.

The takeaway?

The data indicates an undeniable correlation between the decreasing ghost population and the worsening inhumanity of mankind.

To wit: we've developed lethal technologies that kill with ever-increasing efficiency; we've allowed poverty and inequality to fester; we've idled as catastrophic climate change wipes out the most vulnerable. And all the while, like an indicator species for our moral degradation, we find fewer and fewer ghosts among us.

Which brings me to my core hypothesis.

There are fewer souls clinging to this earthly plane because *there are fewer souls, period*. The ghost decline is symptomatic of an uncomfortable step in human evolution. Namely: humans possessed souls at one point, but have evolved not to have them any longer.

How has this happened? And why?

Think of the soul like an organ – not in terms of function, but of vulnerability. In the same way that excessive alcohol consumption poisons the liver, the soul sustains damage from moral trespass. Unethical behavior harms it; evil is anathema to it. In consequence, possessing a soul poses evolutionary disadvantages. It prohibits actions it dubs morally impermissible, thereby limiting the courses organisms may pursue in furtherance of their own survival – and reducing the odds that such organisms endure.

As a matter of raw statistics, we could say immorality is more conducive to biological survival. And in an increasingly immoral world, the best-adapted organisms have jettisoned the organs least able to tolerate it. Ergo, our environment has not selected for souls.

If my suppositions are correct, they carry alarming consequences.

First, given that we now lack a fundamental component of the humans who preceded us, we face the possibility that we are a different species than our recent ancestors. *Homo sapiens* may no longer be our correct name. Perhaps *Homo secularis* is more accurate – if not *Homo profanus*.

The absence of new ghosts also suggests that *Homo sapiens* is itself extinct. And if the soul is indeed a biologically hardwired moral compass, then the only species known to have it has perished from this earth. Put differently: the sweet, the kind, the caring (those capable of salvation, if you subscribe to such doctrines) died off long ago. Only we remain – the dregs tailored for an amoral world.

Furthermore, my hypothesis uncovers a troubling facet of evolution itself. The presence of ghosts has offered slight but hopeful evidence of an existence that continues after biological death. Yet, if ghosts are disappearing for the reasons I've articulated, it follows that evolution does not – and perhaps *cannot* – select for non-biological survival. Evolution may even be at odds with it, driving entities of the spirit into obsolescence so that the material and transient may reign.

And if ghosts truly constitute proof that there exists a hereafter, then we must confront the most startling realization of all:

None of us will ever see it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander B. Joy holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He typically writes about literature, film, philosophy, and game studies.

GHOST

A. J. PADILLA

Sixth months ago, on the night of December 23, 1962, my boss at Universal Life and Casualty died of a massive heart attack. He had been watching the Christmas episode of *Bonanza* when he got up to go to the fridge for a beer. His wife found him twenty minutes later. The paramedics tried everything to revive him, but the poor guy had probably been dead before he hit the kitchen floor.

"Look at it," he'd once said to me as we stood on Sixth Avenue, looking up at the forty-four-story steel and glass behemoth where we both worked. "It's like an overgrown baby, always demanding attention."

I became the new head of Building Maintenance a week after his funeral and was put in charge of the health and well-being of that overgrown baby.

The promotion came with a raise and a cramped basement office. It also meant being on call nights and weekends, but I didn't care about that. After twenty years with Universal Life, I was at last exactly where I wanted to be, and all the good things life has to offer suddenly seemed within reach.

Then, on a sultry evening six months later, my wife announced over supper that she wanted a divorce. Teresa wouldn't tell me why she wanted to end our marriage after nineteen years, except to say that we had "grown apart," as if we were a couple of characters in one of the stupid soaps she watched every weekday afternoon.

"Since you got promoted your whole life is that damned building. I don't seem to matter much to you anymore."

I pleaded with her to reconsider, but she remained immovable as Everest.

Teresa and I rarely argued, and when we did it was usually about little things that were soon forgotten. Over the years we had settled into a happy routine and were comfortable with each other -- or so I thought until that evening.

After her bombshell, she got up from the table and disappeared into our bedroom, locking the door behind her.

So, there I was, alone, with my marriage suddenly gone to hell, and with no family or close friends to reach out to for sympathy or counsel. For the next couple of days, I tried living with -- and yet apart from -- Teresa. We spoke little and sometimes not at all. A suffocating loneliness took hold of me and I began to feel like a spirit haunting what had once been my life.

On the morning of our third day apart, I quietly packed some things in an old suitcase and headed for the front door. As I walked past the living room I caught a glimpse of Teresa sitting on the divan, her hands folded primly on her lap as tears ran down her cheeks. She looked as beautiful as the first time I saw her, way back when we were both still in high school. I had meant to say all sorts of hurtful things, words that would cut into her flesh like shards of glass, but seeing her like that took my breath away and I left our apartment in silence, a swarm of angry words still bottled up inside me.

I took a cab to Penn Station, where I put my suitcase in a locker before walking across town to the Universal Life Building. I rode the service elevator down to my office and called a nearby hotel to book a room. The Chester wasn't exactly the Plaza or the Waldorf, but it was cheap and clean and only fifteen minutes from Universal Life.

I struggled for days to come up with an explanation for what had happened. What I finally did was hire Dennis Coyne, a private investigator with a sloppy little hole-in-the-wall office in Washington Heights. Coyne was an overweight ex-cop whose entire wardrobe seemed to consist of a single wrinkled brown suit. The guy didn't look like much, but he knew his business. It took him less than a week to find what I probably should have been able to figure out on my own: Teresa had been carrying on with another man.

I got lover boy's address and paid him a visit late one Saturday afternoon.

The man who came to the door was tall and slim. He had slicked back blond hair and a thin Clark Gable mustache. I knew the type, all cheap cologne and phony charm in a tailored gabardine suit.

From somewhere behind him came a woman's soft voice. "Who is it, hon?"

I didn't waste any time.

"Do you know Teresa Cobb?"

He body stiffened and he tightened his grip on the doorknob.

"Yeah, I know her."

He tried to smile, but his face only twitched.

I reached out and got him by the throat.

"Don't ever go near her again. Do you understand?"

He grabbed my wrist, but could not pull my hand away.

"Do you understand?" I repeated.

He nodded and let out a strangled squeak. I had planned on leaving him looking like he'd gone fifteen hard rounds with Sonny Liston, but I saw from the panicked look on his face that it wouldn't be necessary. He'd had enough.

In fact, the guy looked about ready to cry.

The woman's voice called out again from somewhere inside the house.

"Honey? Is everything okay?"

I turned and left.

A couple of days after my visit with lover boy, I went to see Teresa. She looked away when I brought out a few of Coyne's glossy close-ups of her and the blond creep holding hands in Central Park.

If she still wanted a divorce, I said, she should send the papers to me in care of Universal Life and Casualty. I'd continue to pay all the bills until the divorce, but there would be no alimony, not one red cent. And if she tried collecting anything, I'd find a shyster with the scruples of Heinrich Himmler and file my own divorce suit on the grounds of adultery.

I spent a couple of lonely, miserable weeks at the Chester before something happened that changed everything. It was nearly five in the afternoon on a Friday and most employees were getting ready to go home for the weekend. I was on my way up to the twenty-third floor to look into replacing some cracked ceiling tiles when two junior executive types got on the elevator. They were Mutt and Jeff in three-piece suits. One was tall and rangy with coal-black hair and eyes; the other was short, stocky, red-haired, and balding. Each carried a yellow legal pad.

Jeff spoke first.

"Hope this ordeal doesn't take too long."

"Ditto, old man."

"Who calls a planning session this late on a Friday?"

"Why, our esteemed department head, that's who."

"I'll tell you this, if he pulls another of his trademark late-into-the-evening soliloquies, I won't be dashing off to Grand Central for the long and sleepy ride back to Scarsdale. I'll stretch out on the divan in my office and spend a cozy night right there."

"With no one to tuck you in? That sounds too much like boot camp to suit me."

They got off on the twentieth floor. I don't think they ever noticed me standing there in my gray Building Maintenance uniform.

Afterwards, I thought about what Jeff had said. Things like that happened now and again when an executive was entertaining a client until the wee hours and hadn't had the foresight to book a hotel room. But could it be done night after night?

At any given time, there were one or two unoccupied offices somewhere within the building's forty-four stories. If you knew where they

were and how long they would remain unoccupied, it might be possible to turn Universal Life into a kind of hotel. Of course, you would need unlimited access to the building to pull it off. You would also need balls of steel to try and get away with something like that. As the head of Building Maintenance, I had the former. I could only hope I possessed the latter.

I went to my dreary room at the Chester that night and tried watching the evening news on a small black and white television. President Kennedy had given a speech to a chamber of commerce somewhere in the Midwest earlier that day. There was a snippet of film showing him speaking to a smiling, prosperous-looking group. I tried concentrating on what he was saying, but it was impossible. I kept thinking about what I'd heard on the elevator just a few hours before.

I shut off the TV and went out for some Chinese food and a cold beer. It was around seven-thirty when I got to the restaurant on Eight Avenue.

I sat in a booth and ordered shrimp lo mein and a Rheingold. When I was done with supper, a waiter in a stained red vest handed me the check. He bowed slightly and smiled before disappearing into the kitchen. The pale blue saloon doors he went through reminded me of a job we were doing on the thirty-first floor, an office with a view of Manhattan's eastern skyline. It had belonged to a guy named Tipton, a big shot in the Accounting Department. Tipton had retired after thirty years and we were getting his office ready for a new man, a college hot shot out of our Boise office who had insisted that his new office be painted in shades of blue. It would take at least three weeks to repaint, put down a new rug, and replace all of Tipton's old furniture. I had at least that much time to try out my plan.

I paid the check, but didn't return to the hotel. I walked back to Universal Life instead.

Milton Little was on duty at the employee entrance that night. With his big, calloused hands, lantern jaw, and steel-gray crewcut, he looked like an ex-prizefighter. Milt had known me long enough not to shove a log book in my direction. I could also count on him forgetting all about me by the time his relief came on duty at midnight.

"Anybody around, Milt?"

He looked up from his Herald Tribune.

"A guy from Policy Loan came by half an hour ago to pick up some paperwork, but he's long gone. That's been it for tonight."

"I suppose that makes us the last of the Mohicans."

"Guess so, Mister Cobb. What brings you back to us so late?"

"A project on thirty-one."

"It never ends, does it?"

“No, it sure doesn’t. You have a good night, Milt.”

“You too, Mister Cobb.”

I hurried down to Building Maintenance, where I changed into my uniform and picked up a flashlight and my key ring. A service elevator took me up to the thirty-first floor and I let myself into Tipton’s old office with a master key. All the old furniture had been pushed into the center of the room and covered with a drop cloth. I pulled the cloth aside, dragged a vinyl divan over by the window and sat looking out at the Chrysler Building’s illuminated spire until I dozed off.

I woke, stiff and uncomfortable, at the sound of a passing jet out of La Guardia. The wall clock read a quarter past one. I was far too groggy to start asking myself what I was doing there, so I took off my shoes, stretched out on the creaky vinyl, and slept dreamlessly for hours.

I gave up my room at the Chester the next day.

Three weeks went by before the kid from Boise showed up and I had to look for somewhere else to sleep. I made do with my basement office until fate came to the rescue a second time. Lester Anhalt, a forty-year man, had retired and moved to his summer home in Maine. His replacement was in the hospital recovering from an emergency appendectomy and wouldn’t be able to take over for almost a month. After his last move up Universal Life’s pecking order, Anhalt had spent his own money installing a custom cabinet that housed a well-hidden wet bar and a small television set. The office even had its own small lavatory. It certainly wasn’t the Ritz-Carlton, but the nights I slept there offered a few of the comforts of home.

There were times during those first months living inside Universal Life when, as hard as I fought to keep her out, Teresa found her way back into my thoughts and made sleep impossible. When that happened, I left whatever office I was using at the time and wandered the building’s darkened corridors and offices until the need for sleep caught up with me.

In the half-light and silence of those nocturnal walks, I discovered a new Universal Life, one that had escaped my notice during the hurly-burly of daytime activity. What had seemed rows of anonymous workstations became small islands of individuality. Over time, I even developed a fondness for a few of them. Santa Claus on the twenty-third floor was a favorite. A tiny Christmas tree, about six inches in height and complete with miniscule decorations, sat on that desk even though it was mid-summer. Then there was the Family Man. He had a workstation on the twenty-ninth floor. It always smelled faintly of peppermint and was home to multiple framed photos of a perfect-looking family: three beautiful smiling children and a wife who looked

a lot like a young Ginger Rogers. The Preacher sat at a desk on the thirtieth floor. Dozens of tiny scraps of note paper were tucked into the corners of the blotter, each scrap with a Bible verse on it. The Movie Fan's desk on the thirty-first floor had postcard-sized photos of film stars taped to the sides of his file cabinet and a framed photo of a smiling William Holden on his desk. The Samurai worked on the thirty-second floor. His workstation was next to a window, and he used the adjoining sill as a home for a collection of *bonsai* trees in yellow pots decorated with Japanese ideograms.

I eventually discovered many such workstations scattered around Universal Life, each of them part of a high-rise *Brigadoon* that came to life every workday morning and vanished each afternoon at five.

Everything in life, if you do it long enough, becomes routine, and spending days and nights inside Universal Life was no exception. I showered every morning in the Building Maintenance crew's changing area. Food was never a problem. I ate in the company cafeteria every day and made sure to stock up on enough sandwiches, fruit, and deserts to see me through the weekend.

I slept until noon on Saturdays, then washed my socks and underwear for the week and dried them using my office space heater. Our uniforms are laundered for us by a service, so that was never a problem. Sunday evenings were always spent in Nelson Guidry's office on the fortieth floor, mostly listening to his fancy radio setup. He was a lifelong company man, a patrician who dressed like something out of an old GQ advertisement and talked down to just about everybody who hadn't gone to Yale. He'd commanded a ship during the war and that's exactly how he ran his department, as if he were still at the helm of a destroyer on patrol in the South Pacific. It was an open secret inside Universal Life that Guidry had the best liquor in the building and I rarely left his office without helping myself to a shot or two of Calvert Extra or Remy Martin Cognac.

Living inside Universal Life taught me how little I needed the outside world. Even the occasional illness was not a problem. Our infirmary was staffed by a full-time nurse and Dr. Emil Geist, a semi-retired physician who does a lot of routine medical claims work for us and also treats minor employee ailments. When I began suffering from headaches soon after moving into Universal Life, I went to see him and he gave me a box of pills that he said would take care of the problem. In no time at all the headaches were gone.

The ghost stories began in mid-July. A cleaning woman leaving a double shift one night probably caught a glimpse of me wandering through a

darkened office and concluded that I was a ghost, the restless spirit of a young executive who had died while waiting for an elevator early one morning. The poor guy suffered a massive stroke and crumpled motionless to the lobby floor. It was this victim of a tragically unfinished life that, the cleaning women swore, she saw wandering through Universal Life that night. She shared her story with anyone who would listen and it soon made its way through the entire building.

The people in charge of security didn't believe in ghosts, of course, but they had old Pat Grogan do evening patrols for a week or two. Pat is the oldest guard at Universal Life and not much of a threat to anyone, not even a ghost. I did my part, too, by putting an end to my night-time wandering for a while.

The ghost incident reminded me that everyone's luck eventually runs out. Sooner or later, I'd find myself with only my cramped and stuffy basement office to sleep in and have to return to a room at the Chester. Oddly enough, I was rescued from that sad fate by an executive who had a reputation for making the lives of people under him miserable. The guy, Tom Crenshaw, called me from his office on the forty-second floor one afternoon, carrying on about a problem with a leaky ceiling tile and insisting that the matter be taken care of immediately. You would have thought he was King Farouk the way he went around demanding things.

The rest of my crew was busy with other jobs, so I decided to look into the matter myself. The leak in his office, as it turned out, was nothing much. Most people would have filled out a work order and waited their turn, but a few droplets of water were enough to infuriate a prima donna like Crenshaw. Since I could find no evidence of a leak originating in his office or any of the offices directly above his, the roof needed to be checked for signs of damage. Even a small leak can eventually work its way into a building and in the course of time emerge many floors below its source.

A thorough roof inspection usually requires two or more men, so I had to take one of my engineers off a job to be a second experienced pair of eyes. I called Bart Shamsky and waited for him by the flight of stairs leading up to the roof, smoking the last Lucky Strike in my pack. That's when I first noticed the door built into the space under the stairway. It was painted the same institutional green as the rest of the stairwell and was easy enough to miss if you were in a hurry. I made a mental note to come back and look into it, but wasn't able to return until an evening almost two weeks later.

None of the keys in my ring would open the door, so I went down to my office for lock-picking tools and a cigar box full of unidentified keys. On the way back up, the elevator stopped on the eleventh floor and Bill Rohrenbeck

got on. Bill was a likable old timer and one of the first people I met when I started at Universal Life. I seemed to recall hearing something about his retirement, but there he was.

"You still here, sport?"

Bill's one of those hale-fellow-well-met types, a born salesman always ready with a handshake, a smile, and a bit of conversation.

"Just finishing up a few things, Bill. You know how it is."

"Sure do. How's the family?"

"Fine, thanks. And yours?"

"Oh, doin' great, just great. Couldn't be better."

Bill's wife had been dead for years and his children were grown and living somewhere out on the West Coast. It would not have surprised me one bit to learn that, like me, he had taken up residence somewhere within the building. He got off on the twentieth floor with a wave and a smile.

I ended up picking the lock when none of the thirty or so keys in my cigar box worked. What I discovered was a space about twice the size of a walk-in closet. It had a sloped ceiling and its bare cement floor was covered with a layer of plaster dust. The place had likely been used during the final stages of the building's construction, but was now too far off the beaten path to be of any use. A few paper cups and empty Pabst Blue Ribbon cans were scattered about, along with an old copy of *The Daily Mirror*. There was a light switch by the door and an outlet on the far wall.

I picked up the newspaper. It was dated June 21, 1958. The pages were yellow and brittle with age. June of fifty-eight was the month I received my promotion to assistant head of Building Maintenance. Teresa and I celebrated by going to Miami for a long weekend. We stayed at the Fontainebleau Hotel, where Frank Sinatra was performing at the time. I never cared much for him, but Teresa insisted on going to every one of his shows.

I read that old newspaper from cover to cover as I stood there, enjoying the sports news, comic strips, gossip columns, and even checking to see what had been on the idiot box that day. I took another long look around before leaving and knew I'd found a new place to spend my nights.

I worked nights for more than a week to get the place into shape. When I was done, years of accumulated dust and dirt were replaced by clean, newly painted walls and ceiling. Discarded items from the basement storage area supplied my furniture: a small table, a rusty gooseneck lamp, and a folding chair. A patchwork of discarded rug fragments covered the cement floor.

There was one final thing I needed and it required a visit to the world

outside Universal Life. So, late one afternoon, I walked out of the building for the first time in more than a month. It was a sultry summer day and pedestrian traffic outside the building was heavy. For a moment I froze, staring at the river of people flowing past Universal Life. The jitters hit me with the force of a blow to the solar plexus. If I'd been a bank robber on the lam, with my face plastered on post office walls all over the city, I couldn't have felt any jumpier than I did on the walk to the Seventh Avenue bedding shop.

The shop hadn't changed much in the five years since I'd bought a new mattress for the bed I shared with Teresa. Rows of beds stood against the shop's south and north walls, leaving a narrow aisle just wide enough for customers to walk through. At the end of the aisle, the same salesman who had waited on me in nineteen fifty-eight sat at a scarred wooden desk. He looked up when my entrance set off a cluster of tiny bells above the door.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Do you sell cots? The roll-away kind?"

"Certainly."

He moved swiftly toward the rear of the shop.

"Come with me, please."

A half a dozen cots were stored near the shop's rear entrance.

"How much for that one?" I said, pointing to a cot with a gray mattress.

"That foldaway guest bed sells for Forty-nine dollars."

I would normally have haggled with the guy, but just then I didn't care about the cost. I was still feeling anxious and wanted to get back to Universal Life as quickly as possible.

"Of course, that includes tax and delivery, as well as a five-year replacement warranty."

"I'll take it."

I pulled two twenties and a ten from my wallet and handed them to the salesman.

"Where would you like the bed delivered, sir?"

"I'll take it with me."

"Beg pardon?"

"No need for delivery. I'll take it with me."

"This sort of item is usually ..."

"Listen, I paid for it, so it's mine now, right?"

"Well, yes, of course, but ..."

Now it was his turn to look jittery.

"Have you got any rope or heavy twine?"

"Rope, sir?"

He looked ready to give me back my fifty dollars.

"Yes, rope. Or some heavy twine."

The salesman went over to his desk and came back with a roll of jute twine.

"Here you are. Really, sir, if you would just tell me where you want the item sent, I'll be happy to arrange for the quickest possible delivery."

Ignoring him, I went over to the cot, opened it, removed the mattress, and rolled it up as tightly as I could. I wound the twine around it half a dozen times and secured it with a square knot. I lifted it onto my left shoulder and headed for the exit.

"Sir! What about the frame?"

"Keep it."

Back at Universal Life, I walked past Pat Grogan at the employee entrance and moved toward the service elevators. A tap on my shoulder nearly made me fly out of my skin. I spun around. Pat was standing there with a curious look on his tired old face.

"Planning on spending the night?"

"Having a relative over for the weekend, Pat. Our old roll away cot's mattress is thin as a slice of deli cheese."

"You don't want whoever it is to get *too* comfortable, do you, son? They might never leave." He laughed and walked away.

I rode down to the basement and hid the rolled up mattress in a supply closet.

The final thing I brought up was an armchair that was being replaced in an office on the 18th floor. Its vinyl was ripped in a couple of places, but it was more than good enough for me. It cut into the meager available space, but made the place look and feel a little less like a prison cell.

I moved in the following night.

My days gradually became mirror images of each other. I'd have supper in the employee cafeteria every weekday around five before retreating to my hideaway. I'd take a large coffee up with me and sit in the vinyl armchair reading all the late edition newspapers I'd picked up in the lobby newsstand. When I was ready for sleep, I moved the chair into a corner, unrolled the gray mattress, and set my small alarm clock to five in the morning. Then I turned off the gooseneck lamp and lay there listening to a handheld transistor radio through an earpiece.

Whenever I felt like a breath of air before bed, I'd walk up to the roof for a while. It never failed to amaze me how different Manhattan looked from

my forty-four-story perch. Midtown traffic became streams of light flowing in all directions, while pedestrians, looking slightly larger than ants, moved about in unhurried silence. It all looked so peaceful. Lots of things in life are like that, I suppose -- calm and perfect from a distance, but up close a noisy, god-awful mess.

There were times when I wondered if there might not be another ghost hiding away in one of the skyscrapers surrounding Universal Life. One night, I brought a flashlight up to the roof with me and aimed it in every direction, switching the thing on and off like some shipwrecked sailor signaling a desperate SOS to passing vessels. For an hour or so I searched for some response, a sign from one of the towers out there telling me I was not alone. But there was only darkness.

I resumed my restless walks through Universal Life on a night in late August. I had dreamed about Teresa and a summer weekend we spent on Cape Cod ten years ago. We swam and took the sun during the day and at night we made love. I'd never seen her look happier. Late on our last night there we walked out into the dunes and lay on the still-warm sand looking up at a sky alive with stars. In my dream we were back at the Cape, hopelessly lost among the dunes. Teresa was kneeling at my feet sobbing. I woke with Teresa's face still fresh in my mind. Sleep was impossible after that, so I left my hiding place and descended into the darkened building.

It was just after midnight and I was standing by a favorite work station, the one with the tiny year-around Christmas tree, when I heard a sound in the corridor off to my left. The overhead lights suddenly came on and I ducked under a desk and waited, my heart pounding.

The squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the tile floor was accompanied by a woman's voice whispering "Where'd I leave those goddamned glasses?" over and over like a mantra. The voice drew closer, and I was sure that by tomorrow morning the whole building would know that I had been the nocturnal spirit haunting Universal Life.

Still hidden from sight, I reached for a small wastepaper basket by the desk and tossed it as hard as I could. It clattered down the aisle between workstations.

A woman's high-pitched scream was followed by the frantic scraping sound of her shoes as she ran off. I heard her cry "Holy shit!" from somewhere in the distance before everything became quiet again.

I put the wastepaper basket back in place and shut off the overhead lights before sprinting to the nearest stairwell and back up to my hideaway.

As the days passed, I thought less and about my life in the outside world. I even managed to make a new friend -- Dr. Emil Geist.

Beginning sometime mid-September, Dr. Geist began showing up in the cafeteria every day around suppertime. He always carried a folded copy of the New York Times tucked under his arm and ordered a Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and vegetables, black coffee and a cup of vanilla custard. The meal never varied, nor did the table where he sat reading the *Times*.

I became curious after a week of seeing him there day after day and asked around. That's how I found out about his wife having passed away. They'd been married forever, and I guess the poor old guy didn't know what to do without her. Phyllis, the nurse in the medical office, told me that he recently started coming in on days he wasn't scheduled and staying until all hours.

I felt sorry for him. In a way, we were both there for the same reason: we had lost part of our lives, one of us to death and the other to betrayal. I thought many times about going over to him and trying to start a conversation, but I never did. Instead, it was Dr. Geist who came over to my table one afternoon.

"How are the headaches, young man?"

"Fine now, Doc, thanks to you."

"Well, that's good to hear. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

We ate in silence for a while.

"We seem to be this place's most loyal customers," I said.

"It would certainly appear so."

He didn't say much that first time, but we sat together every day after that and he gradually became talkative as hell. Doc Geist and his wife had been all over the world during their long marriage and he enjoyed telling me about the places they'd visited. He would go on about trips to Borneo, Nepal, Peru, Japan, or some other place I'd never see in a hundred lifetimes. He made them all come to life for me and I soon found myself looking forward to our meals together.

Even ghosts in their hiding places aren't free from the tidal push and pull of events in the outside world. Sometime around mid-October, late on a Monday afternoon, I was settling in at my usual table with a meatloaf special and a late edition of the *Daily News*. The headline read, *President to Address Nation*.

Doc Geist looked distracted when he joined me that day. He hardly touched his supper and mentioned his son for the first time. Until then, I

assumed he and his wife had been childless, like me and Teresa.

He pointed to the headline in his copy of the *Times*.

"A colleague of mine, a neurosurgeon, had a vacation home there back in the 30's and 40's. In Cuba, that is. In the old days they called Havana the "Paris of the Caribbean," you know. Marvelous weather, great food, and friendly people, a truly wonderful place. My boy used to love our trips down there."

The day after President Kennedy's Cuba speech he again brought up his son.

"My boy is really a very fine physician, far more capable than his father. He's got a small private practice out West. Bailey and I haven't had much to say to each other for many years. We had a falling out over the woman he chose to marry, you see. Both my wife and I disapproved of her at the time, but we could not have been more wrong. She has turned out to be a fine wife, and a wonderful, caring mother to their three children.

He looked down at the newspaper.

"This is a nasty business. God only knows how it will turn out."

"Do you really think it's that bad, Doc?"

"Well, there's always a danger of miscalculation, isn't there? One misstep, a single failure of judgment on one side or the other, could so easily turn into a world cataclysm. All it would take is one incident and ..."

He never completed the sentence, suddenly falling silent and looking off toward the cafeteria windows to the buildings beyond Universal Life.

"I'd really hate to have it all end without having patched things up with my son."

He turned to me and I saw that his eyes were welling up with tears.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mister Cobb, it seems to me that you might have some fence mending of your own to attend to."

"What makes you say that?"

"The wedding band on your left hand for one thing. Also, a man your age doesn't sit here day after day unless he's a widower like me or he feels he no longer has a home to go to. Forgive me, but I suspect you may fall into the latter category."

He tapped the newspaper with his finger.

"Time may very well be short for all of us. I intend to call my boy tonight and say some things that have long needed saying. You might think about making a phone call of your own. That is, if my guess is correct. If I'm wrong, I hope you will forgive a melancholy, meddlesome old sawbones for his misdiagnosis. It certainly wouldn't be his first."

With that, he rose from the table and left, not bothering to finish his

supper. I didn't buy any of his end-of-the world talk, but it started me thinking about Teresa and about the phone call the Doc said I should make.

I never did make that call. I didn't have to.

I was in my office the next day, catching up on paperwork and talking with Bart Shamsky about all the crazy stuff going on over in Cuba.

"You think they'll chicken out, Eddie? Ship those missiles back to Moscow?"

I looked over at Shamsky. He was standing by the office percolator pouring a cup. I had known him nearly ten years, since he was first hired and I spent a month teaching him the ropes. He was a good engineer, serious about his work, a guy you can count on to keep his cool and think a problem through, but he was clearly rattled by the latest headlines.

"What are you worried about, Shamsky? You know these politicians always figure a way out of things. It's no different with this missile stuff."

"I'm not so sure. You back the Russians into a corner, what else they going to do but fight?"

"Stop worrying. Kennedy's as smart as they come. He'll pull something out of his Irish bag of tricks."

He sat down across from me.

"Can you imagine it? Can anybody imagine it? Everything gone in a flash, just like that, over some dumbass missiles that shouldn't have been there in the first place? You ever see pictures of Hiroshima after the bomb?"

"Everybody has, Bart, but that's not going to happen here, so why not drop the subject? Drink your coffee and think about something else, like doing your job for instance."

"Doesn't seem fair, Eddie. I mean to kids who'll never have a chance to grow up...."

That's when the phone rang. I was relieved not to have to listen to any more of Shamsky's talk about a nuclear Armageddon.

"Building Maintenance, Cobb speaking."

"You've got to come home."

It was a voice I hadn't heard in more than four months.

"Teresa?"

She sounded frightened, like a kid trapped in a dark room unable to find a light switch.

I looked over at Shamsky.

"Would you excuse me a moment, Bart?"

"Oh, sure. I've got to hit the john anyway."

"Everything's going to be blown up, Eddie. I don't want to die alone."

"Don't get hysterical, Teresa. Nothing's going to happen."

"How do you know? How can *anybody* know?"

She was right. No one could know for sure. And a lot of people were scared. I saw it on faces all over the building. The papers were full of stories about long lines in supermarkets around the city, as if people were expecting a nuclear war and thought a big enough supply of bottled water and Campbell's soup would see them through the thing just fine. Maybe stocking up at the local A&P was all they could think of doing when faced with something so terrible, as logical a reaction as any when your fate wasn't in your own hands.

"Why don't you get Romeo to come over and keep you company if you're so damned scared?"

"Who?"

"Lover boy, dearest."

"I don't know what ..."

"Your blond Casanova. You couldn't have forgotten."

"Oh. I don't know where he is and I don't care."

"Don't you?"

"I haven't seen or heard from him since before you walked out, Eddie. That's the truth."

Teresa is an awful liar. This little shaky thing in her voice always gave her away. She wasn't lying to me about Romeo or about being terrified.

"Look, Teresa, why don't you have a glass of wine and watch your soaps."

"It's the end of the world."

"It's going to be the end of this phone call if you don't cut out that kind of talk."

"Oh, please come home. *Please!*"

"Come home. Just like that? After all these months? I'll think about it, Teresa. In the meantime, you get a hold of yourself."

I hung up just as Shamsky returned.

"Problems, boss?"

"Everything's hunky dory."

"Yeah, hunky dory. Except that we might all wake up with a thermonuclear tan tomorrow morning."

She had never called, not once in all the time I'd been away. There were letters from her, sure, at least a couple of dozen, but I had put all of them away unopened.

The prospect of seeing Teresa again made me nervous as hell. I tried putting her phone call out of my thoughts, but I suddenly couldn't stop thinking about our apartment, and how it would feel to walk through our front

door again after a day's work. I remembered the cooking smells that filled the place as Teresa prepared supper, the sounds that came from the kitchen as I sat in the living room reading the evening newspaper, and remembered the way Teresa had of singing along with the radio as she cooked.

"Give it a rest, will you? I've had about all I can take of this doom and gloom shit."

"Okay, okay. Don't blow a gasket. I'll grab my tools and go see about a work order on the nineteenth floor."

I tried getting back to work after Shamsky left, but the papers on my desk might as well have been written in Chinese for all the sense they made. I got up and paced around my tiny office, a mix of anger, excitement, and fear whirling around inside me like a tornado.

I had to get out of there, not up to my hideaway but outside. After months of dreading the thought of stepping out onto a Manhattan sidewalk, at that moment it was the one and only place I wanted to be.

I changed into my civvies and walked out of Universal Life.

Teresa was breathing deeply in a familiar and comforting rhythm. We had made love with a passion missing from our marriage for years, and then she fell asleep naked in my arms.

My night table clock said it was one thirty in the morning. Even as I lay there with Teresa, missiles in their silos or down in the mechanical guts of a Polaris submarine, and B-52 bombers circling like enormous silver vultures high above the clouds, were preparing for an apocalypse.

Teresa sleepily moved her hand over my bare chest and sighed. I had managed to sooth her terror with soft words of forgiveness and renewed love, while all the while my own fears churned inside me.

Helpless millions in the city were quietly preparing for the end. But what if the human race somehow managed to escape obliteration, if the weapons of mass death were put away by armies of desperate and frightened men? What if, after all the talk of nuclear war, there was a tomorrow? Would I return to the safety of my hiding place high above the streets of Manhattan? Or would I remain with my faithless wife to face an uncertain future together?

I felt Teresa's warm breath on my shoulder and realized that there was no longer a choice to be made.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Padilla is Academic Librarian working at the Dutchess Community College campus of the State University of New York. He has had short stories published in the Scarlet Leaf Review, Pulp Literature, the Acentos Review, and the Corner Bar Magazine.