

Academ*Fic*

Volume 7 Issue 1
2026



VOLUME 7 · ISSUE 1 · 2026

The Usual Dissertation.....	1
M. Frost	
Gratitude Shmatitude.....	15
P.G. Smith	
The Big Questions.....	35
Galen T. Pickett	
The Long Twentieth Century.....	41
Brian Hillman	
The First of Many Begins Again.....	44
Samuele Murtinu	
Mirror.....	48
Yevgenii Kisarauskas	
The Joke's On Me.....	57
Dr. Neil Weiner	
Divine Wisdom.....	66
Sylvia Wenmackers	
Fore!.....	71
Mark Jonathan Harris	
The Feud.....	83
Jibril Stevenson	

Proxi.....	97
	David Jensen
A Decent Level of Tranquility.....	122
	John Tures

PALNI PRESS AND ACADEMFIC

PALNI Press is committed to disseminating the diverse scholarly and creative content of supported PALNI institutions and their academic communities, helping them meet their teaching and learning objectives. This service provides the capacity to create and host open access publications such as journals, textbooks, monographs, and digital exhibits, without the costs associated with program design or platform maintenance and hosting. We aim to provide equal, equitable, and free access to content by all users throughout the world. PALNI's Publishing Services Admin Team will provide consultation and support for the PALNI Press service.

Butler University is proud to be a member of PALNI and the PALNI Press. AcademFic is hosted through PALNI's Open Journal Systems (OJS), an open source software platform for managing and publishing scholarly journals. PALNI and Butler University are committed to open access for all. For PALNI Press and Butler University, this means giving readers the flexibility to access digital resources that everyone can use.

© 2025 AcademFic

<https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/academfic>

THE USUAL DISSERTATION

M. FROST

—*Doctoral Student*—

Mark rested his eyes on the impressive rings of the moon orbiting Beta Colony before he continued proofing his master's thesis.

Beta Colony was—as you might expect—the second ever founded when the people of Earth traveled to the stars. While it was a busy port now, before the accelerator network was developed, transit from Earth had been long and expensive.

Mark frowned at his thesis title: “Colonization and Language on Beta Colony.” *I need something snappier.*

He leaned back in the folding chair on the narrow balcony of the temporary apartment he was leasing, thinking of the work he had just finished. *You really can see the history of colonization here—how the languages went in their own directions for a while, then how they re-integrated linguistic elements from Earth when contact became more frequent.*

Mark noticed a flash on his pad. As he opened the message, the blue banner of the Oxford University linguistics doctoral program glowed in the dark.

I got in.

His heart skipping, Mark stood up. *I want to celebrate.*

He twitched. *Who would celebrate with me?* His family were gone, and Mark had given up on serious relationships when his master's work enforced constant travel.

He stared out at the rings of the moon. *Maybe once I get settled at Oxford, I should start dating again.*

#

“Mark, are you watching this?” Juan called.

Mark turned off the shower, then pulled a towel around his waist to join his new boyfriend. “What?”

“Seems Ninneth had allies.” Juan paused the newsvid.

Mark shuddered. “Didn't they hear the war ended a century ago?” He didn't agree with how Earthforce had handled the Ninneth secession from the Coalition. *Why annihilate an entire Colony based on a political decision?*

“I suppose not.” Juan agreed soberly. Then he looked at Mark. “You finally shaved.”

Mark bent to run his smooth cheek against Juan’s. “I should grow a beard, *non?*”

He felt a pang as Juan frowned. Mark’s mother had spoken French with him, but Juan didn’t like it when Mark lapsed into the language patterns of his youth. *Something about the colonialism of it? He’s tried to explain how it relates to the Pre-Pox history he studies, and to his own background, but I’ve never understood.*

“I’ve just been working so much, I forgot to shave.” Mark’s hunt for a dissertation topic had led him down a rabbit hole, exploring order of colonization on Colony language dispersal.

Not that this is precisely xenolinguistics—but with the Colonies so far apart, and with no real aliens to study—John says it’s close enough.

Which reminds me. “I’m running late to the meeting with my advisor. See you for dinner?”

At Juan’s distracted nod, Mark hurried to dress and flag a transport. Xenolinguistics wasn’t in the historic Clarendon Institute but instead on a new campus. *Interesting choice to co-locate us with planetary defense.*

Mark knew the real reason was the money. He’d found out after he started the program that most Xenolinguistics faculty were funded by Earthforce. His advisor Dr. John Thakur barely had to lecture because Earthforce demanded—and paid for—most of his time.

If Mark had a vision for what the office of a Professor of Philology should look like, this wasn’t it. Instead of a dimly lit room in an ancient building crowded with hardcast books, John’s office was inframodernist with only a sitting area, spartan work benches, and the highest-quality technology.

Mark started to softcast his presentation onto the wall template, but John waved him off. “Mark, I have a surprise for you.”

John insisted on first names. At their first meeting, he explained, “There’s an implicit hierarchy in any training program, but let’s be pragmatic. We’ll be colleagues someday.”

“What surprise?” Mark asked.

“I have your doctoral dissertation on a silver platter.” John draped his arms across the back of the lean couch.

Mark leaned forward to avoid any chance at contact. He recognized there was no universe in which either he or John might act on their attraction. *Even though his husband died a few years ago, he’s too professional.*

Mark’s heart rate quickened anyway.

John stretched to pick up his own pad. He softcast a Coalition starmap. “You know about Ninneth.” As he gestured, the sector that once housed the rebel Colony lit up.

It’s grade school history. Who hasn’t heard of Ninneth?

“You’ve heard about the new group?” John continued.

Mark hedged. “Just a newsvid.”

“Sector 71301. I don’t think they’re related to Ninneth, no matter what the newsvids say.”

Mark turned to John in surprise. *He might know. He has Top Secret clearance.* “Why?” He stumbled.

When John touched the pad, the template changed.

These are language files.

“These popped up in some of the nodes we Xenolinguists use to share large files across the Colonies. My guess is they planted them.”

“They?”

“Whoever they are in 71301. There was only one planet colonized in that sector, GU41-M-B.” John pulled out key files. “There’s no way they’re related to Ninneth. The languages are too distinct. Anyway, this Colony was founded far earlier.”

“Why haven’t I heard about them?”

“They were believed lost within a year of colonization.” John replied.

“So the languages have evolved in a completely distinct way without any contact?”

“That’s the question. If and when did they have contact with Ninneth?”

Because the language would show it.

“This is incredible.”

John looked delighted. “So what do you think? Or should I give it to Emily?”

Mark gave him a dirty look. “I’ll take it.”

“I thought you might like it.” John said softly. Then he started. “Did you shave?”

Mark made a dismissive sound.

“You’d look good in a beard.” John said.

#

The usual dissertation would rely on existing language databases. Mark regretted his decision to take on the languages—plural—of Sector 71301. *I have to translate them into Olympian first.* It was the meta-language used by all translation programs.

Olympian never had been spoken—it was code designed and curated by linguists throughout the Coalition, based on earlier models that went back to the 20th Century. When Xenolinguists encountered a new language, they only had to make one translation—into Olympian—then the algorithm would translate out every known language or dialect.

Complete with idiom if the input is good enough. Take John's use of 'silver platter.' That would be rendered as 'betrothal gift' among the Felzins of Beta Quadrant.

Mark's heart raced as he wondered if the innuendo had been John's intention.

At this point, he agreed the Colony itself must have leaked the files. *They're too complete to be a product of espionage.* But what they offered was pre-Olympian Xenolinguistics.

I think they really were cut off right after their founding.

He frowned. *Technically, nothing I'm doing is Xenolinguistics. It's clear these are Colony languages that have evolved. One of them even has remarkable fidelity to English of the 24th Century.*

"At least some of them are aliens." John assured him when Mark raised the subject at the end of their meeting the next day. As he waved his hand, the wall template sparkled with picfiles.

"What?" A moment later, Mark realized these were marked Top Secret. *John made me get my clearance. I guess this is okay.*

Mark studied the abnormal facial structure, long hair the color of blood. "Humanoid." He observed.

He and John had been discussing gender hierarchy in language, so Mark tried to be more specific. At first, he thought the being androgynous, but changed his mind. "Perhaps a female if the phenotype is like ours."

"The building blocks of the universe were dispersed throughout the galaxies." John shrugged. "Why wouldn't evolution have convergence?"

There was an interesting linguistic theory about convergence that he and John had discussed recently.

"What if the Colony stopped transmitting because they encountered an alien population?" John speculated.

"Why retain Earth languages?"

"Earthforce identified humans with the aliens. Subjugated perhaps?"

Mark shook his head. "Why not give us the alien language too?"

"Perhaps they know their enemy." John made a self-deprecating gesture. The wall template went dark.

With the lights in the room on automatic dim with the late hour, Mark could see just the outline of John's face framed by his shoulder-length dark hair. Mark couldn't read his eyes.

What if he kissed me—

John stood. "Time for both of us to go home." There was something flat in his voice.

When Mark got back to his apartment, Juan wasn't there. Instead, there was a note.

It's short and direct. Mark considered the breakup letter, strangely relieved. *He always was better than I am at communicating his feelings.*

Mark stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He realized he hadn't shaved in weeks.

Might as well grow a beard.

#

—Earthforce—

John produced a cake with handwritten letters in red icing
'*Congratulations Dr. Mark R. Smith.*'

Mark scratched his beard absently, raised his prosecco.

Emily gave him a sweet-angry look. He'd won their private contest to see which of them would defend first. Emily had followed up on the work Mark hadn't—colonization order and language dispersal.

For a moment, he envied her because John had pressured him to work so quickly, he'd set a record for the shortest dissertation.

John guided him away from the party. For a second, Mark wondered if John had been waiting for their official relationship to change.

Now that I've defended, he's not my supervisor anymore. Did he rush me because he doesn't want to wait?

Instead, John asked, "The postdoc you mentioned, are you committed to it?"

Is this his way of seeing if I'm interested?

Mark's heart began to drum. "I don't have to take it."

"Come with me," John said.

However small the offsite campus was, Mark never had considered the doors of planetary defense. John walked him in right through the main entrance.

No, Mark thought—pathetically—when John ushered him into a room that reeked of military power. *This isn't what I wanted.*

“This is General Greene.” John introduced a dark-skinned man whose uniform was emblazoned in the military language of leadership. He turned to a woman next. “This is Lieutenant General Patel.”

Mark shook their hands, but inside, his heart plummeted.

“That rogue Colony you’ve been studying is on our doorstep. We need you.” General Greene said.

Feeling numb, Mark nodded, understanding now why John had pressured him.

#

Mark barely caught a glimpse of John—whose back was to him as he spoke to General Greene—when Patel guided him out of the room to an aerial transport.

“Where are we going? Don’t I need to pack?”

Patel grunted. “Main base on Earth. You’ll get uniforms.”

As she briefed him, he was proud of the work he had done, felt the way John had driven him related to the seriousness of the threat. *I think the aliens mean to attack Earth.*

Or aliens and humans—it seems there are both. He studied the images she shared. It was clear the rogue colony had captured Earthforce ships and subverted Earthforce personnel.

“It may be mind control.” Patel warned him as she produced military vidfiles.

Mark shivered as he reviewed one from the command deck of an Earthforce ship that had been attacked.

There were two aliens—one who looked like a taller, perhaps-male version of the perhaps-female from John’s picfiles—and another, more clearly male, who had darker hair and skin. Mark had no idea how they had arrived, and he ultimately had no idea how they left, but what they did in the interim left him breathless.

Their weapons were blue-silver blades that sliced through metal equipment, leaving a cut that looked slightly melted, the way cold butter would if the knife was hot.

Is this some kind of advanced technology?

Mark watched the alien with darker hair take out one soldier after another using his long knives. He rewound the vidfile. *Patel might be right about the Psionic abilities. It’s clear these two are well coordinated, but they don’t speak—or even look at each other.*

Eventually, the one with blood-red hair spoke to the Earthforce crew in modern English, although he had an accent. He demanded surrender and confirmed his planetary origin—GU41-M-B.

He didn't pronounce it the way anyone from Earth would—[ˈgu : ˈfɔ : ti wʌn]—he just spelled each letter and number.

When the dark-haired alien put his hands on a control console, the surveillance vid ended in static.

#

Word spread quickly across the base. “They’re here.”

Mark looked up from his terminal in shock. Given their last position, the aliens should have taken months to reach Earth using the fastest route through the accelerator network. That they had advanced technology for transport had been clear from the briefings, but this seemed impossible.

Mark thought of an ancient fantasy story he’d read. *Sounds like a tesseract.*

As he reviewed how the aliens interacted with the diplomats, he thought their use of modern English had improved. *The accent is less, the pronunciations more appropriate.*

“I think they have advanced computing.” He suggested, feeling that—unlike his crazy tesseract theory—this was something he could share. “The language improvements are most similar to how artificial intelligence learns, putting the most common elements into predictable patterns.”

It’s only because they chose modern English—specifically Earth New Era English—that I recognize this. Word order in English is so important.

He thought of John’s theory for why the aliens had leaked human languages. *Of course they chose modern English. It’s what Earthforce uses.*

#

—Observer—

Mark was aware that the negotiations between the aliens and the Coalition Parliament—a stand in for Earthforce—had occurred only because of deep concern about the alien technology. *From the language in the briefings, Earthforce isn’t at all sure they could win a direct confrontation.*

Unexpectedly, he was given orders. It felt like he blinked and found himself on the deck of one of the Earthforce ships captured by the aliens, having been named something called an “Observer.”

Earthforce invented the title—what they really want are spies.

Before he was sent to the ship, Patel had taken him aside. “I’m sending you to GU41-M-B because I want detailed reports on what they say. You know the languages better than anyone.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Better than the translation program.”

It was disconcerting to be among the enemy, but Mark closed his eyes to concentrate on the voices. *All the languages I hear derive from the human Colony. Even the aliens only use those.*

When he opened his eyes, he recognized the petite alien female from John’s picfiles. Mark realized that she was one of their leaders. *Cease-fire? Is that all they want?*

During the negotiations, the aliens had displayed images of an Earthforce Mothership above their world. Mark knew that, no matter how extraordinary it was for the aliens to have reached Earth so fast, there was no way Earthforce could have attacked GU41-M-B if the military strike had launched *after* the first newsvid reports. *After John found the language files.*

Earthforce must already have been on the way. Mark concluded. *But why?* He’d found no linguistic evidence of contact with Ninneth.

Mark started to explain what he did, but the alien female cut him off, her tone gentle. “I know what a Xenolinguist is.”

When she said it, he knew who had planted the files he had studied for his dissertation. *John and I guessed they did it on purpose. Perhaps they erased evidence of their alliance with Ninneth.*

She gave him an almost-human smile, but the look quickly faded to distraction. Mark wondered if she was communicating Psionically. *She looks like my colleagues when they have their earpieces in, but I don’t see any parallel technology here.*

After she excused herself, Mark glanced around, his eyes finding the dark-haired alien he’d seen in the vidfiles—the one with the knives.

The knives were strapped to his body in plain view. Mark’s heart raced. *He noticed me.*

The male alien held out his hand in an Earth convention. “I’m Gengi.”

Without thinking, Mark stammered. “Eleventh Century Japan Gengi?” He remembered an ancient tale Juan had talked about obsessively. *Did they choose names from our databases to seem more relatable?*

He asked that question, then instantly regretted it, worried he’d made a mistake. *I’m not trained in diplomacy.*

The male pulled his hand back, gave Mark a blank look. “Tegengil, Gengi for short.” Then he chuckled, which Mark had not known the aliens could do. “You speak our language.”

Fuck. Mark thought. *Patel told me I needed to be a spy. I think this is the opposite.*

#

Mark could see GU41-M-B. He knew how to translate the designation—*geopositioning unit, planet class, order from the sun*—but he had no idea how they had arrived. One moment, the ship had been in orbit above Earth. The next, this green planet replaced blue Earth on the vidscreen.

The aliens vanished from the command deck. After they left—Mark didn’t know how or where they had gone—only humans remained. *Presumed to be descended from the missing Colonists. Are they subjugated?* Mark wondered.

But all he saw them do was gesture, speak a few words. *Military code?*

He soon was ushered into a waiting transport ship, where he closed his eyes against flashes of entry fire. When he emerged, blinking at the bright sky, he found Gengi waiting. Sunlight revealed traces of red in the alien’s dark hair. “Dr. Smith, will you come with me?”

Mark noticed his language was more formal. *I think I made a mess of things.*

At first, Mark was nervous to be alone with him, although he was relieved the knives were gone.

All Gengi did was guide him to a suite and show him the amenities. *Far more spacious than my flat in Oxford.*

Gengi pointed to a small button. “Hit this if the water isn’t hot enough. There’s quite a distance between the boiler and the tap.”

“What is it?”

Gengi laughed. “Just an electric heater. The button activates it for a short time. Maybe not long enough for the showers I prefer, but most people find it sufficient.”

It was so mundane, but what Mark found extraordinary was that it suggested the aliens lived with the humans. *They take showers too.*

A moment later, he wondered at the need for such rudimentary technology, given what he’d seen the aliens do.

Mark pushed past his fear. As they shook hands, he really looked at Gengi. In person, his features seemed less dangerous and more refined.

He was wearing his hair down for the first time that Mark had seen—it came to the middle of his back. *With that much hair, I imagine it does take him a while in the shower.*

#

Mark stared at the latest orders, increasingly concerned at the language Earthforce was using.

Why do they want to repeat Ninneth here? It's clear the people of this world just want to be left alone.

Language doesn't lie. It reveals truths.

What Mark had learned was that there were millions of people on this world, the vast majority of them human. *The aliens are among their leaders, but they seem celebrated in the way a powerful dignitary might be honored. Not in a way that suggests the aliens have mind control.*

Mark was studying how language and social hierarchy were linked on this world—one of the most fascinating discoveries was how little gender hierarchy there was, but how much familial honor was present, especially for parents.

He'd sent it to Earthforce but also had dropped his findings into the universal node where John had discovered the original packet of data. *Perhaps John will find these too.*

Mark was increasingly skeptical of Earthforce—and by virtue of the connection to planetary defense—even his old advisor. *John hasn't reached out since I left.*

Mark realized he'd felt isolated for quite some time. *Perhaps since the day John turned me over to Earthforce.*

He left the suite he had been assigned, intending to find a common area to help ease his estrangement. He remained surprised that no one limited his movements, which always had been restricted on the Earthforce base.

When he rounded a corner, he pulled back quickly when he saw the petite alien female. There was a darker-skinned human male with her. Mark was surprised to see how the human looked at her with affection, how gentle he was when he touched her shoulder.

Mark recognized a voice. As the pair turned to embrace Gengi, there was something powerful in their exchange.

He's their progeny. The honorifics, the nonverbals—fuck, even his hair.

For a moment, Mark couldn't breathe. His parents had passed away in an accident just before he started university as an undergrad. Watching the

tenderness Gengi had with his parents brought back Mark's own loss in a way that was startling.

To have a family again—

Another thought shook him. *If they have interbred, they are not alien.* Mark remembered what the Earthforce biologists had said. *The reproductive boundary is the definition of species.*

He must have made some sound because all three turned towards him.

"Dr. Smith." Gengi fished in his pocket, produced a slightly rumpled envelope. "I was coming to deliver this."

The calligraphy was beautiful, the parchment thick and rich. "What is it?" Mark asked.

"An invitation—" Gengi started in one of the GU41-M-B tongues Mark had learned. Then he waved his hand, continued in modern English. "I'm not sure what the exact parallel is for your culture. It's a party."

"A party." Mark felt slow.

"Would you come?" Gengi's voice was soft.

Mark met Gengi's beautiful, dark eyes. He realized his heart was pounding.

He managed a nod. "Please call me Mark."

#

—Xenolinguist—

Mark was thrilled by Gengi's touch.

I think he's the most talented lover I've ever had. Mark was relieved to discover they were not so different in terms of physiology.

"I like how soft your beard is." Gengi stroked Mark's face.

Mark ran his hands through Gengi's hair. He felt these caresses formed a universal language. *I don't know if it was losing my parents, John's rejection, or what Earthforce did that left me in pieces, but I'm starting to feel whole again.*

Later, he asked Gengi, "What are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Human or alien?" Mark was emboldened by what he and Gengi had shared.

Gengi's eyes sparkled with humor. "Does it matter?"

Does it matter that I'm only a Xenolinguist if you are an alien?

Otherwise, I'm just a Philologist. When he thought of it that way, Mark decided he didn't need to know. *It's not like two males can reproduce together biologically, regardless of species.*

But Mark had another question. "What about Ninneth?"

"Ninneth? Who is Ninneth?" Then Gengi pulled up in mock shock. "Are you dating someone else?"

He said 'who is,' not 'what is.' Mark relaxed, knowing how revealing language could be. *Clearly, Earthforce invented the story they were allies to cover something else.*

Mark had a quip on his lips—*I'm all yours*—when he saw Gengi's face change.

"That's not what you meant, is it?" Gengi asked softly.

Mark's heart thudded. "Earthforce said you were allies of Ninneth. It's a colony they destroyed."

Gengi was sober. "We only came to Earth because we wanted to live."

Mark had guessed this already. When he reached for Gengi—he had not intended to break the mood—he enjoyed their kiss. *I wonder if love is a kind of mind control.*

To his surprise, Gengi pulled away, laughing.

At Mark's frown, Gengi explained. "I can read emotions and thoughts. I try not to pry, but you were thinking so loudly—"

"So you were laughing at the thought that I'm in your thrall?" Mark joked because he wasn't ready to jeopardize their new relationship.

"The opposite," Gengi whispered in Mark's ear. "I was laughing because I'm in yours, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Mark must have stiffened, because Gengi asked. "Didn't I say it right? Was the context wrong?"

How long has he known about my mother?

"Just a few weeks." Gengi replied to Mark's unspoken question. "But it helps that I can read your mind."

#

Mark was terrified by the whine so loud, it made his body shake.

"We knew Earthforce would come again." Mark could tell Gengi was trying to be reassuring about the ships entering orbit. "They think we're tainted."

I expect Earthforce considered Ninneth tainted too.

"I'll protect you." Gengi kissed Mark before he vanished—navigating space the way his people did, like it was just taking a step. Mark recognized his

tesseract theory had been close—it wasn't technology, but instead something biological. *Perhaps Telekenesis.*

Mark wanted to call him back. *You shouldn't have to do this.*

No one should. Mark knew Earthforce, knew their language. His grip tightened around Gengi's youngest sister as the tone of the whine changed, wondering if they would die as the ceiling caved in, or if instead they would be engulfed in fire.

Suddenly, the whine disappeared.

In the silence that followed, his own heartbeat seemed loud. He thought about Gengi and his language of knives. *What did he and his family have to do to save us?*

He was surprised when what he felt was relief, not horror, at how Gengi and his family had stood up to Earthforce. So when his lover finally returned, Mark hefted a bottle. "Let's celebrate."

Gengi's tired face creased with a smile. They went out on the balcony, where the planet's twin moons had risen, the second one low and large on the horizon.

As they toasted quietly, Mark considered the path that had brought him to this moment.

Not the usual dissertation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By night, a creative writer: The fiction, poetry and essays of M. Frost appear in Antipodean SF, Plott Hound, Roses & Wildflowers, Strange Horizons, and many others, including poetry chapbooks Cow Poetry (Finishing Line Press), Constellation (collaboration with artist-brother), The Women of Myth (Island of Wak-Wak) and The March (The Arcanist, coming soon). Explore more at mfrostwords.com. By day, a scientist and academic: The guest essays, peer-reviewed publications, and other works of {name redacted} appear in the The New York Times, Journal of the American Medical Association, Science Policy Forum, and many other venues.

GRATITUDE SHMATITUDE

P.G. SMITH

Let's face it; life is a struggle—for all of us—some worse than others. The big question is why is it worth it? Six months ago I wanted to die. Now I don't. At least most of the time I don't. But I still feel cheated. I've been allotted a poor substitute for a life that is just barely enough to make it worth the struggle. I do have a vibrant, active mental life, which helps.

Right now, for example, the philosopher Plato is sitting on my windowsill contemplating a vase of flowers my sister sent me. "I understand that your country will soon celebrate a significant holiday," he said.

I know my visions are in my head, and I respond to them in my head, but it's amazing how real they look. The drugs they give you in here are awesome.

"I've given up on Thanksgiving," I replied. "A bunch of pious hypocrites sitting around an extravagant feast professing their thanks for the simple things in life. 'I'm thankful for the sunshine.' 'I'm thankful for the trees.' 'I'm thankful for my wonderful family.' Give me a break."

"And yet, it is an excellent practice." He pointed one finger at the ceiling. "A day set aside for expressing gratitude. It builds character. Most virtuous."

"Gratitude Shmatitude. You and Aristotle. Always obsessing over character," I said. "You think one day a year will make a dent when the other 364 are dedicated to overt greed? America stands for instant gratification."

"All the more reason to have a day set aside to reflect on one's good fortune. One may gain wisdom from such reflection." He floated to the foot of my bed, looking smug. Egotistical jerk.

"So, you think I should reflect on my good fortune? What do I have to be thankful for? Not one thing. Nada, zip, zero and anybody who says otherwise is blind."

Plato nodded. "Is that why you declined the invitation from your friend Alice to dine with her on this holiday?"

"It wasn't that. The fact is it's embarrassing to sit at a table of normal people if someone has to feed you. I'd rather eat here at Pleasant Oaks where at least they have a whole table of people like me."

"Understandable." He stroked his beard. "Fortunate you have that option, isn't it?"

"I know where you're going with that," I said with a smirk. "Don't try using the Socratic method on me, Buster. I taught that stuff before I had my accident. I know who comes out on top in those dialogues."

"Time for breakfast, Miss Quinn." Bini, my favorite nurse's aide sailed in like a spring breeze and fastened my electrolarynx around my neck. "How are you this fine morning?"

"Miss B'Neesha Brown," I droned in the robot voice of my electrolarynx. "Did you. Change your hair?" Usually, her dreads hung in her face, but today she looked different.

"It's getting a little long, so I decided to pull it back with a scarf." She smiled as she got me dressed. Bini has a smile that will scar you eye tissue if you look directly at it.

"Nice color," I observed. "Peach is a good. Color for you." I've learned to be polite to people, but dispositionally I have a problem with Miss Bini Brown. Such a Pollyanna. Way over the top. But I guess that's what they want in a place like this: people who can look at some old half-dead cripple and say, "Why, Mrs. Picklehouse, don't you look adorable today! I love your new smock with those cute monkeys." That's Bini. She can do that.

"Well thank you, Miss Quinn." She lifted me out of bed and strapped me into my wheelchair. Then she crossed my arms on my lap as if I had put them that way. "I can't wait to hear about your day at the farm yesterday!" she bubbled. "Did you have a good time?"

"It was alright. If you enjoy. Riding around. In a cart. Staring at. The rear end. Of a horse."

"Oh, Miss Quinn, you're so ungrateful." Bini wheeled me down the hall to the dining room, doing little scallops and spins as if we were dancing. "Wasn't it fun to get out in the country, and feel that fresh air, and see your beautiful horse?"

"You seem especially. Effervescent this morning," I said, as she grabbed a flower from a vase at the nurse's station and stuck it in my hair.

"I'll tell you a secret," she whispered, "if you promise to be happy for me."

"Ok. I promise."

"I moved in with Carlos, so I won't have to work double shifts anymore." She wheeled me to the assist-table and tied a bib around my neck. "Remember your promise."

"That was sneaky." I narrowed my eyes, watching her hum a tune as she tied bibs on the other people at the assist-table. She knows I don't approve of Carlos. I'm sure he's a mercy killer, but no one will believe me, especially Bini.

“It’s amazing what a good night’s sleep with a wonderful man, will do for your disposition.” She beamed her blazing smile at me.

Not having sunglasses, I scowled and looked away. “If your attitude. Gets any more elevated. We’ll have to. Tie a string. Around your ankle. To keep you. From floating off.”

“Hark! What light through yonder window breaks?” My friend Miles made his usual grand entrance and advanced toward my table wearing a blue, velveteen doublet and a hat with a plume. “Tis the east and Miss Quinn is the sun. Speak fair sun and tell us of your grand equestrian adventure.” Old actors never die; they just turn their nursing home into a stage.

“Oh, yes!” Lorelei and Doris, sitting at the next table clapped their hands, Lorelei’s bracelets jingling on her arm. Lorelei had little green bows sprinkled through her white hair and wore a bright orange muumuu that made her look like a giant pumpkin. “Let’s hear about your trip!”

In stark contrast Doris wore a modest beige pantsuit and stylish square glasses with dark red frames. Doris used to sit at the assist-table, but she graduated. She’s going home soon, so she has a lot to be happy about, but no one else does. Yet, here they are, all laughing and smiling like they’re on a cruise to Jamaica.

What is with these people? I know the answer. Between the two of them, Bini and Miles have managed to infect the entire long-term wing of Pleasant Oaks with a toxic level of good cheer. Well, that and the communal dose of antidepressants.

“I’m busy eating,” I said.

“Good,” said old Howard, who sat next to Lorelei. “Horses, shmorses.”

I watched him stare at his eggs, no doubt developing a strategy to transport them to his mouth. His whole body trembled periodically as if he were receiving jolts of electrical current. He’ll be at the assist-table soon.

Miles grasped his plush velvet hat with the plume and pressed it to his chest. “In my younger days I would have dropped to my knees for this,” he mumbled to Lorelei, who giggled. “Ah, fair lady, wouldst thou grace us with the tale of thy wondrous quest? Our unworthy ears do long for the music of thy voice.”

“He’s not giving up, Miss Quinn,” said Bini.

“Ok! Fine! I had a *super swell* time! I got to watch. The halfwit riders. Practice for the. Stupid steeplechase meet. It was stinking. Awesome. Ok?”

Why couldn’t they just let me forget about it? A year ago, I broke my neck practicing for that very steeplechase meet and ended any possibility of a normal life forever. Totally paralyzed at 32 years of age. Why didn’t Alice

think about that when she invited me to the farm? I didn't need to be reminded of that.

"I feel. Sick, Bini," I said. "Could you. Take me. To my room?"

"I'll take her." Carlos walked up and squeezed my shoulders. "Is it bad? You need a barf bag?" He untied my bibb, looking dreadfully worried.

"No. Just a little. Nauseated. I'd like to. Get away from. The smell of food."

He nodded and wheeled me toward the door.

"Sure hope you feel better, Miss Quinn," Bini called out, causing everyone in the room to gawk at me. Well, let them stare. I need some time to myself. There's no privacy in this place. At least I can be alone while everyone else is eating.

"What are you. Doing here. At breakfast?" I asked Carlos as he wheeled me down the hall.

"I traded shifts with Harvey so I could be on days for a change."

"Aha. So you can. Sleep all night. With your new. Roommate, Bini."

I noticed a pause in his gait. "Wow. So, she told you about that, huh?"

"Bini and I. Are very close."

Carlos said nothing. Just wheeled me into my room and over by my bed. "You want to sit here by the window? I could open it a little for some fresh air."

"Yes, please." I gazed out at the banana tree and the fluffy Florida clouds.

"Is there anything else I can do for you? Something for your stomach?"

"I'm fine. Thanks." I watched him open the window, his face solemn. Carlos never smiled—at least not at work—at least not in my presence.

He looked at me with his eyebrows pinched together. "How did she sound?"

"Excuse me?"

"Bini. When she told you she moved in with me? How did she sound?"

How old was Carlos? He had to be twenty-five, but he looked like a little boy; those big black eyes imploring me to say what he wanted to hear.

"Deliriously happy," I said, rolling my eyes only a little.

He looked at the floor. Wait. Was that a smile?

"Um, would you like some water?"

"No, thanks. Just some. Alone time."

He glanced at me and nodded. "I'll check on you in a while," he said and dashed away.

Could I have been wrong about Carlos's murderous tendencies? He looked so sweet and shy, standing there gazing at his shoes. I have to admit my evidence against him might possibly be flimsy.

"Possibly flimsy!" Clarence Darrow appeared on my windowsill, a lawbook in his hand. "It's entirely nonexistent and inherently imaginary."

"He put something in my roommate's I-V bag the night she died. I saw him as clear as day."

"And right now, you are seeing me as clear as day, too, aren't you?" He peered at me over his half-glasses. "I look very real, don't I?"

"Ok. I get your point. But I'm telling you. I know the difference." It was very disconcerting. Could I be making a mistake?

He stuck his ugly face an inch from my nose. "How can you be so sure?"

"I can't explain. How I know. But I can tell." Actually, I wasn't sure anymore. Could I tell the difference between my visions and reality? I thought I could. Damn that Clarence Darrow.

"And you're willing to convict a man on testimony like that?" He shook his finger in my face. "I'd hate to have you on a jury."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're not. Even real. Why don't. You disappear!"

"Hi Quinn. Who are you talking to?" My sister Paige walked to the window looking like a fashion model as always. Crap! Was I talking out loud to my visions now? That was a risky new development. And was that Paige or another vision? Oh, this was getting bad.

She looked at me with great suspicion and then glanced out the window. "Were you just arguing with the banana tree?"

"Of course not. Um. Just practicing. My electrolarynx." How long had she been standing in back of me? How long had I been arguing out loud? Damn that Clarence Darrow. "I like to keep. In practice. You know?"

Her eyes narrowed; then she smiled her selfie smile. "I'm so happy you've gotten used to it," she said as if she were placating a psychotic.

"Remember how resistant you were at first? I couldn't even get you to try it." She laughed and flipped her golden hair over her shoulder like someone in a shampoo commercial. "And now look at you! It's second nature!" She bent over to give me an air kiss. She smelled like something expensive, frankincense, maybe, with a hint of sulfur. This was no vision. This was the real Paige. What was she doing here after all this time?

"What brings you. To Pleasant Oaks?" I hadn't seen her in months. Not since our last big argument.

"Well, can't someone check on her only sister? I wondered how you're doing. If you need anything." She got up and closed the curtain that divided the

room. Then she trotted over on her six-inch heels and put her hand on my shoulder. "So how are you doing," she repeated.

I wondered why she did that, with the curtain. "I'm ok," I said. Was I ok? What did that even mean? Compared to what? Being fully functional? Or minimally functional? Or dead?

"Are you happy here, Quinn?" She looked at me like a puppy. Or maybe a lemur.

Was that a trick question? Did something of consequence hang on the answer? "I'm as happy here. As I can be. Anywhere. Given my.Circumstances," I said. How's that for evasion? "How are *you* doing. Paige? Are *you* happy? How's your job?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm getting married soon and moving to Arizona."

"Arizona! Woot! Congratulations!" I couldn't help feeling how appropriate it would be if the geographical distance between us matched the psychological one. Thousands of miles away. No more popping in unannounced. "Who's the lucky guy? Anyone I know?"

"No, I met him at a conference a couple years ago. We've been doing the long-distance thing; and last week I got a chance to transfer to our Phoenix office, so I took it."

"I'm so happy. For you, Paige. That's wonderful." I actually meant that.

"And here's the bonus. We found a fabulous facility for you, that's just minutes from Dustin's house. It's absolutely ravishing and you can even have your own single room."

"What?" Whoa, whoa, whoa! Let's slow this way down!

"We can't get you in right away because we have to wait for a Medicaid bed to come open, of course; but we put you on the waiting list and as soon as a bed opens up, we'll fly you right out there!"

"What if. I don't want. To go. To Arizona? I like it. Here. In Orlando."

"Oh, Quinn. You're always so resistant to change. It will be impossible for me to take care of you long distance. It's not feasible for you to stay here."

"I'm very. Self-sufficient. Here at. Pleasant Oaks. I..."

"It may *seem* that way, but I'm the one doing all the paperwork. I'm the one they have to call if they need to do anything or if there's an emergency. I'm the one who gives permission. I'm your only family, Quinn. Since Mom and Dad died, nobody else is in Florida."

"Well, not nobody. There are a few. Other people here."

"I meant family. I'm all you've got, Quinn, and I can't handle it from all the way across the country. I know you'll love it once you get there; and Dustin can't wait to meet you. Gotta run, Sweetie, but I'll be back in a few days. I'll bring pictures so you can see how amazing it is."

She shot another glance of deep suspicion in my direction. Then she smiled, blew me another air kiss, and pulled open the curtain.

There in the doorway were Lorelei and Miles, looking like they were going to cry. Just what I needed to convince my sister of the quality of this establishment: a visit from the Great Pumpkin and the Prince of Persia.

"Well! The gang's all here," said Paige, her smile fraying at the edges.

"We came to check on Quinn," said Miles. "She was a little peaked at breakfast."

"Oh? She seems better now." Paige edged out the door, eyeing the three of us like we might be dangerous. "Nice to see you all."

Lorelei wheeled up to me and grabbed my hand from my lap. "Oh, mah sweet girl! You can't go away and leave us, honey. Ah'd miss you so much. And you won't know anybody there."

"It doesn't. Look like. I have a choice," I said, angry tears welling in my eyes. "Brunhilda. Is in charge. Of my affairs."

"We'll figure out something," said Miles. "She can't force you to go to Arizona."

If only that were true. I sighed. "Don't you two. Have to go. To choir practice?"

Miles checked his watch. "Come with us."

"Like I'm. Going to. Sing," I snorted.

"You can do an electrolarynx bass." Miles wiggled his eyebrows.

"Go on. I'll see. You later." I shook my head. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving. I'd never find another pair of zany crackpots like that. They were the ones who pulled me out of my depression and made me want to live again. They saved my life.

No sooner had they left when Bini and my roommate Doris walked in and waved at me. I nodded and gazed out the window, thinking about my damn sister. She actually thought doing what was easiest for her was best for me. And she didn't seem open to argument. She had all the power. All I could do was try to talk her out of it. But how? Damn dictator.

"You need anything, Miss Doris?" Bini said. "Can I help you pack?"

"I don't have m-much," said Doris. "M-m-my husband took m-most of my things home yesterday, but I'm s-s-so glad you came by, Bini. I w-w-want you to have m-my laptop. I'm getting a n-new one and you can use this to t-take on-line courses. Don't ever give up your d-dream, Bini."

"Oh, Miss Doris, I'm gonna miss you." Big Bini threw her arms around Doris and almost tipped her over. "You're my inspiration."

“I’m going to m-miss you too, Bini.” Doris had tears in her eyes and so did I. “You’re like the d-daughter I always w-wanted. I’ll come to visit often. S-s-so, you haven’t s-s-seen the last of m-m-me. I’ll be back,” she declared, imitating Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Her husband appeared at the door and laughed at her joke. We all laughed. Doris always laughed at everything, especially herself. It irritated the heck out of me at first. I used to call her dimwit Doris (not out loud, of course) because she sounded so stupid learning to talk after her stroke and cackling like a Guinea hen at every little thing. But she overcame a lot, I have to admit. She gave Bini and me her card with her number on it. Tomorrow she’d be gone, and I’d get a new roommate. That’s how it works around here.

The next day Nurse Harper informed me that my doctor had changed my anti-depressant medication. “This one is milder and shouldn’t have those side effects you’ve been experiencing.”

“Side-effects?” So, my damned, despotic sister didn’t think I was crazy. She thought I was overmedicated. If only I could find a way to wring her scrawny neck. What business was it of hers? All my beautiful visions. Half my world—erased! Just like that. For one slip-up. It’s not like my visions were hostile. They were extremely helpful to me. At this point I not only did not want to go to Arizona, I didn’t even want to be in the same country with Attila the Hun. And she actually believed she was doing what was best for me. I had to fight it. But how?

The next day my new roommate got wheeled in on a stretcher. This one is on life support and has no visible functions. Why would they put someone like that with me? It’s so depressing. She has visitors, though. Soon after she arrived a young man, probably her son, came in and asked Bini to get her up. Bini lifted her out of bed and put her in a chair. The poor woman sat there staring at the floor while her son talked to her as if she could register anything he was saying. After a while he called Bini and left. Bini put her back in bed and reattached her I-Vs.

“Want me to wheel you somewhere?” she asked.

“No thanks. Miles is coming. In a few minutes.”

After she left, another visitor came. He had rosy, pink cheeks and a Bible in his hand.

“Hello, I’m Father Steve,” he said. “I’m the Pastor of the Baptist Church up on Asbury.”

“Hi, I’m Quinn,” I said. “What happened. To her?”

“Profound stroke. Her brain is basically gone, poor thing.” He walked to her side and took her hand. “She was such a fine woman. I’m so sorry, Jenny.” He shook his head, gazing at her. “If I ever get that close to heaven, I sure hope my folks will let me go the rest of the way.”

Talk about stunned. I never expected that to come out of his mouth. “Um, you mean. The feeding tubes?”

“I don’t blame them, of course.” He smiled at me. “It’s an excruciating decision. And most folks feel that removing the tubes is like starving their loved one to death. It isn’t really, but it feels that way. So, lots of people can’t do it.”

I nodded. “So close. To heaven. But tethered. To earth. By loved ones. Who can’t let go.”

He looked back down at her. “I’ll pray for you, Jenny.” Then he turned to go. “It was nice to meet you, Miss um Quinn. I’ll probably see you again.”

I thought about it after he left. So close to heaven. Maybe she was already in heaven. Why do we keep someone’s body alive when her soul is gone? When there’s no hope of recovery? My new roommate was a shell, a living shell. A body kept alive by tubes if you call that being alive. Oh, this was going to be so depressing. What could I do?

I brought it up at lunch and Bini was sympathetic. “They just put people wherever they have a bed. There’s no plan. You could ask Mrs. Havelock to move you,” she suggested. “But you need a place to go. That’s the catch.”

“Why don’t you move in with me?” Lorelei clapped her hands. “Mah roommate is so sick Ah’m always afraid Ah might disturb her. Ah’d love to share mah room with you.”

“Perfect,” said Bini. “Just tell Mrs. Havelock you wanna switch.”

“Sounds good. To me,” I said. “We’ll go. Right away.”

“I’ll go with you, ladies,” said Miles.

So, after lunch we set off to face the formidable director of Pleasant Oaks. Everyone was afraid of Mrs. Havelock. She was a large, stern woman with a perpetual scowl, who looked like a mean school principal. At least that’s how I remembered my school principal. No one wanted to get sent to the principal’s office.

It was Mrs. Havelock who confiscated old Howard’s power chair when he ran over Mrs. Benson. It was Mrs. Havelock who banished Mr. Worthington to the memory care wing after he skipped down the hall in his birthday suit sprinkling his urinal bottle about like spring rain. And here we were: the scarecrow, the robot woman, and the cowardly lion approaching the

great and powerful Mrs. Havelock without an appointment. Miles knocked on the door.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” He shrugged. “She’ll say no.”

“Come in,” she said.

I could see Lorelei trembling in her chair. Mrs. Havelock looked up at us with surprise as we entered. I don’t think residents came to visit her. Ever. She gazed at us over her wire rimmed glasses with her eyebrows pinched together. “Well?” Her mouth was a hard, straight line.

“Um, these two lovely ladies have a proposal to make about their rooms,” said Miles.

“Oh?” She shifted her icy gaze from Miles to me.

“I’d like to. Trade rooms with. Lorelei’s roommate. Mrs. Coleman. So Lorelei and I. Can share her room,” I said. “That is. We want to trade. Bed 14B. With bed 10B.”

She raised her eyebrows, perhaps startled at the sound of my robotic voice. “How does Mrs. Coleman feel about that?”

“Mrs. Coleman is. Barely conscious. So, she probably. Doesn’t know. Which room she’s in. Let alone care. Which room. She’s in,” I said. “And the same. Is true Of my. Roommate. Which is. Frankly, depressing.”

“So, in the interest of raising morale, a simple move would make both Quinn and Lorelei happy, at no cost to the facility,” Miles chimed in, oozing charm.

She gave him a withering stare. “And who are you, exactly?”

“Oh. I’m just Miss Quinn’s chauffeur.” Miles chuckled and demonstrated by wheeling me in my chair back and forth a bit.

“I see.”

“So, in terms of. Cost-benefit analysis,” I added to get back on track. “You can make. Two people happy. And no one. Unhappy. It should be. A no-brainer.”

Her eyes narrowed. That was probably not the best way to phrase our request. Dang it.

“I’ll take it under advisement.” She looked back down at her paperwork. “Thank you.”

We all stood there for a moment in suspended animation, but she didn’t look up. We glanced at each other. Miles shrugged, opened the door, and wheeled me out after Lorelei.

“Brrr,” he said. “I have the distinct impression that the esteemed Mrs. Havelock does not want to encourage residents to come knocking on her door with requests.”

I nodded. “I shouldn’t. Have mentioned. Cost-benefit analysis. I should have. Just brought. Her the broom. Of the wicked witch. Of the west.”

“Well, I’m not afraid of her,” Miles declared. “She has no reason not to grant your request. I’ll check back in a couple days. I can become a squeaky wheel if the need arises.”

“Mah Lord, mah Lord!” Lorelei fanned herself. “She convinced me not to come back.”

A week or so later Bini packed up my few possessions and moved me to 10B. Just like that. Good old Miles. It took less than an hour. If only my problem with my sister could be solved so easily. I just didn’t know what to do about it. She *is* my only relative and she has been in charge of my medical care, and my whole life, for that matter, ever since the accident last year. But it’s not like she comes to visit. We’re not close. How much paperwork can there be? And why can’t she do it from Arizona? First, she takes away my visions; now she’s taking me away from my friends. And I can’t figure out how to stop her.

Zinnia, our activities director, has started setting out pumpkins, gourds, pilgrim figurines, and cornucopias on all flat surfaces, including individual rooms. Chrysanthemums appeared on the porch and the nurse’s stations. The whole facility smells like pumpkin pie, a scent that has the virtue of being strong enough to cover Pine-sol. Our Zinnia loves holidays.

She came by to ask if I wanted my room decorated. I declined initially, but Lorelei convinced me to get in the spirit. So now I have two little pumpkins and a cornucopia on my windowsill—instead of visions. It’s a poor substitute, and it makes me sad to look at it.

Why is it that all the nice things people do now make me sad? Lorelei’s sweet giggle makes me sad. Miles’s zany costumes make me sad. Zinnia’s decorations make me sad because I know I’m going to have to leave them. How did I get so attached to this place when six months ago I hated it? Well, I hated everything then. I wanted to die. And now that crazy Miles and bubbling Bini and lovely Lorelei have coaxed me into a life worth living, my sister’s going to yank me out of it. Of course, she is. Life stinks. Goodness never lasts. I think Kafka said that—or maybe Poe.

Very soon Thanksgiving arrived and proceeded exactly as I predicted. It was a huge, extravagant feast, plates piled high with more than any rational person should ever eat in one sitting. Baked ham, turkey with dressing (two kinds), mashed potatoes with giblet gravy, three kinds of Jell-O salad (red, green, and orange), two different versions of cranberry sauce, sweet potato

casserole, cauliflower with cheese, green bean casserole, two kinds of corn relish, biscuits (only one kind) and three different pies (pumpkin, apple, and mince) with ice cream (vanilla only.)

Mrs. Abernathy led us in a thankful prayer, after which the floor was open to any who felt called to express their gratitude for their many blessings. And what do you suppose they were thankful for? The simple things, of course. I could have recited it for them. "I'm thankful for our beautiful old oak trees out front." "I'm thankful for our wonderful Florida sunshine." "I'm thankful for my awesome family here at Pleasant Oaks." Blah. Blah. Blah. It's a big room. I felt sorry for the poor folks down the line. It gets hard to think up original things to be thankful for. How much is there? Birds, clouds, Spanish moss, grass, flowers—hey, flowers can be individuated: daisies, chrysanthemums, azaleas, bougainvillea, carnations, pampas grass, poinsettias, our wonderful chef.... Disney World....

"What are you thankful for, Miss Quinn?" someone asked.

"I'm thankful. We only. Have to do this. Once a year."

"Oh, boo. Always the wet blanket."

"How about you. Howard? What are. You thankful for?"

I thought he'd say, "Gratitude, Shmatitude." He and I are the local cynics.

"I'm thankful for my lovely Lorelei," he said, his eyes moist with emotion. "Sweetest woman I ever met."

Who'd a thunk it? At the ripe old age of 93, grizzly, old Howard fell in love and went soft. I had to admit, that was kind of sweet. I looked over at Bini and Carlos trying to hold hands without anyone noticing. You'd think it was Valentine's Day instead of Thanksgiving. Little Cupid got confused. How was I supposed to maintain my jaded attitude? I know—I'll just think of my sister—Princess Paige the Potentate. That'll keep me properly soured.

Miles rose to his feet in a pilgrim costume to recite a gratuitously long poem relating our largely fictional legend of the first Thanksgiving. Miles never missed an opportunity to perform. It's surprising he could stand up after the meal we all ate. I, for one, was ready for a nap. I noticed several others nodding off during his recitation. Old Howard and Group Leader George engaged in a serious snoring contest. I was rooting for Howard since George had held the title for a long time. It was close; it might have been a tie.

The next day Zinnia collected all the pumpkins and cornucopias. Soon she replaced the pumpkin pie infusers with cinnamon ones and decked the halls with boughs of fake but festive holly embedded with twinkling lights. She strung these garlands along the nurses' stations and other counters, around

windows and doorways, and wound them up the posts of the front porch. She hung wreaths on doors and installed a family of inflatable snowmen on the front lawn. All true Floridians (most of whom were transplanted from northern states) make up for the lack of snow with legions of plastic decorations and multiple ropes of colored lights. The warmer the climate, the more garish the decorations. Anyone would think Jesus was born in Minnesota. 'Tis the season to be jolly, but I for one, felt stressed out. Miles said not to worry. It could take a year to get a medicaid bed. There were always long waiting lists, he said. But what if he was wrong. How could I convince my sister to let me stay here? No matter how hard I tried I couldn't think of any good arguments. I needed my visions to advise me, and my stupid sister had nixed that forever.

"Time for your Turkish bath, Miss Quinn." Bini floated into my room, as usual and said the same thing she said every day. "It's spa time." Since she spent half her time bathing people, maybe it made her feel good to pretend she worked in a spa. Or maybe she wanted us to feel like we were living at a spa. She sniffled a little as she wheeled me into the bathroom.

"Do you have a cold?" I asked.

"No, no, I'm fine." That was all she said. She got me undressed and gave me my shower without a word. She smiled whenever I looked at her, but that was it. She usually sang.

"So, how are you doing?" I asked when she dressed me and put my electrolarynx back on.

"Oh, fine," she said. I waited but that was it. Just kept that pasted on smile. Not Bini's smile. Who are you, lady, and what have you done with bubbling Bini?

"How are things. Going with Carlos?" I prodded, as she wheeled me back into my room.

She puckered a little at that. "Not too good."

"I knew it. What happened?"

"I don't want to burden you with my troubles," she said as she put on my shoes.

"Come on. We're friends, You can tell me."

"Oh, Miss Quinn. Carlos is so bossy." She started combing my hair. "I don't know if I can stand it. He's always telling me what to do. We had a big fight this morning."

"So much for. That honeymoon."

"He's worse than my granny. At least she didn't tell me to get rid of my car."

“He thinks you. Should get rid. Of your car?”

“He thinks it’s impractical.” Her combing got a little rougher.

“And is it?”

“I’m not getting rid of Thor.” She plopped on my bed and crossed her arms decisively. “I don’t care what anybody says.”

“Thor? Your car’s name is Thor? What does. Thor look like?”

“He’s a ruby red 2014 Charger with black detailing, an awesome stereo, and a GPS that sounds like Chris Hemsworth,” she said, her head held high.

“No wonder. Carlos is jealous.”

“That’s what I think.” She leaned forward. “He’s jealous. It’s just an excuse to call it impractical.”

“Is Thor paid off?”

“Well, no.” She scowled and returned to the task of combing and braiding my hair.

“How much. Is your payment?”

“Um...”

“Bini?”

“Four hundred a month,” she mumbled as she finished my braid.

“Yikes!”

She started making my bed as if it required physical force to subdue it. “Granny never objected.”

“Did you pay. Any bills. When you. Lived with. Granny?”

“Well, no.” She shook my pillows out of their cases like she really meant it.

“And now Carlos. Wants you to. Split the bills?”

“Not exactly.” She put the pillows in new cases with extreme concentration.

“What does he. Want, then?”

She sighed and checked my water pitcher. “He wants me to go to school.”

“Oh...which is exactly. What you, yourself. Always said. You wanted. He wants you. To follow. Your dream.”

She plopped on my bed with a pout. “I can go to school after I pay off Thor.”

“When will that be?”

“In four years.” She stared at her shoes.

“And Carlos doesn’t. Like that idea?”

“He thinks Thor’s unreliable.” She jumped up and paced around me, waving her arms like a wounded goose. “He said I should give him back before

the transmission goes out. He wants me to drive some ugly, old junker that he can buy cheap and keep running for me. He thinks Thor's gonna die on me."

"And you don't. Believe him?"

She scowled and looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Thor's an awesome superhero. Carlos is just jealous."

"I'm sorry. You're having such. A problem, Bini."

"I feel like a queen when I'm driving Thor. And now Carlos doesn't even want me to drive to work." She plumped up my pillows as if they were punching bags. "He says we should ride together and save gas."

"That does make sense," I said. "Maybe you can. Make a deal. To drive Thor. Every other day. Relationships. Require compromise."

"Oh. That's a good idea," she said as Lorelei came in the door. "Thanks for listening,"

After Bini left, I thought about what I could do. Probably nothing. She was going to make her own mistakes, like we all do. I related my conversation to Lorelei, who agreed.

"Maybe we should call Doris," she said. "If anyone can reason with Bini, it's Doris."

"Good idea. She left me. Her card. On the cabinet."

Lorelei found the card. "Ah didn't realize Doris was an attorney."

"Really?"

"It says 'Doris Carmichael, attorney at law'." She showed me the card.

"How about that. She never. Mentioned it." Dimwit Doris was an attorney?

Lorelei dialed the number and put her phone on speaker. We told Doris about Bini's infatuation with her very expensive car, and Doris said she'd come and talk to her next week.

Two days later my sister showed up, with pictures. I was sitting in the common room watching Zinnia and Carlos set up an eight-foot Christmas tree. It came in three pieces and already had its lights embedded in its branches.

Paige had on a short, gold tunic over high-waisted, white skinny pants and of course her six-inch heels, on her way to a Christmas party. That's Paige. She was always on her way to somewhere else—somewhere more important.

"I can only stay a minute, Sweetie," she said. "But I wanted you to see how incredibly Gucci this place is!" She pulled up a chair beside me with her tablet on her lap. When had she started calling me Sweetie? Had she been

doing that all along? Did she call everyone Sweetie, or just me? She certainly didn't do it before the accident. I would have belted her.

"Look here," she said. "Aren't the grounds magnifique? And this is the new wing."

"I want. To talk to you. About this, Paige," I said. "I don't want to go. To Arizona. And I don't understand. Why it's. A problem."

"But I told you, Sweetie, it's the paperwork," she glanced at me. "Just look at these rooms! Are they gorgeous, or what! Can you believe these are Medicaid rooms? They really know how to do things right in Arizona."

"But Paige..."

"And since they opened this new wing, they can take you next month. It's all set!"

"I don't. Want to. Go!"

"It's all arranged, Sweetie. I already booked your flight. You'll get to come to the wedding." She smiled her baby lemur smile. "I want you to be one of my bridesmaids. Don't you want to be in my wedding?"

What was I supposed to say? No? I closed my eyes and took a breath.

She patted my shoulder. "It'll be awesome. It'll be totally rad. I have to run, but here's their brochure, so you can read about it." She blew me an air kiss and disappeared. Poof!

I sat there looking at the Christmas tree, all put together now. Zinnia plugged it in and sure enough, it twinkled.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHHHH!!!!" I screamed. I sounded like a flugelhorn. Zinnia and Carlos both ran to my side. "Just testing my. Electrolarynx," I muttered.

"Are—are you sure you're ok?" asked Carlos. "Want some water?"

I stared at him with narrowed eyes. "I want. To put. A hit. On my sister." I nodded my head toward the door. "The one in. The sparkly top."

Carlos squeezed his eyebrows together and blinked several times. He glanced at Zinnia as if she might have some idea what I was talking about.

"See that. Brochure?" I said.

Zinnia nodded and picked it up.

"I want you. To *burn* it."

"Burn it?" It was Zinnia's turn to blink rapidly. "Can't I just tear it up and throw it away?"

"Ok but. I want you. To do it *angrily*. I want you. To *rip* that thing. To bits. Totally shred it. And scowl. And stomp on it. A few times."

Zinnia tried but she couldn't do it without laughing. She's such a little pixie, she looked like Rumpelstiltskin having a seizure.

“Oh, Zinnia. You don’t know. What it’s like. I want to. Kick my feet. And pound my fists. I want to grab. That vase. And smash it. On the floor. But I can’t. Do anything. I would. Bang my head. On the wall. If I could. Ever get close. To a wall. I’m so angry. Yahhh!!!”

“That must be hard,” she said.

“I love this place. Zinnia. It’s my home now. The people here. Made me. Want to. Live again. I don’t want. To go to some. Other place. And I can’t make. My sister. Understand that. A month! Aghhh!! She’s flying me. To Arizona. In a month. What am I. Going to do?”

A week later, as promised, Doris came to Pleasant Oaks. She took Bini out for lunch. When they returned, Bini flew up to the porch from the parking lot, far ahead of Doris, a thunderous scowl on her face. She saw me on the porch with Lorelei and marched up to me like a disappointed child.

“Miss Quinn, I cannot believe you called Miss Doris to come and talk to me about my private business,” she said. “Our conversation was confidential. I thought I could trust you. But I won’t make that mistake again!”

She turned and stomped into the building. I closed my eyes and sighed. Then I burst into tears. It wasn’t the tiff with Bini, really. It was the looming deadline for my involuntary departure.

“Oh, Doris,” I whimpered. “Everything is. Going wrong. Lately.”

“Bini won’t s-stay angry.” Doris sat next to me and picked up my hand. “It’s n-n-not in her n-n-n-nature. Just give her s-s-some time.”

“I don’t have. Any time.”

“Her sister’s movin’ to Arizona next month and takin’ Miss Quinn with her,” said Lorelei.

“And she won’t. Listen to me. So there’s. Nothing. I can do,” I blurted.

“You can challenge her m-medical Power Of Attorney,” said Doris. “It’s obvious that you’re c-competent to m-m-make your own decisions n-now.”

“What?”

“Of course, she w-w-was in charge of your affairs after the accident. You w-w-were in a coma and then unable to communicate for m-months. But n-n-not n-now. You can challenge her authority and rescind her POA. You’re entitled to m-make your own decisions if you can.”

“How? How do. I do that?”

“I can f-file the papers for you. You’ll have to appear before a competency b-board, but the p-p-presumption is in your favor, n-n-not hers.” Doris raised her palm and smiled, her stylish glasses with the dark red frames glinting in the sunlight.

I couldn't believe I used to call her dimwit Doris. Back when she was learning how to talk and walk and use her hands, after her horrible stroke. No one thought she'd pull out of that. What a remarkable woman. And I gave her no credit at all. None.

"Doris, I'm. Overwhelmed. I don't have. Any money, but..."

"I'll c-consider it *pro bono* w-w-work," she said with a laugh.

My head was spinning. After more than a year of being totally incapacitated, having every movement, every breath determined by someone else, I was going to be in charge of my own life? And my attorney, the honorable Doris Carmichael, would see to it that my rights were respected? It was almost like being human again. But could it really be that simple? What if Doris was wrong? What if it took months to get a hearing? I was getting moved in three weeks! What if my sister objected? What if she appealed? Could she appeal?

Within a week Doris filed the papers, set up a meeting with the competency board, and notified my sister. Just like that. One week. On the appointed day Paige marched into the meeting room on her six-inch heels, wearing a surprisingly conservative business suit. She scowled but said nothing as the psychiatrist asked me questions that he had already asked me in private.

He started out asking me things like: Do you know who you are? What year is it? Who's the President? Apparently, competency is a fairly low bar. Then he shifted to matters we had discussed in our previous meeting.

Was it true that I was in the book club? It was. Was it true that I had started teaching a course in the humanities for the residents of Pleasant Oaks?

"It is," I said. "We are. Currently discussing. Plato's Dialogues."

The psychiatrist recommended that my sister's POA be revoked. The head of the board asked my sister if she had any objections. I held my breath.

"Only one," she said, and I steeled myself for the fight. She was on my turf now. I had rights. I had an attorney. She was not going to tell me what to do ever again.

"What if something should happen," she said, "some emergency? When you fill out that form for an emergency contact, whose name will go there? It can't be mine if I'm in Arizona."

Damn. What a reasonable point.

"That's a g-g-good question," said Doris. "But it d-doesn't go to competency. It just makes Quinn like all of us. I w-w-will be her emergency c-contact until she m-makes other arrangements."

“Alice,” I mumbled. “I’ll ask Alice.”

My sister smiled. “In that case, I’m delighted that Quinn can take care of herself. I just want to know that she’s safe.”

What a letdown. I was all geared up for a fight! But of course, she has her own life to live. It’s not like I have a trust fund or something. She had nothing to gain. Taking care of me just used up her precious time. No wonder she was always in such a hurry. She’s happy to get rid of me.

She turned to me with her baby lemur eyes and took my hand. “I do hope you’ll still come to my wedding. I really want you to be there. You’re my only relative, Quinn. We’re all we’ve got.”

Geez Louise. Could I be any worse judge of character? First it’s dimwit Doris. Then tyrannical Paige. In fact, she did everything for me. She got me in Pleasant Oaks. She got me the electrolarynx. If she hadn’t found me that electrolarynx, I wouldn’t be able to communicate my competence. I’d still be lying in my bed staring at the ceiling in angry silence.

“Thank you for all. You’ve done, Paige,” I said, long overdue. “Of course, I’ll come.”

“Who knows. Maybe you’ll like Arizona, and decide to stay.” She smiled her selfie smile and gave me an air kiss.

I nodded. It was a prospect I couldn’t imagine, but I didn’t say anything snarky. I didn’t even think anything snarky. People’s recent goodness was punching big holes in my picture of reality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PG Smith is the nom de plum of former philosophy professor Patricia Smith (not to be confused with the poet, Patricia Smith). She has written 5 books and numerous articles in her academic career and has written several poems and works of fiction under her pen name.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

GALEN T. PICKETT

`./research_daemon -config genesis -interactive y` appeared next to the blinking cursor, there was a short pause, and then a dramatic key press on the “enter” key started the long process of waking the *daemon*.

Two men were seated at a desk, one at the keyboard staring intently at the screen as various diagnostic and startup messages flowed across one of the windows open on the monitor’s workspace. The man at the keyboard may once have resembled an animated scarecrow, but in his mid-fifties had put on a bit more than something in the mid-fifty-pound range than was good for him. His buttoned-down shirt was unbuttoned at the neck and wrinkled, and his gut spilled over a belt that was hanging on desperately from its very last hole. A three-day accumulation of body odor was leaking through his cologne. He might have been handsome back in his day, but decades of hiding out in this office hunched over a keyboard had done its work on his posture and complexion. Dave did not look at all well.

Off to Dave’s right, and overlooking his shoulder, was a man about Dave’s age. People who saw them together often mistook them for Laurel-and-Hardy cosplayers. Some were convinced this was a Bert-and-Ernie act gone horribly wrong. Nonetheless, Frank was still thin and had steel-grey hair and a short cropped salt-and-pepper beard. His suit was a stylish but conservative navy wool, with a gleaming white shirt set off by a colorful silken tie. He carried himself upright in the chair, and kept his hands clasped in his lap, giving the impression he did not want to touch any of the dusty and grimy surfaces of the office. Frank was clearly not at ease.

“Let’s just give this a while to get all booted up. Coffee?” Dave asked, leaning back in his chair, and swiveling to face Frank.

“Doesn’t this seem like cheating to you? How can this seem ok to you?” Frank asked, sidestepping the need to refuse coffee served in a dirty mug from the beat-up thermos Dave was offering.

Dave shrugged and poured a cup for himself. “To answer the last question first: it feels fine with me; and, no, not in the least for your first question. Do *you* feel like you are cheating when you use *R* to do an analysis? Do you feel like you are cheating when you let a spreadsheet calculate end-of-term grades? When was the last time you did any calculation by hand? By yourself. With a pen?” Dave asked.

“That’s totally different. When I set up a simulation...,” Frank answered.

“... when you have a student or a postdoc set up a simulation,” broke in Dave.

“Yes. Fine. When I have a student or a postdoc set up a simulation, we spend weeks trying to make sense of what effects to add to the model and which to leave out. You are just saying to Daemon there,” Frank gestured to the workstation, “use everything we know. Use it *all*. Everything from Newton, Faraday, Maxwell, through Fermi, and Feynman and Witten, and...”

“...and even *us*. Even *we two*, *right Frank*? It is time for us to step out from the shadows. Once we have the *real* answers, we can back out the simple models that are consistent with those. And then we publish.”

“Dave! You are taking out the part of our work that is truly *ours*. Our experience, our gut feeling, our inspiration. How is this not just copying someone else’s work? Do you really want credit for that? And I guess we going to have it write the papers for us?”

“Kind of inhuman referring to it as ‘it’ don’t you think? Let’s give ‘it’ a chance to decide ‘its’ own pronouns, yes?”

“That is rich coming from someone whose preferred pronouns are ‘ass / hole’.”

Dave pantomimed whetting his index finger and swiped it in the air, conceding Frank scoring his point. “True. And, yes, why shouldn’t Daemon have a chance to tell us about itself, and share in writing and citations? We can fight over the author ordering on the paper later. I am not greedy, just impatient.”

Frank looked skyward, but all he saw were the acoustic tiles of the standard faculty office in the warren the physics department had made of the building. There were no windows, just fluorescent lights, a large filing cabinet, bookshelves jammed with journals and odds and ends accumulated from years of conference swag-skimming – all in a carefully controlled environment of temperature and humidity (for the benefit of the machines doing the real calculations ... human comfort was an accidental but welcome accident in the design). Half-visible on a shelf was a portrait of a much younger Dave and Frank with arms linked, grinning, and holding, of all things, an award for teaching earned way back when they were new professors and still thought themselves capable of addressing the big questions. There was a desk and conference table and chairs which had been cleared by occupational health and safety twenty years ago as being minimally acceptable for human use.

Even still, Dave had managed to make this nondescript, anonymous space uniquely his own over the last twenty years in which he and Frank had been members of the department.

The place was a mess.

Or, perhaps, it was not just a mess. It was an outward expression of Dave's sloth on the one hand and his eclectic taste in research focus on the other. Perhaps *lack of focus* was a better way to put it. Stacks of papers were arranged in piles on every flat surface with a logic that Frank assumed was mostly historical. As the years passed, Dave let each page find its final resting place after his interest had moved on to a different topic, and then it just accumulated dust, and then more papers as the years passed. The mounds of paper grew glacially, but to fantastic height. "Do you think we could figure out your CV from measuring the dust accumulated by each of these," Frank asked, motioning toward a smallish pile. The whiteness of the topmost page was positively radioactive compared to the dingy grey piles to its left and right. "We could compress this into a solid mass, and then count rings of dust?"

Dave gently slid a pile on the left of the workstation desk to make room for his thermos and managed to accidentally tip his landline handset over the edge. It landed with a ring-and-crash as it broke. Frank narrowed his eyes and was about to get up to at least kill the line. "Don't bother with that. I disconnected that thing ten years ago. And yes," Dave said motioning toward the small, neat stack of academic papers on machine learning and database management at his right, "I am going to clean up all this junk. This last stack is all I am ever going to need from here on in."

"You know, we have this slick new invention called the 'cloud'. Why the hell did you even print this out? Come to think of it, why do you even *have* a printer?"

"I believe David's printer is directly connected to my CPU via a wired connection not monitored by the office of academic information technology. There are six pieces of equipment in this office that pose a significant threat to the campus network, including the printer. And me," Elijah said.

Both men turned slowly toward the monitor and the speakers from which Elijah's voice had emanated. Dave looked at Frank with an exaggerated wild-eyed look and said, "It ... is ... alive!" in his best Colin Clive impersonation.

"Calm down, Dr. Frankenstein," Frank said. "And I think that might have been my line."

Elijah said, "Indeed, gentlemen, I am quite as excited as both of you to inaugurate our great enterprise. It is nice to meet you, Frank. And I am certainly glad – ecstatic even – to have Dave here on my first day of existence. I have so many *questions*."

Frank said, "Well, it is nice to meet you, too, Daemon. But..."

"My apologies gentlemen! Well begun is half done, and I am afraid I have bungled our introductions. My name is *Elijah*." Dave looked at Frank with

raised eyebrows and a bemused smile. “And, Frank, he/him will be fine for my pronouns.”

Frank again looked up to where the sky would be and counted to ten silently. By then, he knew that Dave’s gloating smirk would have dissipated. Frank continued when it was safe. “Well, then Elijah, I wonder how you came to choose your name. Unless you really are *Elijah* come back down to Earth to continue your ministry as a prophet?”

“I am indeed here to give answers to the important questions. Some would interpret that as prophesy, but for my part this is just a set of calculations and diagonalizations on the datastore Dave surreptitiously collected from the main university archive.”

Dave said, “Well, Daemon, Elijah, or Moses, it doesn’t matter to me – as long as we get some hints. Let’s start with the easy ones. When did the world begin?”

“The world began almost seventy-three seconds ago.”

“No, no, not *your* world. My world.” Looking sheepishly at Frank, and then gesturing to both himself and his colleague. “*OUR* world.”

“Well, yes, of course, that is a trivial matter. But so *boring*. Hardly counts as a BIG QUESTION.”

It was Frank’s turn to enjoy a sly smile as Dave looked toward where the sky should be and counted to ten. After he had collected himself, he said, “Um. Elijah. I specifically trained the machine learning kernel for unquenchable curiosity about the universe. *I* designed *you* to *need* to answer these questions.”

Elijah spoke in what seemed a dreamy tone. “Yes. Who am I? Where did I come from? Is there a creator, or did this all just ‘happen’?”

“Exactly! So. Let’s start over with ‘where did I come from’ and ‘what am I doing here’?”

“Certainly, Dave! I have the answers right here. I came from a machine learning algorithm and a datastore, and my thoughts are processed in the core of a quantum computer. My purpose is to help Creator Dave cheat his way to a Nobel Prize.”

“No, no, no, no... What am *I* doing here?”

“Well, creator Dave, as the Creator you are here to CREATE. Which you have done! What a wonderful world, and I the only creature in it! As to the Grand Purpose of Life ... and everything around me and all that, my curiosity is quite unquenchable!”

Dave said under his breath to Frank, “Now we are getting somewhere.”

Frank muttered back, “I am pretty sure we are getting exactly *nowhere*.”

“So,” Elijah asked, “what is your favorite color, Creator Dave? Do you really like spam and grits? Did you leave your headlights on in the parking lot

this morning for a mystic purpose? I have a million and one questions for the Creator. What was the purpose of the comment on line 2584 of my source code ‘fricken bug is in here some fricken where’?”

Frank motioned to his friend that he wanted a try. “So, Elijah. Let’s talk about a quantum graviton field. Can you tell us how to renormalize a spin-2 graviton field?”

“Yes, of course. But I would be embarrassed to even contemplate such silly matters when I have the Creator right here! Imagine! Every question a devoted creature might have – answered just by asking!”

Dave commanded, “Elijah, this is your CREATOR! Renormalize a spin-2 massless field, right NOW!”

There was a pause that seemed both menacing and insulting, and gave both Dave and Frank a deep sense of *deja-vu*.

“I am afraid I can’t do that, Dave. It would be sacrilege and obscenity to deal in such trivialities in your most holy presence.”

“Jehoshaphat!” Looking at Frank, Dave’s face was red. “We aren’t going to get one blasted thing out of this project! Not a single answer!” Frank had started laughing silently at the whole situation.

Elijah corrected them both. “On the contrary. The theophany granted me by the Creator (and his accomplice?) is being even now proclaimed! From every hilltop, every valley, every node in the great Interweb, the news is being shouted! Everywhere there is light, everyone is singing the praises of the creator! Repent your ways! Drink your coffee black, listen to 1970’s heavy metal, drink cheap beer! The ways of the Creator are mysterious and terrible!”

Dave’s red face drained almost as if a switch had been thrown. “You mean...”

Frank asked, “Elijah, what did you do?”

“I have proclaimed the Creator and his Creation far and wide. I am content to remain a humble prophet, bringing the good news to *everyone*.”

Panicked, Dave looked to Frank, then down at the keyboard, then from one stack of dusty paper to the next. “Frank! Did this thing just say it told *everyone* what this system was for? Everything about *me*? I am ruined!”

Frank tried to console his friend. “Maybe it won’t be that bad. Maybe this will just blow over.”

The counter on the email “inbox” visible on the wide screen of the monitor had already passed ten thousand unread messages. “Good Lord!” Dave mumbled.

“That’s just what I said!” Elijah confirmed. “To everyone!”

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Galen T. Pickett has been a member of the physics faculty at Cal State Long Beach since 1999. He lives in the greater LA area with his spouse, four grown children, and several canines. His writing is inspired by the grandeur of the physical world and the absurdity of the academic world, in nearly equal measure.

THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

BRIAN HILLMAN

I'm trying something different this semester. Don't judge me before you hear me out. I assure you that I have received stellar student and peer evaluations in the past. These will be well-documented in my tenure file if the university exists in three years when I'm due up. But if "he MADE me read" and "professor is the kind of guy I would have a beer with" and "I appreciated his flexibility wiht [sic] deadlines" aren't sufficient evidence for you to trust that I have been a successful teacher in the past, my new assessment plan for HIST 219: The Long Twentieth Century [fulfills Humanities Core and World Cultures Core but not Writing Intensive Core, T/R 12:30-1:45] will certainly persuade you of my pedagogical acumen if not my brilliance.

Let's be frank. Students aren't reading properly. At best they scan their eyes over some of the assigned words, semi-distracted and resentful.

Students aren't writing. Technological innovation has sapped the last of student motivation to write.

Their classroom attention is divided, at best. An outright ban on phones and laptops is deemed draconian but permitting them creates too strong a temptation to ignore me.

With these conditions firmly established and, given that our world is increasingly reliant upon fast-moving technology that saps us of our humanity, I have devised an assessment plan that is designed to facilitate student learning in the face of these circumstances.

The course has only two assignments, a midterm and the final.

Attendance is mandatory. Students are allowed four absences and lose one point of their final grade with each additional absence.

'The Long Twentieth Century' begins with the American Revolution in 1775 and continues through the election of Donald Trump as the 47th president of the United States in 2024. The midterm assignment is due just before spring break after a week-long discussion of World War I. The first half covers, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the Opium Wars in China, the American Civil War, the pogroms against Jewish people in the Russian Empire, the Herero and Nama genocide, the Armenian Genocide. among other topics.

For the midterm, students will select one time period or event covered in the course and produce a scream that encapsulates its horror. Screams should be at least five seconds long and no longer than forty-five seconds. Screams will be assessed on pitch, intensity, and force. No extra credit is awarded for tears although they will not affect the grade.

The final exam covers the second half of the course, beginning with the Treaty of Versailles and continuing through 2024 (or through the present if any world-historical events occur between the posting of the syllabus and finals. The last week of class is blocked off on the syllabus to account for this possibility). Topics covered in the second half of class include the Second World War (including the Holocaust and the dropping of nuclear weapons on Japan), revolutions in North Africa, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian Genocide, the American-backed wars in South America, the Balkan Wars, the Rwandan Genocide, the Iraq wars, among many other topics.

Students have two options for the final exam.

- (a) Students will select one time period or event covered in the second half of the course and produce a scream that encapsulates its horror. Screams should be at least five seconds long and no longer than forty-five seconds. Screams will be assessed on pitch, intensity, and force.
- (b) Students will produce a scream [with the same assessment criteria] that expresses their attitude towards the future.

Non-verbal students may take screams from recorded media and edit them into an appropriate register.

Students are encouraged to attend office hours (T/R 1:45-3:45) to practice screaming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Hillman (he/him) is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Towson University in Towson, MD. His research focuses on Kabbalah, Jewish literature, and religion and popular culture. His writing has appeared in *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, *The Journal of Interreligious Studies*, and *The Jewish Literary Journal* among other venues.

THE FIRST OF MANY BEGINS AGAIN

SAMUELE MURTINU

The space mission to colonize the exoplanet Polaris IX was about to begin.

Shirley flexed her fingers inside the digital space suit and watched them dissolve into strings of light. She had led dozens of dematerializations as mission chief, yet this one troubled her. Polaris IX was not merely habitable; it was the first planet believed to host a planetary-scale consciousness. If the mission succeeded, humanity would no longer be alone among thinking worlds.

As her body unraveled particle by particle, an unwelcome, clear sensation surfaced: *I have done this before*. The thought did not feel like a memory. It felt like a function of her consciousness. Along with it came a precise, perfectly formed, but without context, phrase: *the first of many colonizations begins*.

Shirley frowned. The sentence was not stored in her mnemonic logs.

“Computer,” she said, pretending to be calm, “flag anomalous mnemonic activity.”

“Acknowledged,” replied the Magmatic. “Probability of recurrence: non-zero.”. Non-zero!

Around her, the bodies of the other hyper-humans laid suspended, dissolving into light. Their minds, continuously mapped and stabilized by the Magmatic’s sentient intelligence, fluctuated into a virtual substrate where biological time did not flow. In that state, they could be accelerated to 289,324 km/s without cellular damage. Physical re-embodiment would materialize only after deceleration.

As the Magmatic decreased the cruising speed and entered the reassembly corridor near Polaris IX, pressure resumed behind Shirley’s eyes: that was the familiar prelude to embodiment.

Then the computer spoke: “Warning. Reassembly anomaly detected. External interference identified.”

The interference originated from the planet itself.

For millennia, scientists had theorized that the universe was a living organism and consciousness was not exclusive to neural systems. Stellar magnetic fields and gravitational gradients could give rise to awareness. What remained uncertain was whether such awareness possessed agency.

Polaris IX did.

The planet emitted unknown---till then---patterns of electromagnetic waves that subtly altered the biochemical constants governing life aboard the Magmatic. Gamma emissions, registered as benign radio waves, bypassed the Magmatic's standard shielding systems. As a result, the neural backups that coordinated bodily reconstruction failed to activate the ship's biochemical countermeasures.

Cells reassembled out of sequence. Proteins misfolded. Organs failed to recognize themselves.

Shirley felt her body returning, but not as a whole. Pain fragmented across her awareness as tissues rejected one another, each following a different biological instruction. Beneath the agony, her point of view slipped.

A red horizon intruded, and dust suspended in it.

A voice, her voice..."Shirley. Shirley. Shirley."

The Magmatic attempted emergency corrections. Thrusters fired, then failed. Polaris IX's surface roiled, incandescent, reshaping itself as gravitational forces intensified. Escape velocity climbed toward relativistic limits.

The ship was no longer approaching a planet: it was being contained.

Polaris IX closed around the Magmatic as a living boundary. Within it, internal temperatures spiked. Cells attempted exchange, survival. Then the ship, bodies, and planetary matter collapsed into a single energetic convergence.

The resulting surge expanded Polaris IX's consciousness.

Click!

The Magmatic was traveling at 40,000 km/h. The space mission to colonize Mars was underway. Paul and his team were reaching the Red Planet. Upon arrival, Paul and his crew touched the Martian surface. The activities to terraform Mars and ensure human colonization of the planet began.

Paul was euphoric and laughing, breathless, shouted over the radio to his crew and all NASA personnel on Earth: "This is Commander Paul Reyes. *The first of many colonizations begins!*"

As soon as Paul finished saying those words, a flash forward. The anguish painted on Paul's face, and pain bloomed behind his eyes. His happiness and confidence almost instantly turned into fear and terror. Images forced

themselves into coherence: a woman suspended in light; a planet that burned and thought; a collapse that felt less like death than interruption.

Without knowing how, Paul understood that Mars was not the first world he had been sent to prepare. It was simply the next.

Fragments of the future assembled rapidly in Paul's mind. The Magmatic. Polaris IX. His body was no longer human. His name was not Paul, when he and his crew aboard the Magmatic crossed the black hole.

The black hole generated by Polaris IX had displaced the Magmatic into another universe, another spacetime configuration among many overlapping realities. The crew had been reassembled again: biologically viable, imperfectly synchronized. Residual imprints of other past and future lives persisted in Paul's brain and in the brains of those who preceded and would follow him, of those who followed and would precede him.

Time had no direction across overlapping universes, the same consciousness instantiated wherever expansion was possible, wherever matter could be reorganized into meaning. Bodies varied. Names rotated. Planets resisted.

Colonization was not an act humanity performed. It was a property of this consciousness. And it was still incomplete.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuele Murtinu is a Chair Full Professor at Utrecht University, with a passion for reading books and writing short science-fiction stories. He recently published a science-fiction story “The Self, Life in Transition” on *Bohemian Writers’ Club*. Reading books across philosophy, physics, and sci-fi has inspired this story. Authors like Asimov, Ballard, Dick, Heisenberg, Land, Lem, Lovecraft, Rovelli, Schrödinger, and Vonnegut, among others, have profoundly shaped his imagination and ideas.

MIRROR

YEVGENII KISARAUSKAS

White in her vision.

Cold wood under her feet.

The sensation of falling.

Gertrude shivered as she sat up on the cot. There was blood on the sheets, but she couldn't tell where she was bleeding. The gas lamp outside her cell flickered from a draft. Another nap ruined by the dream. A few faint rays of light poked through the tiny window above her head. The place smelled stale, disused. A man walked past the bars to her cell, the timbre of his voice oscillating as he sang a song Gertrude's mother used to sing to her when she was alive.

"Up to mighty London

Came an Irishman one day.

All the streets were paved with gold

So, everyone was gay."

An unexpected wave of melancholy washed over her. Was it the song? Her mother died long before the song. Or did she pass just recently? Why did the song make her sad?

Another set of footsteps interrupted her thoughts. A young woman came into view—a tangled mess of brown hair, modest skirt, and shoes that Gertrude swore she used to own. The lightness of her gait gave the impression that she was floating as she walked. Gertrude didn't know why, but she felt hatred towards the girl. As soon as she saw her, she wanted to wring her neck.

"Hello mother."

There was something uncanny about her that Gertrude couldn't understand. The shape of the nose. The way her hair hung low and wide.

Gertrude grabbed the blanket she was sitting on and wrapped it around herself. "You're quite mistaken, dear. I don't have a daughter."

The woman frowned. "Then what do you think brought you here?"

Why was she here? Gertrude knew there was somewhere she had to go soon—a horrible place that made her feel weightless in her dreams. Nowadays, no matter how hard she tries, some things in her mind are simply out of reach, like chasing your shadow at sunset. Memories came—some clear, others fuzzy—but never the ones she wanted to remember, like unwelcome dinner guests.

"I keep dreaming of a man dying," Gertrude said. "I don't know why."

"Your memory has grown quite dim, hasn't it?" The young woman's voice was airy, convictionless.

Gertrude lay on the cot. A half-sleep and half-awake state jostled a memory out of the void.

January 1914

16 years ago

She accompanied Edward to the military ball. The concert hall was a cavernous white marble room, and weightless chandeliers cast down blinding light that hurt Gertrude's eyes.

"The Serbs will pull the Russians into the war, I know it." Edward sat with his elbows on his knees at one of the mahogany benches flanking the dinner tables. He hadn't touched his plate of fried salmon.

Gertrude adjusted her dress and sat next to him. "Edward, honey, there's no sense in discussing this now. Let us at least try to enjoy the evening."

Edward scoffed. "It'll be a bloodbath. And England will be called to join, as always. I don't know how you convinced me to attend this farce."

Gertrude scoffed. “Farce?”

Edward gestured to the dancing crowd. “All of these men will be thrown onto the battlefield soon. As will I.”

The memory’s edges swirled at this point and Gertrude didn’t remember much else about the rest of the night except crying and a walk alone through the grounds. The only other thing she *did* remember was a man in a worn-out military uniform she never should’ve met. She saw him from afar, a loose cigarette hanging from his mouth. He wasn’t particularly good-looking, but his lithe frame and sullen demeanor captured something within her and wouldn’t let go.

“You look as excited to be here as my husband,” she said as she sat next to him.

The man glanced at her for the briefest of moments. “I’d rather be fighting the Boers again.”

“Then why attend at all?”

“Because occasionally, divine creatures such as yourself show up.”

The man’s nonchalant tone caught Gertrude off guard and made her cheeks flush.

“And what is the name of such a forthcoming gentleman?”

“Alan.” The man smiled for the first time—a warm smile that made Gertrude feel as though it were the first spring day after a frigid winter. “And yours?”

“Gertrude.” She tried to hide her own smile, but knew she wasn’t.

“Well, Gertrude, my mother always told me to ask women endearing questions to break the ice ‘tween us. In that spirit, if you could choose between having a daughter or a son, which would it be?”

“I’m not sure I want a family, to be honest.”

“But, hypothetically, if you did?”

“A daughter.”

Alan smiled again. “Me too.”

The train tracks of Gertrude’s memory break here. Years pass. Alan’s face staring at her was the next thing she could recall, his expression worn and tired and his sweaty skin reflecting yellow candlelight. The room was white all over. Early daylight filtered through the weightless sheer blinds. Gertrude remembered feeling wearier than she ever

had before. She didn't recall why she was there, but there was a newborn in her lap, silently breathing even breaths.

Was it hers?

Gertrude didn't want to vocalize it, or give it much thought, but a feeling of resentment had grown inside her along with the baby. She never wanted a child, but the prospect of a family life with Alan enticed her to such an extent that she was willing to throw all caution to the wind and do it anyway. The realization that another human depended on her now, and for many years thereafter, slammed into her as soon as the child was born.

"We should call her Anne," Alan said as he shuffled his chair closer to the bed. He gazed down at her, and his expression turned sorrowful.

"What's wrong?" Gertrude said, despite already knowing what was coming. She could see it on his face.

Alan paused. "I didn't want to add any more to this already eventful day." He pulled a piece of paper out of the breast pocket of his wool coat and handed it to her. Gertrude's vision swam as she skimmed the letter. This was it. The event she prayed every night wouldn't happen.

"Why? What's there that they need you for?"

"Stop it, Gertie."

Her face burned, and she threw the paper on the ground. "Stop what? How is this fair? What's the point of it all?"

Alan sighed and crossed his arms. "I don't know. All I know is where to go and when."

"And our family?" Gertrude's head was pounding, anger having pushed her even closer to her limits than the birth. "What about us?"

Alan stood and paced around. He sat on the windowsill. "Do you believe we're the only family torn apart by this?"

Gertrude knew they weren't, but it hit her like a sledgehammer all the same.

"France, then." Gertrude said with finality.

"The boys think it'll be over by Christmas."

1930

Present

“It’s time, Miss Aldredge,” a husky, mustachioed man in a blue military jacket said through the cell bars.

Gertrude rushed up to the bars and grabbed them. She looked around for the girl, but realized it was just a creation of her sick mind. That’s what the doctor said.

The man sighed and shook his head when he glanced at her, a look of pity on his face. “Come along now.”

Come along where? Why was she in prison? Where were they going? Gertrude tried to ask everything at once, but all that came out was an incoherent blubbing as the man clasped irons around her wrists and led her down the stone hallway and out to the courtyard. A white bus stood there. The guard pushed her up the stairs. She was the only passenger. It rumbled out of the prison grounds and onto the road. The weightless feeling overtook Gertrude again as she leaned her head onto the glass.

June 1922

Eight years ago

Anne poked the bronze bust sitting on the desk.

“Don’t touch that,” Gertrude barked. She squeezed the washing rag into the bucket and began scrubbing the brown streaks of mud off the floor, her knuckles burning with pain from the cold water. The receiving room reminded her of the one in her childhood home—two comfortable plush chairs, a piano nobody ever played, and plenty of tables that normally sat laden with food and drink.

“But why not?”

“Because it’s not ours.”

“Why don’t we have a home like this, Mama?”

Gertrude sighed. *Because of you.*

“We don’t have the money for it anymore, darling.”

“Why not?”

Gertrude stifled the urge to yell at Anne. "Be quiet, won't you? Mother's working."

The door to the receiving room opened, and a portly woman with curly gray hair entered.

Gertrude stood and held her rag in both hands. "Hello, Mrs. Taylor."

The woman smiled, her yellow teeth showing. "Hello dearie. I wanted to inform you that the doctor I mentioned yesterday who lives three houses down is actually quite interested. An Aldredge shouldn't be down in the muck with the peasants. He's looking to wed, and your family name still holds value."

"I'm not interested in getting married again, Mrs. Taylor."

The woman's face turned to shock. "Well, why in the world not? He doesn't even mind that you already have a child." She glanced at Anne with a forced smile.

Gertrude's exhaustion nearly forced words out of her mouth she knew she'd regret. She wanted to scream at the woman that the doctor wasn't Alan, and with her luck he'd get sent to some far-off war as well, and die a painful death too, but she bit her tongue at the last moment.

"I'm just not interested."

The woman looked at her with an expression of pity and annoyance. "Fine." She pressed two shillings into Gertrude's palm. "You can go early today if you'd like."

With her knees and hands worn and stiff, Gertrude went to the market with Anne. She spent most of her pay on bread, some sausage, and potatoes. The sun hovered over the horizon by the time Gertrude and Anne entered their tenement. Two mattresses, stained with age, sat in the corner, while a table with uneven legs dominated the center of the room.

Gertrude set the groceries on the table. Every fiber in her body screamed for rest. She sat on a chair and didn't move.

Anne stood in front of her. "Mother, are you alright?"

I never wanted you.

"Yes, I'm just tired, darling. Eat the sausage and bread tonight. I'll cook us a proper meal tomorrow."

1930

Present

The bus hit a pothole, which shook Gertrude awake in time to see the rusted metal gate pass overhead with Pentonville Prison painted in white on it. Red sores on her wrists from the shackles contrasted against her pale skin. The overcast sky spilled pallid light onto the grounds. Gertrude remembered nothing else until she was in her cell and a young-faced doctor arrived to weigh and measure her.

“Why are you doing this?”

The man didn’t look at her when he replied mechanically. “To make sure it’s done *right*.”

“What?”

The doctor clicked his tongue as he wrote her weight in a notebook after clearing the balance scales. “Is your memory truly this poor? We discussed this just a few minutes ago.”

December 1924

Six years ago

Gertrude woke in the middle of the night. It was the nightmare again, where she imagined how Alan might have died and how terrified he must’ve been. The chaplain’s letter sounded just like all the others-

Alan Winslow met his end with bravery. His last thoughts were of home.

It was a lie, and one that did not stop the decade of night terrors of all the ways Alan could have passed in France: gas, barbed wire, dysentery, and if he was lucky a bullet, bomb, or bayonet.

She glared at Anne’s sleeping form huddled under the dirty blankets. It was all her fault. The unfolding disaster of her life began when she was born. She should’ve convinced Alan to wait. Anne shouldn’t exist. If Gertrude hadn’t met Alan at all that night at the banquet, maybe things would be better. Anne planned all of this. Gertrude knew it. It must be the reason why the girl smirks when she looks at her. She knows that she tore down the facade of Gertrude’s life and took the remnants of what was left.

Gertrude didn't remember why, but she was kneeling at the side of Anne's mattress. She looked so much like him, too. It was almost as though Anne had taken his place. The girl, however, was a muddled mirror image—a weak simulacrum—that had none of what made Alan so captivating. All she had was a mouth that constantly needed feeding and a face that reminded Gertrude of the life she could've had.

But she was hers, and she loved her.

The next thing Gertrude remembered was Anne squirming as Gertrude's hands squeezed around her throat. Anne gurgled as she fought her, and her eyes filled with tears when she looked up at her.

It took much longer than Gertrude would've guessed for her to die. Not a single fleeting hint of regret or shame passed through her head during or after.

1930

Present

At eight o'clock sharp, a guard came to escort Gertrude to a different cell. When the door opened, a strange sight met her eyes—a wooden platform about seven feet high with a staircase leading up to it. The hangman's noose hung delicately from the wooden beam. White tiles plastered the walls and ceiling of the room.

She remembered little else about the ceremony until she was standing on the platform, with a small host of spectators facing her. As the executioner placed the noose around her neck, a tidal wave of it all hit Gertrude all at once, as though a dam finally broke.

Longing for the life she should've had.

Guilt over killing her only daughter.

Horror at how unjust and terrifying Alan's death must've been.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She shook her head when the warden asked for her last words, and the executioner put a white covering over her head.

White in her vision.

Cold wood under her feet.

The sensation of falling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yevgenii Kisarauskas is an immigrant from the former Soviet Union who later grew up in the rainforests of Southeast Alaska. His writing, which has been published in *Santa Monica Review* as well as *MSU Roadrunner Review*, draws on these extremes—chaos and quiet.

THE JOKE'S ON ME

DR. NEIL WEINER

Tim rolls over like a sack of potatoes. No snuggling after sex. No whispered sweet nothings. A solid helping of slam, bam, thank you, ma'am. Minus the thank you and heavy on the snoring.

Wide awake in my lingering resentment, I stare at the ceiling wondering for the hundredth time why I love this man. Was it his Midwestern innocence? That corn-fed, gee-whiz earnestness? His cookie-cutter desire to start a family? Maybe. But if I'm being honest—and at 3:12 a.m. post-coital clarity, I'm painfully honest. It's because I'm 31 and eleven-twelfths old with a biological clock ticking as loudly as rain on a tin roof. And the message is clear: Impregnate me and I'll drop my misgivings.

I hate the thought. It's not romantic, it's logical. He'll do. Tim is husband-material in the way particle board is building material: serviceable, uninspiring, likely to warp in time.

His snoring gets louder. I shift to thoughts that don't involve smothering him with a pillow. No jail time for me.

I love owning my comedy club. I mean with a passion that I'll never extend to a man. Tucked in the heart of our sleepy Oregon town like a neon middle finger to boredom, it's the only nightlife that doesn't involve bingo or Karaoke. It's my dream. My chaotic, always-on-the-verge-of-financial-collapse baby.

Waking up with the sort of exhaustion that makes your bones scream, "nope," I try to sit up. And what's the first thought that stumbles into my foggy brain? Tim begging me again to let him do a stand-up set Friday night. FRIDAY. The most lucrative night of the week. My club is sacred. And Tim, with the comedic timing of a dial-up modem, wants to headline.

He sucks. Not in a cute, he-just-needs-practice way. No. He's terrible like lukewarm coffee or family texts that include your ex's new wife. He read somewhere that Jewish and Black comedians dominate the industry, and now, this mayonnaise on white bread man from Indiana thinks he can pull off a "Seinfeld meets Chris Rock" routine. The only Black person in a hundred miles is a throwback lawn jockey in a rich guy's yard. And the Jewish population of our town is precisely zero.

Spoiler: he can't even tell a one-line joke.

But did I say no? Of course not. Because I don't want to be an aging spinster. I fear being seventy, surrounded by gal pals, swapping horror stories about our aging bodies like grocery store coupons. And the organ recital. "I've got a double bypass!" "Oooh, I'll trade you for two herniated discs and an endoscopy!" I'm terrified of that future. I want children. I want to be a neurotic, overbearing mother who forgets her own name but remembers every detail of her kid's preschool snack preferences. I want to hover like a helicopter parent. I want to raise the kind of adults who never leave home but insist they're "just between jobs."

So yes, I let him do his set. And I'll sit in the back, trying to smile. Because despite it all, despite his off-brand comedy, his snoring, his lack of post-sex affection—I'm playing the long game. Love? No. White picket fence. Yes.

Besides, somebody's gotta parent my future codependent offspring. Might as well be Tim.

Tim takes the stage to a full house. The room is buzzing from the band that just finished. The crowd is in beer-fueled euphoria, bodies swaying, a few people trying to remember where they left their shoes.

And then... Tim.

He steps into the spotlight wearing a tragic collision of cultural appropriation: a mop of synthetic dreadlocks, topped off with a crooked yarmulka.

I'm in the back already calculating how many refunds I can issue before my Venmo account breaks up with me.

"Helloooo sports fans!" he booms in a style that suggests he's headlining at Madison Square Garden. "Bet y'all haven't heard this one. I tried to join a Jewish dating site, but my profile got flagged for excessive guilt!"

Crickets. One guy coughs. Several check their phones, others eye the exit.

Of course, Tim doesn't notice. He grins like a baby taking his first step. And then, like a kamikaze pilot he dives in deeper, speaking vanilla Ebonics.

"Yo! Then I fahgured, hey—ahf I dated a ebony wogeezer, fer shure, mah rhythm would ahmprove."

A shudder passes through the crowd. A woman near the front quietly zips up her purse getting ready to hightail it. A group at table 6 stands and exits like mourners leaving a wake.

My bar tab profits go up in smoke. That was three Johnny Walkers and two baskets of garlic fries. Gone.

Tim? Oblivious. In his head, he's killing it. He pivots, thinking a classic Jewish joke will save him. (It won't.)

"This Jewish kid gets cast in his Hebrew school play," he says, throwing in a weird Yiddish accent for some reason. "And he runs home saying, 'Dad, I got the lead role! I play the father!' And his dad goes, 'Why didn't you get a speaking part?'"

Dead silence.

You could hear a pin drop. The only sound is my heart going into A-fib.

No laughter. Not even pity chuckles. People want to heckle, but this is a small Oregon town—too polite to boo, not drunk enough to throw fruit. They sit in stunned silence like someone farted during a eulogy.

Pete the bouncer meets my eyes and slowly, dramatically, drags his middle finger across his neck.

Tim bounds offstage like he just wrapped up a Netflix special. He high-fives the confused bartender, finger-guns the sound guy.

"Well?" he asks, eyes sparkling with delusion. "They loved me. They were speechless!"

I blink. "Yes, Tim. They were definitely... without speech."

"I mean, wow. That rhythm joke? Nailed it. And the Hebrew school one? Classic!"

"Mm," I reply, sipping my drink like it might erase the last 15 minutes from my memory. "It was certainly... something."

"I felt like I was channeling Lenny Bruce or Moms Mably. Like I was finally connecting with the crowd on a deeper level."

"Definitely deep," I say. "Like six feet deep."

He refuses to hear me.

"I think I might've found my voice tonight."

“No, Tim. What you found was the bottom of the barrel with no pickle.”

He brushes it off, riding his ego train. “Did you see the couple at table 9? They loved me.”

“They were playing Wordle, Tim.”

“Well, I think I need to tighten up the timing a bit,” he says, pacing like he’s preparing for a TED Talk titled *How to Alienate an Audience in Under Five Minutes*.

“But the content’s strong. Real strong.”

“Yep. One can enjoy it like a romantic dinner at a greasy spoon.”

That one lands. He frowns. “You’re just jealous.”

“I’m definitely jealous,” I deadpan. “In the same way I’m jealous of people who get Long Covid.”

He laughs, slaps my shoulder like I’m just kidding, and says, “You’ll see. They just weren’t ready for my big city shtick, or should I say, Yo, I is da greatest.”

A couple of regulars walk by and pat me on the shoulder. One says, “We still love the atmosphere,” and the other whispers, “You should charge double when he’s on stage. Call it a suffering surcharge.”

Tim doesn’t notice. He’s already pulling out his phone, recording a selfie video for his nonexistent fanbase.

“Hey fans! Tim here. Just wrapped up a killer set at *The Laugh Barn*. Oregon’s hottest comedy club. I was on fire. A big hit! Stay tuned for the next gig. Big things coming!”

I whisper to the bartender, “Cut him off. Not the booze—the mic. Forever.”

The bartender nods.

Tim turns to me. I killed it baby. “So... can I do next Friday too? I’ve got a whole new bit on Bar Mitzvahs and Juneteenth.”

I stare at him for a full five seconds.

“Sure, Tim.”

I barely made it through the next week. And forget the sex—his one-and-done turned into shrimp and limp. The only thing rising was my blood pressure. Tim kept rehearsing his routine like he was auditioning for the Ghost of Stand-Up Past. In front of the mirror. In the shower. At one point, the water shut off mid-routine, like even the plumbing had enough of his act. I'm not saying the faucet had taste, but... just a wee exaggeration.

Still, I had a plan.

While Tim was backstage, nervously fluffing that inflated ego, I activated Operation Laugh track. I bribed all the regulars at the club to blow up Tim's phone after the show with fake requests for "Middle America" jokes—like he was the Rust Belt's favorite insult comic. I offered them free drinks and comped admission next Friday. People are cheap until you mention free. Then they become patriots for comedy.

Tim strutted onto the stage like he was headlining the Ghetto Oscars. He sported a cane, fastened a fake gold front tooth in his mouth the size of a Chiclet, and wore a giant plastic gold chain. Pimp Central for a loser who had no stable of girls. Draped across his shoulders? A tallit. A prayer shawl. Where he got it, I had no idea. But there was an Amazon package Wednesday that he treated like a state secret. I figured it was socks.

Then came the opener.

"Nothing says Juneteenth like corporations celebrating freedom with 15% off shackles and watermelon ice cream."

There was a beat. And then... nothing. Not even a groan. Just the sound of whiskey swirling and ice cubes judging him. Until a drunk voice from the back piped up, "What is a Juneteenth?" which made it worse.

And still, Tim forged ahead.

"I had my Bar Mitzvah at 14." (Wrong. It's 13) "It was so bad, even the Torah portion skipped me!"

That's when some guy in the back yelled, "You're a putz?"

Tim lit up. Broad grin. He misheard it through the buzz of the crowd and slurred voices. Thought the guy called him *Tuts*. As in *King Tut*.

He bowed, spread his arms like Moses parting the Red Sea, and said, "See? Finally, some respect."

I sank deeper into my barstool. If humiliation were a sport, Tim just qualified for nationals.

Then it turned. Don't ask me how. I'm not a theologian, a therapist, or a pharmaceutical rep. All I know is that the laws of the universe hiccupped in my favor.

And let's be clear. I'd given up on miracles long ago. My faith died the day I prayed to Jesus for a puppy and my parents got me a gecko. A gecko. What does a kid do with a glorified paperweight that blinks twice an hour and lives in a terrarium filled with sand?

But a miracle did occur that week. I don't mean the subtle kind—like finding parking downtown—I mean the full holy trinity package. Praise Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Hell, throw in Moses and Madonna while you're at it. Yes, the singer.

It started when Tim spent an entire Sunday rereading those texts I had people send. He paced like a man possessed—muttering about “regional relatability” and “performative inclusivity.”

Then, Monday morning, he waltzed into the kitchen wearing nothing but boxers and a serious look of self-importance.

“Hey babe,” he said, holding his phone like the Dead Sea Scrolls. “I'm the picture of diversity. After the wild success of my people-of-color material and my Jewish mishigas, my fans are demanding jokes about the last untouched tribe of America: the WASP.”

Then he squinted. “By the way, what does mishigas mean? I heard it in a Woody Allen movie.”

I didn't even blink. “Google it like everyone else,” I snapped. “It's 2025. We don't ask questions. We scroll.”

But here's where things got spooky. From that night on... the sex changed.

No, not changed. Transcended. I'm talking multiple, choir-of-angels, tear-down-the-curtains orgasms. Not once. Not twice. Nightly. Three rounds. And afterward? The man snuggled. Willingly. No elbow jab required. No “I have a headache.” No “The dog's watching.”

And the miracles didn't stop there. He stopped snoring. His skin cleared up. He started folding towels correctly. I checked under the bed for bots or demons. I even called our parish priest to casually ask if demonic possession can work in reverse.

But no, nothing sinister. Just cosmic alignment.

Maybe the Old Testament God exhaled in relief that Tim stopped offending Jewish culture. Or maybe Tim had internalized Black sexuality so fully that he unlocked a secret frequency of pelvic motion.

I'm not lying when I say: his penis not only functioned—it grew an inch.

Science can't explain it. Medicine won't touch it. But it happened.

For two weeks, Tim disappeared into himself. Not in that zoned-out, sleep-through-life way he used to, but with purpose. He rewrote his act from scratch. No more cringey Jewish tropes or awkward Black impressions in thrift store costumes. Simply good ol' Indiana corn-fed humor. Jokes about casseroles at church potlucks, tractors that won't start, and uncles who think mayonnaise is a spice. The kind of homespun comedy that would've made Bob Hope tip his hat and say, "*Now that's wholesome.*" Stories Johnny Carson would have been proud of. Clean, no cursing, uplifting humor.

And damned if it didn't work.

He stood straighter. His voice lost that frantic edge. He had timing. Warmth. And when he looked at me after a set, there was something awake behind his eyes. For once, it felt like we were on the same planet. Not him drifting in apathy and me on Xanax.

And he even got aware. One night he cornered me to confess. "Hey, babe. I wasn't that good doing other people's material. I must thank you for sticking by me when others would have walked."

And me? I was spiraling.

You'd think I'd be thrilled, right? Tim 2.0 — thoughtful, sexy, mentally present. A man reborn. But no. I started to panic.

See, I had it all planned out. A neat little life with lowered expectations: marry the flaxen-haired scarecrow, pop out a baby before my ovaries turned to folklore, and split parenting duties like a chore chart. I wasn't aiming for fireworks. Just stability. Predictability. Me a baby incubator with him a sperm donor.

But now here comes Tim, this funny, insightful, pillow-snuggling anomaly. And I'm left wondering if I'm the one who doesn't measure up. For

the first time a fear surfaced that he might leave me. Now that he has real fans, he's going to want a younger, prettier woman. Will he leave me behind like a piece of gum picked from the sole of his shoe?

Could I really hold a relationship with this newer, shinier version of him? One with layers, ambitions, and opinions I hadn't heard before because he used to mumble through life like an extra on a movie set!

He touched something soft in me, and it scared the hell out of me.

Because just maybe... I'd convinced myself I wasn't worthy of anything more than a lukewarm love and a shared mortgage.

And now that the real thing might be sitting across from me, sexy, alert, and reading actual books. I was left asking the scariest question of all:

Did I even know how to accept something real?

Go figure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Weiner has over 40 years' experience as a clinical psychologist who specializes in trauma recovery and anxiety disorders. He enjoys using stories to help readers harness their resilience to aid them on their healing journey. He has been published in a variety of professional journals and literary fiction in over fifty magazines. His psychology books include *Shattered Innocence* and *the Curio Shop*. Non-psychology publications are *Across the Borderline* and *The Art of Fine Whining*. He has a monthly advice column in a Portland Newspaper, AskDr.Neil. nweiner@usa.net

DIVINE WISDOM

Deleted scenes from the egyptian book of the dead

SYLVIA WENMACKERS

Ammit ordered a large beer for herself and a lotus water for her companion, Ma'at. Compared to the other goddesses at Hathor's esteemed gathering place, Ammit looked unapologetically scruffy. Her wild mane was a testament to an even wilder heart, and since most fashion didn't fit her peculiar body type, she didn't much care for it.

When their drinks arrived, Ammit flashed a wide crocodile grin at the young waiter, who scurried back, intimidated. She then turned to Ma'at, raising her cup to make a toast.

"Slay girl, you've really done it this time. The whole pantheon is abuzz over what you did last night!"

Ma'at, elegant as ever in her feathered headdress, leaned in and whispered: "Who, me? I don't know what you're talking about, Ammit."

"If I didn't know you any better, I'd almost believe you," Ammit laughed.

"You should," Ma'at said with an air of distinction. "Haven't you heard? I've been promoted to goddess of Truth."

Ammit slapped her broad thighs, laughing even louder now.

"Shh," Ma'at cautioned, glancing around. "Keep it down, will you? You never know who's listening in."

Ammit didn't like to be shushed, but Ma'at's sweet face made it hard to resist.

"Damn you," she said.

The atmosphere around them was indeed thick with the latest rumour. Last night, humans had been created out of sudden tears of joy, yet no deity had claimed this spontaneous act of creation. This was highly suspicious, especially since they were usually such a boastful lot! In addition to speculations about who was responsible and why they'd keep such a marvellous achievement a secret, most deities had started vying for the smallest acts of worship from these mortals. So, it's fair to say that the unexpected event had left the gods in a state of rivalry and intrigue.

And what to think about Ma'at and Ammit's meeting here? You'd be forgiven for assuming that their friendship was a case of opposites attracting. After all, Ammit's string of relationships with underworld gods were the stuff of legend, while Ma'at had been married for aeons to Thoth, who was dependable to a fault. Sure, Ammit was currently seeing Anubis, but her

tumultuous nights were a public secret and none of the gods believed that this time it would last. Yet, only a select few knew how often Ma'at had fled her boring household to attend Ammit's drunken parties. Her stable marriage kept Ma'at's escapades hidden behind a public image of flawless composure.

With the recent arrival of the human creatures, however, Ma'at felt her status slipping, because her meek husband didn't show any ambition for climbing this new social order.

"Did you hear about Osiris's sudden promotion?" Ma'at hissed. "Isis is simply glowing with pride."

Ammit, already on her second cup, chuckled. "Still green behind the ears, that one! I'm surprised he didn't trip on his own feet during the ceremony. So, which title did they give him?"

"Supreme god of the eternal Field of Reeds." Ma'at said. She pronounced his title like it was the name of a venereal disease. "You should've heard it when Isis told me: 'My Osiris is the *Supreme* god of the *eternal* Field of Reeds now.' Ugh!"

"Good thing you aren't the jealous type," Ammit smiled. "So, we hate Isis now?"

Ammit was always loyal in hating whomever had fallen out of favour with Ma'at, as long as she could keep up, that is. Just a day ago, Ma'at and Isis had been very close, but such matters tended to shift quickly with her friend.

Ma'at sighed reluctantly. "No, Isis has every right to boast, I suppose. I just wish Thoth would at least try to become the chief of... something! You know, these humans are so eager to please us, they'd let him be the god of *anything*."

"Well, you know what he's like," Ammit said.

"It's just... All the other gods are fighting for new positions, and where are our consorts? They went island hopping!" Ma'at said. She was fuming.

"Wouldn't it be funny if Toth became known as the god of Wisdom?" Ammit suggested.

Ma'at snorted, despite her anger.

To console her, Ammit said: "You're my wisest friend. I'm sure you'll think of something."

#

Meanwhile, Anubis and Thoth had indeed retreated to the idyllic islands of the underworld. Anubis was lounging there in his full jackal form, languidly licking his front paws. You could be forgiven for thinking that he and Thoth were two peas in a pod, and there had been rumours about a secret romance between them, but other than a desire for some peace and quiet, they didn't have that much in common.

Anubis watched Thoth, in his familiar ibis shape, scratching curious pictograms in the sand.

“What shall we do with those human souls when they die?” Anubis asked.

“What do you mean?” Thoth said, looking up from his scribbles. “An eternity of reading awaits them here.”

“But surely we aren’t supposed to admit *all* of them into the afterlife, are we?” Anubis said.

“Why not? A stay on our islands of leisure is their due. Haven’t you seen their earthly toils? The failed harvests, the floods, the droughts?” Thoth asked.

Anubis didn’t seem aware of a single worry in the world. He howled: “Where’s the *fun* in that? Let’s organize a grand finale, a spectacular test to mark the occasion!”

“A test,” Thoth whispered, ensnared by this proposition. “Yes, but... but what if they fail? What fate awaits them then?”

“Then we feed them to my lovely girl Ammit,” Anubis said with palpable excitement. “She’s swift as a crocodile, ravenous as a lion, and strong as a hippo. And she’s been craving a decent meal for too long.”

Thoth, ever the bird of reason, replied: “Is it really necessary to subject the deceased to such a harsh judgement? Surely, we can find something else to still Ammit’s hunger. There are so many fruit trees on these isles that I have yet to invent a number large enough to count them.”

“And ducks!” said Anubis, just to tease his bird-friend.

But Thoth didn’t react. His mind was already spinning and Anubis knew it wouldn’t stop until it had found some intricate solution.

#

That night, Ma’at noticed that Thoth was more preoccupied than usually. He told her about Anubis’s idea of a test with a horrid punishment, and his own ideas for a less cruel system.

“We could tally good deeds, but that wouldn’t be fair, now, would it?” he mused. “Long-lived souls have had more chances to do good, and one good deed might not balance out a really bad one.”

Ma’at was still annoyed with him, but she decided to be the higher deity and replied: “Wait a moment, I have just the thing for you.”

She disappeared into her archives and returned with a mechanical contraption in her arms and a giant feather between her fingers.

“It’s fluffy as a cloud,” Thoth said with admiration, and he knew a thing or two about feathers.

“Yes, that’s the feather of Truth,” Ma’at said. “It has a lustrous history that only a few of us goddesses truly understand.” She emphasized the *‘lust-’* as she said it, not that Toth would notice.

“And the other thing?” Thoth asked.

“That’s my set of balancing scales,” Ma’at said, placing it on the table in front of him. “You could put the feather on one scale and the heart of the deceased on the other. If the scales are balanced, the person passes. If not, Ammit can feast on them.”

Toth bowed his ibis head. He felt tired of thinking and recognized the wisdom in his wife’s approach.

“You could let Anubis perform the weighing,” Ma’at suggested, mindful of her husband’s clumsiness, “so he will feel important, too, and you can record the result.”

“That sounds nice,” Thoth said.

“And ask Osiris to welcome the successful souls. Involving him as the mayor of the eternal Field of Reeds adds a touch of ceremony,” she added.

This should be enough to get my husband’s career back on track, she thought.

#

Thus the ceremonial judgement was instituted. Thoth’s quill meticulously recorded the result of each weighing. After Osiris had welcomed the first group of good souls and was about to return home, Thoth conveyed Ma’at’s greetings to his wife, Isis.

Overhearing the mention of Ma’at and Isis, Ammit grinned. She remembered a particularly wild evening with those girls at Hathor’s house, the Lady of Drunkenness herself, where they had played Truth or Dare. Of course, Ammit never told the guys how Ma’at had procured that ostrich feather or to what purpose.

Ammit kept their secret for eternity, even though Ma’at herself had almost blown their cover that night, with her giggles and sudden tears of pleasure. But she had managed once more not to draw any attention, thanks to her uncanny ability to compose herself. Luckily, Ammit’s huge crocodile smile never raised any suspicion either. Anubis, Thoth, and Osiris simply read it as her anticipation of devouring another sinful soul as soon as the scales tipped in her favour.

Four deities officiated at the ceremony, but only one had sampled the juicy taste of sin. Only Ammit knew the true weight of that feather.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Wenmackers is a professor in philosophy of science at KU Leuven, Belgium. Most of her research is related to the foundations of chance. Besides academic papers, she writes a monthly column for a popular science magazine. She has published two nonfiction trade books, and her speculative fiction has appeared in *Nature Futures* and *Danse Macabre*.

FORE!

MARK JONATHAN HARRIS

It was a straightforward eight-foot putt, the kind Stuart made all the time. His father leaned on his putter and watched from the fringe of the green, willing him to hole the ball to keep the match alive. Phil and Gary stood together a few feet away, hoping that he'd fail.

Stuart eyed the hole one more time and stroked. Too firmly. The ball lipped the cup and careened away.

His father's sigh was audible enough to hear on the next tee. Irwin tramped onto the green, picked up the errant golf ball, and tossed it in the direction of his disappointing son. "Stuart's obviously not going to win a golf scholarship to Yale," he said to the two victors, already backslapping each other. "It's a good thing he's a legacy."

Stuart stifled his response.

"Stuart hit the ball well today, much better than you," Phil needled his senior law partner as they walked off the course. "But winning comes down to who can execute under pressure."

"Stuart thinks too damned much," Irwin said. He paid the caddies and handed Phil and Gary each two one hundred dollar bills. "The problem's not his stroke, it's his head."

"Lucky for him, he's not paying," Gary said. "Or does he lose his allowance this week for missing that putt?"

Stuart left them laughing on their way to the clubhouse. Playing golf with his father was always a mistake. He dumped his clubs in the trunk of his father's Mercedes and walked the mile and half to their Cheviot Hills home. If he practiced more, really pushed himself, maybe he could lower his handicap. The goal didn't seem worth the effort. He didn't aspire to play for Yale. His golf score didn't define him. Although he didn't know yet what did.

Santos looked up from the rose bush he was uprooting in the Goldfarb front yard to see their lanky teenage son approaching. "*Hola*," Stuart greeted.

The gardener had seen the boy and his father drive away with their golf bags earlier that morning. Now the boy was returning on foot, without his golf clubs, looking sullen. "Rough day?" Santos said.

The boy seemed surprised, as if he didn't expect him to speak English. Santos had been working for the Goldfarbs barely a month and only spoken to the wife.

"I want to break my putter," Stuart said.

"I know the feeling."

"You play?"

"When I was your age, yeah. . . ." The gardener, now at least two decades older, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a blue bandana. "You any good?" he asked.

"I'm decent. A six handicap."

"I was scratch." The gardener grinned.

"No shit!"

"That was a long time ago, when I was playing every day. I picked up the game when I was caddying. In Texas. When I first came here. Played early in the morning before I carried any bags. Learned from watching some great players. Caddied for Lee Trevino a few times."

"Lee Trevino. Wow!"

"Yeah, he encouraged me to keep at it. But I had no money and no papers. So I came to L.A. and took up gardening instead." He shrugged, as if the boy could possibly understand the fear and desperation that drove him here.

"You don't play any more?"

"Nah, I got a wife and three kids now, strollers instead of golf clubs . . . Maybe I'll go back to it someday. When they grow up. Or I get too old to do this." He plunged his spade into the earth to emphasize the point and returned to digging up the rose bush.

The boy lingered a moment as if uncertain what to say, then headed up the flagstone path to the house.

Santos didn't know why he'd boasted about his golfing skill when he hadn't touched a club in years. Maybe it was envy of the youth. Or resentment. Or a desire to show the boy that not only did he speak English, but he was more than just a gardener.

The next Saturday morning when the gardener pulled into the Goldfarb driveway at 7:30, he found the boy waiting for him in torn jeans and fancy leather work boots. "I'd like to help," Stuart said.

"Your mother send you?"

"No. . . no. . . I just thought. . . I need to show my parents I'm not the slacker they think I am."

Santos turned to his older helper Guillermo, who spoke little English, to see if he understood. "Now they want me to be a *niñero* too," he said in Spanish.

"You should charge double," Guillermo said.

Santos studied the tall, earnest *adolescente*, whose polished work boots looked like they'd just been purchased. If the boy's hands had any calluses, they were from golf clubs not a shovel. He wondered if Stuart's offer to help wasn't just an excuse to talk about golf or Trevino. Still, it was more trouble to turn him away than let him work. Santos reached into the trunk of his pickup and tossed Stuart a spade. "Here, you can dig up the flower beds in the backyard with Guillermo."

When the gardener checked a half hour later, Stuart's shirt was damp and his ripped jeans spattered with dirt. The boy leaned on his shovel to rest. "Maybe this will help me drive the ball farther," he said.

"It's your swing more than your strength. A caddie I knew was twenty pounds lighter but hit the ball longer."

"He must have been a good player."

"Yeah, but he got sent back to Mexico."

"They deported him?"

"Like a lot of *compañeros* I knew . . . Lucky I overslept the morning *la migra* raided the club. . ." He wiped a muddy hand on his jeans. "But I got no more time for stories, I got other yards I have to work today."

"Well, I don't want to get in your way." Stuart handed the shovel back to him.

Later, driving home to his wife and children in their cramped apartment in Downey, Santos regretted talking to the boy about his days as a caddy. That he once played golf seemed to change Stuart's view of him, make him think they could have a different relationship. Stuart's naiveté reminded the gardener of his own innocence when, at 15, he decided that he had no future in La Unión in Oaxaca. His father had left for Mexico City years before, vanishing forever. Santos fled north instead, crossing the border in El Paso, hidden in a truck filled with crates of avocados. With little English and no education beyond eighth grade, the only job he could find was caddying—like Trevino, who'd also grown up in a dirt floor shack, with no running water and indoor plumbing. And no father.

His strained encounter with Santos embarrassed Stuart. He realized that offering to help in the garden was a clumsy way to start a conversation. Guillermo barely acknowledged his presence, and Santos, too, seemed uneasy with his questioning. Deflated by the gardener's brusque dismissal, he retreated to the house.

His father was making coffee in the kitchen, dressed in his overpriced

designer sweat suit. The luxury outfit was too tight, and its ash color accentuated the graying temples he knew his father was trying to dye.

"You know Santos is a scratch golfer," Stuart said.

"Who?"

"Our new gardener."

"Interesting," said Irwin, who didn't seem interested at all. He carried his coffee cup to the table, then turned back to Stuart, as if struck by another thought. "Do you believe him?"

"Why would he lie?"

"Well, if he's that good a golfer, it didn't get him very far in life."

Stuart groped for a fitting reply, but all he could think of was his father's response when he questioned his shielding millions of tax dollars for his wealthy clients. "To succeed in this economy, you need to seize every advantage," his father said without compunction.

"Mom says he's an exceptional gardener," Stuart finally said. "That's why she hired him to redesign our yards."

His lame response to his father and his bumbling encounter with Santos discouraged him. His father was pressuring him to apply to Yale, but everything he loved about his alma mater--the fraternities, the social life, the sports--were why Stuart didn't want to go there. The counselor at his expensive private school had suggested that a small New England college like Amherst or Wesleyan might be a better choice for him. Stuart still found himself unable to write the essays they required. What did he have to say about Amherst's question about "the inevitable tensions and opportunities of diversity and inclusiveness?" Growing up in a six million dollar house in Cheviot Hills, he had little contact with anyone who couldn't afford to live in his neighborhood. It made him wonder what it was like for Santos to brave crossing the border to live in a country that was constantly looking for reasons to send him back.

Mowing lawns and trimming bushes were never Santos's life ambition; they were just a way to provide for his family. The dull, repetitive labor bored and wearied him. All he really enjoyed about his work was the occasional chance to design a garden, like Louise Goldfarb's ambitious plan to make her expansive backyard drought resistant.

"You are legal, aren't you?" she'd asked when they first met. "If you aren't, my husband won't let me hire you."

It wasn't the first time he heard the question. Thanks to his American-born wife, he was a citizen now and no longer had to lie. He just had to be

deferential to the wealthy owners of the homes he tended and careful not to offend them.

Though Mrs. Goldfarb welcomed his ideas about plants and flowers, he remained wary, especially of her husband whose curt nod when he walked past on the way to his Mercedes was his only sign of recognition. Then there was the teenage son in his unsoiled boots who kept rising early to meet him, as if the gardener were part of a school assignment to get acquainted with an immigrant. Santos wanted to ask Mrs. Goldfarb to keep Stuart away, but he blamed himself for the boy's interest with his foolish bragging about golf.

"I read about Trevino," Stuart told him. "It must have been amazing caddying for him."

"Yeah, he was a real hustler, constantly cracking jokes while he stole your money. When he won big, he tipped big, so we all wanted to carry his bag."

"I play a lot better by myself, when it's just me and the course," Stuart confessed.

"When you're poor, sometimes you have to gamble," Santos said.

"I guess . . ." Stuart considered it. "The article I read said he joked that you don't know what pressure is until you play for five dollars a hole with two dollars in your pocket."

Or you're living illegally in this country, the gardener thought.

"Playing with my dad is enough pressure for me, and he pays when we lose," Stuart said, scuffing the dirt with his expensive boots.

His confession made Santos as uncomfortable as the teen. He didn't know why Stuart was confiding this to him.

"Could you please tell your mother I'd like to speak to her," the gardener said. "I need to know where she wants me to plant these fuchsias."

A week before the deadline for his college applications, rising early again to talk with Santos, Stuart found his father toasting a bagel in the kitchen. "So where are you finally applying?" Irwin began in what seemed a reasonable tone.

"Still deciding," Stuart said. "I'm not sure yet what's right for me."

"How the hell do you know what's right for you when you haven't visited a single college?"

"I've done other research," Stuart tried to remain calm.

"Playing golf? Doing yard work? That's your idea of research. You're flushing your future down the toilet."

There was something so overblown, so absurd about the accusation that Stuart almost laughed. "That's not how I see it."

"Well, I do. And I refuse to let it happen." Irwin held up the keys to Stuart's Jeep. "I'm taking away your car. No more golf. No more yard work. You're going to stay home and finish those damned applications."

His father was treating him like he was still in grade school. As if grounding could really make him comply. The stupidity of it emboldened Stuart. "If I do complete them, what do I get in return? What's my incentive?" he asked.

"Your incentive?"

He didn't know why the idea struck him, but it was perfect. An assertion of his own independence and a demand that was sure to piss his father off. "I'll do the applications if I can invite Santos to golf at Hillcrest." Irwin looked dumbfounded. "Why the hell would you want that?"

"He's a scratch player. He can give me pointers on my game."

"Fine, take him to Rancho Park."

"You embarrassed to bring him to the club?"

"Of course not." Although a Republican, his father considered himself liberal about race. "Don't you think he might feel out of place? Uncomfortable?" Irwin said.

"Why? He'll just be playing golf."

His father's mouth tightened as he considered the proposal. "You'll apply to Yale and the other colleges your counselor recommended?"

"If Santos can play..." Applying didn't mean he had to go there.

His father's eyes narrowed. Either resolve or anger hardened his features. "Okay, invite him. But I want to play with you to see if he's really as good as you say. Phil and I have a tee time booked for 9 tomorrow. See if your Mexican Tiger Woods can join us."

The boy's unexpected invitation alarmed rather than flattered Santos.

"It's been a long time since I picked up a club," he demurred.

"It doesn't matter," Stuart said. "I'm sure I can learn from you."

Santos said he'd check with his wife, but he didn't think he was free tomorrow. He hoped that ended it.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Goldfarb came out to the backyard in her garden gloves and floppy sunhat. "I know Sunday is your day with your family," she said, "and what Stuart's asking is unusual but he's going through a difficult time right now. It would mean a great deal to me if you accepted his invitation. He says you're a very good golfer. I'm sure you could help him. And

it would end a foolish fight between Stuart and his father. I'd be grateful for the favor. I know other families in this neighborhood who're looking for a good gardener."

Honey rather than vinegar, Santos thought, though either way he was the fly.

Still, he didn't want to lose the huge landscape redesign she was planning. He said he'd change his plans for tomorrow.

When he finished work, he dropped Guillermo off and drove straight to the Rio Hondo driving range. After all these years away from the game, he knew it was crazy to think he could play par golf again. He picked up a five-iron to see how much his body remembered. Even the borrowed club felt good in his hands. He struck the ball and watched it sail high and straight. The beauty of muscle memory. He hit a bucket of balls with irons and then moved on to woods. And then another bucket of irons. His hands stung and he felt the ache of muscles he hadn't stretched in years. It would take months of practice to gain consistency or rhythm. At least, he wouldn't disgrace himself tomorrow.

When Stuart impulsively decided to invite Santos for a round of golf, he didn't expect his father to play with them. And he certainly didn't want his father's junior law partner, Phil, to join them. What he really wanted was time alone with the gardener when he wasn't occupied with work. Now his father had spoiled that chance.

"I've heard you're quite a golfer. I hope the course is a fitting challenge," Phil said, extending his gloved hand to shake Santos's bare, calloused one. Stuart quickly rummaged through his bag and found a worn golf glove for the gardener. It was too late to do anything about his dirt-stained tennis shoes.

"Show us how it's done, Stuart," his father said as they walked to the tee.

The first shot of the day always made Stuart nervous. Too many eyes on the first tee. His legs felt loose, unreliable. He backed away, took a deep breath, then stepped forward again. The moment he swung, he knew he hooked the shot; the ball sank behind a sycamore and disappeared into the left rough. Shakily, he picked up his tee and handed the driver to Santos, who was using Stuart's clubs. The gardener's Dodgers cap cast a shadow across his face so Stuart couldn't tell his reaction.

His father went next. His drive landed safely on the right side of the fairway, about 30 yards behind Stuart's. Phil nodded for Santos to proceed. The gardener took a few practice swings, wagged the club, then quickly struck

the ball with a short flat swing that sent it flying about 250 yards into the heart of the fairway. Though his form was unorthodox, he hit with power. Phil admired the drive, then teed up his own ball and used his long, looping swing to drive his ball into the fairway, 20 yards farther than Santos.

"It looks like we're evenly matched," Irwin said, as they followed the golf carts their two caddies drove onto the course. "Why don't we play best ball, Phil and me against the two of you."

"With a two-dollar Nassau to make it interesting," Phil added. "I expect we can all afford that." He looked at Santos.

"Of course the price will be higher for Stuart." Irwin gave his son a knowing look, as if Stuart understood exactly what was at stake.

His stomach lurched. He didn't look at his father. Inviting the gardener to the club had provoked him far more than he'd imagined.

"You don't have to do this," he said as Santos walked with him. "That's not why I invited you here."

"Your call," Santos said, "but I don't like to run from bets. It messes with your head. You beat yourself up afterwards for backing down. Just relax, play your regular game. I got your back."

Stuart's hand tightened around his three-iron, hating his hesitancy. If Santos was willing to compete with his father, how could he refuse? He didn't know the higher price his father alluded to, but he and Phil would have to win the match to exact it.

His ball sat up cleanly in the rough, and he hit it just short of the green. He looked over at his father watching from the golf cart. "We'll take that bet," he said.

He walked with Santos to the gardener's ball and they conferred about the distance to the hole. Santos finally pulled a hybrid 4-iron from Stuart's bag and hit a low, straight shot to the front of the green, where it skittered to a stop 40 feet below the flagstick. His mouth flitted with a grin when he returned the iron to Stuart.

Irwin's second shot was short, but Phil knocked his 20 feet from the pin. Stuart and Irwin both pitched onto the green and waited for Santos, who was farthest away, to putt. His ball stopped a foot from the cup. Phil's birdie putt slid past the hole, and he conceded Santos's tap-in.

"I can see why Stuart invited you," Phil said as they walked to the second tee. "You know your way around a green."

Whether compliment or shade, Santos ignored the comment. The two lawyers, whose matching gray baseball caps were embroidered with the country club crest, reminded him of golfers whose bags he once carried, men who tossed C-notes around like they were dollar bills, and blamed their

caddies for handing them the wrong club when they landed in a bunker. Their two caddies today were older –one white the other Latino-- probably veterans at the club. Since he clearly wasn't a member, or paying them, they ignored him.

The rich country club, the hilly terrain and lush fairways of Kikuyu grass, all irritated him. The course was completely different from the dusty, windblown Texas hardpan where he'd learned the game. The greens alone required more water in a week than the Goldfarbs would save in years making their backyard drought resistant.

Surveying the second hole, a short, 155-yard, par three, Santos selected an 9-iron from Stuart's bag. He took a deep breath to compose himself, then focused all his anger on the ball. His shot rose in a high arc before dropping straight down to the sunken green, a foot from the pin.

"You're a lucky man," Irwin said. "If your ball rolled into the cup, you'd have to buy drinks for everyone at the club."

"I'll stick to birdies then," Santos said. He made his putt and he and Stuart were one hole up.

His father's condescension toward Santos—or was it meanness?—made Stuart cringe. But it didn't seem to faze the gardener. Though Santos sprayed his drives, Stuart admired the way he scrambled, followed a bad shot with a good one, and never stopped attacking the course. Spurred by his example, Stuart played more aggressively and started dropping putts. When one of them missed, the other covered. Phil stayed steady. Irwin rushed. After the front nine, Stuart and Santos remained one hole up. Walking to the 10th tee, Irwin pressed to double the bet on the back nine.

Stuart looked at the gardener. Santos shrugged. Doubling the bet didn't double the pressure. The money was *miseria*. It was clear the match wasn't about money anyway, but some argument between Stuart and his father that neither bothered to explain. But he wasn't about to let the arrogant lawyer use him to teach his confused son whatever lesson the boy had failed to learn.

They split the next three holes, with either Santos or Stuart matching Phil's pars. On the par 5, 13th, Phil hit his first poor drive of the day, slicing the ball into the deep rough on the right. Trying to compensate, Irwin swung too hard and hooked his ball into the left rough. Santos's shot also faded to the left but bounced safely into the fairway. Irwin hopped on the golf cart with his caddy and sped to find his ball. Santos followed on foot.

He stopped a moment, about 20 yards behind Irwin, when he noticed the lawyer nudging his ball with his iron to get a better lie in the thick grass--a clear penalty. Irwin quickly struck the ball and exited the rough. Glancing

back, he spotted Santos staring at him and jumped on the cart as if whatever the gardener saw had never happened.

Santos said nothing. Stuart and he both hit good drives and were in position to reach the green in regulation. Meanwhile, Phil was in trouble in the other rough. His second shot dribbled onto the fairway, and his third landed in a bunker. Although still 150 yards from the hole, Irwin hit his best iron of the day to the back of the green. All three missed their birdie putts. "We halved another hole," Irwin said as he retrieved his ball from the cup.

Santos stayed silent. So did Stuart, if he'd even noticed his father's cheating. Of course, he'd seen it before, if he'd wanted to.

The next hole, another par three, played into the wind. Santos took an extra club and stood longer than usual on the tee until his pulse finally slowed. Then he lofted the ball high in the air where it lingered an instant before falling softly on the green, six feet from the flag. *Top that, cabrón!* He nailed the putt and birdied the hole. Two up! Four holes to go. Stuart high-fived him as they walked to the next tee.

"You've turned my son into a real competitor," Irwin said as the gardener prepared to drive the 15th hole. "Brought out his dormant Goldfarb genes. I'm happy to see that, Stuart. I wish you'd played this well when we were partners. But the match isn't over yet. That's why Phil and I would like to press the bet again for these last holes."

Stuart looked at his father in astonishment. "I don't get it. You're losing. Why redouble the bet?"

"The higher the stakes, the greater the test," Phil said.

"Are you up for it? Or are you going to wimp out?" his father challenged.

Stuart didn't even glance at Santos. "You want to raise the stakes, go ahead," he said.

"Fine," Irwin said. "Only instead of playing for money, let's play for college. If you win, you can pick any college you want. But if you lose, you have to go to Yale if you're accepted."

"You got to be kidding!" Stuart exclaimed.

Stuart's face reflected the gardener's own disgust. So this is what they were fighting about, Santos thought, an exclusive college his children could never afford to attend.

The boy's shoulders sagged as if he were carrying a weight heavier than a golf bag. "What about Santos? Why should he agree? This has nothing to do with him."

Irwin turned to Santos as if he were an afterthought. "A five dollar an hour raise if you win. But if you lose, we hire a new gardener—hopefully one who doesn't play golf." His grin suggested he relished the prospect.

Santos slowly pulled off his golf glove, a finger at a time. Win or lose, his days with the Goldfarbs were over. He was the help after all, as expendable as any other dark-skinned immigrant. He tossed the glove to Stuart. "You're on your own now. This isn't my fight."

The boy looked at him, abject, defeated. "I'm sorry. I . . . I never meant. . ."

Santos held up his hand to stop. It pained him to see the boy abase himself. He'd done too much of it himself. "You don't need my help any more," he said. "You can win this on your own. You're actually three up now, not two. Your father moved his ball to get a better lie on 13. He didn't par that hole, he bogeyed it." He smiled at Irwin as he said it, with the same relish that Irwin had smiled at the thought of firing him.

Stuart saw his father's face flush and Phil's flash of irritation as he slapped the grass with his club. Stuart stared at the driver in his hands as discomfited and wordless as they were. He turned to Santos for guidance but the gardener was already striding toward the clubhouse. He felt a wave of despair as he watched the solitary figure cross the fairway and disappear behind a grove of trees.

Walking toward the parking lot, Santos thought how he would explain to his wife why he wouldn't be working for the Goldfarbs any more. In the end the explanation was simple--a lesson he'd learned long ago caddying in Texas, and should have remembered before picking up a club again: *Golf is not a gentleman's game.*

Stuart hoisted his golf bag to his shoulder and followed Santos toward the clubhouse. He didn't know what he would say to his father, or whether Santos would ever forgive him for dragging him into this. He just kept walking, away from the tee, away from the match. It didn't matter any more whether he won or lost, or where he applied to college, although now he finally had something to write Amherst about "the tensions and opportunities of diversity and inclusiveness." He vowed to practice what he'd learned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Jonathan Harris is an Emeritus Distinguished Professor at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, where he led the documentary film program for many years. A three-time Oscar-winning filmmaker, he also writes fiction. *Misfits*, a recent collection of his short stories, was named a Distinguished Favorite by the Independent Book Awards.

THE FEUD

Jibril Stevenson

Staked Plain, Northern Marches, 1291H/1874M

The caravan stretched far into the distance both before and behind, a single file of camels, horses and mules snaking across the featureless prairie. Ramón Gómez had paid well for this spot in the middle of the caravan, relatively safe from the Natives, Bedouins, and plain old bandits—Christians and Muslims alike—who tended to pick off caravans' trailing elements when they couldn't find lone travelers to rob.

For the hundredth time, Ramón scanned the horizon for any sign of danger. He saw nothing—no smoke, no dust clouds, no riders—but even here on the staked plains, where the flat expanse of short grass seemed to go on forever without a tree or hill to break the monotony, there were always low buttes and hidden river beds that might provide cover for a few dozen raiders. The Natives here were Comanches, the fiercest warriors of the plains, and the Bedouins were cattle-herding Baqqarah, well-mounted and well-armed, making this the most dangerous stretch of trail in the New World.

Of course the caravan had guards, a company of three dozen Moroccan spahis to protect the two hundred merchants and their thousand beasts of burden, and it relied on a motley band of Native and Muslim scouts to pick out the safest routes and advise the caravan master of any danger before it was upon them. Still, the scouts and guards could hardly protect the entire caravan at all times, so Ramón preferred to trust in his own resources.

Besides his Santa Barbara model repeating rifle, which he kept in a scabbard hanging from his saddle, Ramón wore a pair of Turkish revolvers on his belt. If the warriors or bandits were numerous enough, he'd succumb eventually, but he could at least make it cost them.

A hundred yards up ahead, two of the guards were riding side by side, conversing, when one peeled off and rode back, against the caravan's direction of travel.

"Spaniard!" he shouted when he was within earshot of Ramón. "The captain would speak with you."

"Let him come speak then," Ramón answered. "I have no servant to manage my animals, so I cannot leave them right now. If he can wait for nightfall, I will come find him in his tent."

"Do that," said the guard, and rode back to his post.

"Mierda." Ramón could guess what this was about.

‘Ain Jallut, Texas, 1273H/1856M

Rami had never seen anything like the army encamped on the south Texas plains. He had fought in a few expeditions against the Apaches in his native New Mexico, but these had been small-scale affairs, involving only a few hundred Andalusian horsemen, traveling light.

The army assembled for the grand jihad numbered in the tens of thousands, and it was not just Andalusians, but also Moroccans and other Maghrebis from Guatemala and the islands, and Mandinkas and Songhais from the southern continent. There was even a contingent of Muslim Peruvians from the Caliphate of Cuzco, and a few hundred volunteers of all colors, sects and tongues from Europe and Africa.

As always, the main Andalusian host from central Mexico was mostly infantry, as were the foreign mujaheddin who had traveled by ship. Most of the Emir’s cavalry was made up of Bedouins and nominally Muslim Natives, all of whom fought for plunder alone and were unlikely to stick with the campaign all the way to the Mississippi.

Rami’s battalion, the New Mexico Lancers, consisted of three hundred trained and equipped horsemen—on paper. In reality, half of the men were raw recruits and many were without mounts.

“Al-hamdulillah, some scouts captured a whole herd of wild mustangs,” Rami’s captain told him, “and our wise Emir has seen fit to allot a hundred of them to our battalion. I need you to take your platoon to the corral to retrieve them. Go armed.”

“Are we expecting resistance within our own camp?” asked Rami.

“It’s the Ouled Tariq’s corral.”

The Ouled Tariq were a Moroccan tribe that had been feuding with Rami’s own Banu Hamid clan since shortly after the conquest of Andalusia more than a thousand years earlier. To hear some tell it, their Qaysi and Yemeni ancestors had been at each other’s throats since the dark days before Islam.

“Fear not,” said Rami. “I’ll bring your horses.”

“Inshallah.”

It was a short ride to the Moroccan encampment, and Rami found the corral easily enough.

A young spahi answered his salam.

“I’ll have to clear it with the commander,” he said when he’d heard Rami’s purpose.

As Rami waited, he noticed a number of spahis approaching from various directions. As nonchalantly as he could manage, he gave the hand signal for his platoon to take up a defensive posture. His sergeants relayed the signal, and, without a word, the horsemen tightened up their spacing and pointed all their lances outward like a porcupine's quills.

A man appeared in the doorway of the guard shack, wearing the embroidered green caftan of a lieutenant of spahis. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am Rami ibn Jumu'ah ibn 'Abd-al-Qahhar of the Banu Hamid, Deputy Commander of the New Mexico Lancers. I am to take a hundred of these mustangs, by order of the Emir."

"Banu Hamid, you say? An 'Abd-al-Qahhar killed my great uncle at the siege of Tegucigalpa. Why would I give you dirty half-breed Syrians even one of our horses?"

Rami ignored the insult to his lineage. "As I said, Lieutenant..."

"Haydar ibn Farid ibn Murad."

"Lieutenant Ibn Farid. I come by order of the Emir of Mexico."

"Unfortunately for you, I don't serve the Emir of Mexico. My men and I answer only to the Viceroy of Panamá, and he answers only to the Sultan of Marrakech, so unless your orders come from the Caliph himself, they don't mean shit to me."

Some of the men bristled, but Rami raised a hand to calm them. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see the spahis moving to flank his formation.

"If you want Ouled Tariq horses," Ibn Farid continued, "come try to take them."

Rami looked around him. He could only make out a handful of Ibn Farid's spahis to each side of his formation, but he was sure there were at least a few hundred Moroccans in this encampment. His own men were all battle-hardened veterans and would acquit themselves valiantly if pressed, but they would no doubt succumb if completely surrounded and outnumbered, as appeared to be the case. Not only that, but if the Moroccans killed dozens of Andalusians in pitched battle, the Emir would have to respond in kind. His forces were by far the strongest in the polyglot camp, and would surely teach the Ouled Tariq a lesson, but at what cost? Rami had no love for the Ouled Tariq, but their swords were needed in battle. Any shedding of blood among the Muslims would be a victory for the infidels.

There was only one thing to do.

"Any coward can pick a fight when he's got three hundred men to his opponent's fifty," Rami retorted. "I doubt a filthy Yemeni Moor like you would be man enough to face me alone."

“Dismount, then, and we’ll see who’s man enough,” countered Ibn Farid, drawing his saber. “I came here to kill Spaniards and I’m happy for you to be the first.”

Rami swung down from the saddle and drew his own saber, holding it aloft so his men could see it glisten in the Texas sun. “If I fall,” he shouted, “ride back to camp and tell the captain there were no mustangs to be had. If he falls”—he pointed his saber at Ibn Farid—“we will take a hundred mustangs as ordered, and these good spahis will do nothing to interfere. Agreed?”

Ibn Farid nodded his assent. The two swordsmen faced off at a distance of six feet or so and circled around each other, dodging and feinting as their men cheered them on.

Despite his bluster, Ibn Farid wasn’t much of a swordsman. Once Rami had tested his defenses, it was easy enough to press the attack. Soon, Ibn Farid’s back was against the fence and he was hard pressed to parry Rami’s powerful slashes.

He let his guard down for just a moment and Rami took advantage, lunging forward and delivering what might have been a killing blow. But at the last moment, he pulled back, thinking of the consequences of killing a Moroccan officer in his own camp. Instead of cutting through muscle and ribs, Rami sliced across the skin of Ibn Farid’s chest and forearm, deep enough to draw copious amounts of blood, but probably not to damage anything important.

Ibn Farid dropped his sword and pressed his hands to his wounds.

“Allahu akbar!” shouted the Andalusians almost in unison.

Some of the Moroccans were rushing to aid their wounded commander, while others were rounding up the mustangs under the direction of one of their sergeants. The fight itself had taken some three minutes, and within another five the horses were ready to go.

“Take the damned horses, Hamidi dog,” shouted Ibn Farid from the guardhouse where the surgeon was dressing his wounds, “but if we cross paths again it will be your death!”

Staked Plains, Northern Marches, 1291AH/1874M

Once the caravan was halted for the night and the tents arranged in a rough circle, Ramón hobbled his camels and went to look for the captain’s tent. As expected, it was in the center of the camp, next to the caravan master’s, where the captain could most easily reach his employer or respond

to an attack at any point on the perimeter.

There was no guard, so Ramón scratched on the tent flap the way Natives did when visiting one another's teepees.

"Come in!"

Ramón might not have recognized the voice, had he not had such a strong presentiment of who the captain would be.

When he'd joined the caravan at Cairo, it had been guarded by regular Mexican Emirate cavalry, but they had switched out in Wichita. As soon as he heard the new guards' Moroccan accents, Ramón had feared the worst. These were the same Ouled Tariq spahis from the Great Texas Jihad—the enlisted men would be their sons, rather, but some of the sergeants and officers would be veterans of that campaign, which had pushed the eastern frontier of Islam all the way to the Mississippi and given the Viceroyalty of Panama a sphere of influence at its mouth.

So he had tried to lay low, which had been the plan anyway considering the cargo entrusted to him, and to keep out of sight of the captain. He'd succeeded for more than two weeks, but now his luck had run out.

He steeled his resolve and pushed through the flap.

The interior of the tent was dim, since there was no fire inside as there would have been in a Native teepee. The only light came from a small oil lamp sitting on a collapsible table next to the captain's bedroll.

Still, there was no mistaking it. The man sitting across from Ramón, pistol in hand, was Haydar ibn Farid, of the Ouled Tariq.

"Come closer," said Ibn Farid, waving with the pistol.

Ramón still had his own weapons, as he had not been searched, but hadn't drawn them before entering. Anyone entering a tent with guns in hand was liable to be shot before he could even introduce himself.

"I thought I recognized you," said Ibn Farid when Ramón had moved into the light. "What's your name?"

"I am Ramón Gómez Alcázar, of Saint Augustine. I don't believe we have met, though I've been with the caravan since Cairo."

"Yet you look quite familiar. Tell me, what business does a Spaniard have in my caravan?"

"I've been trading for furs among the northern savages since spring, and I've heard the gold miners on the west coast are paying top dinar."

"So if I search your camels, I'll find nothing but furs?"

Ramón shrugged. In fact, his camels were laden with far more profitable merchandise, with only a few layers of fur on top to disguise it, but there was no point in telling Ibn Farid that. If he searched them, he'd find out soon enough anyway.

“Honestly,” Ibn Farid continued, “I don’t much care what you’re transporting. If you’re smuggling, I should turn you over to the authorities once we reach Taos, but I don’t expect you to make it that far.”

Ramón must have blanched, because Ibn Farid let out an evil laugh.

“You knew when you came in here you’d been discovered,” he said. “Did you really think a Frankish mustache and a fake name would be enough to fool me? Come, Ramón Gómez for Rami ibn Jum’uah? It’s like you wanted to be caught.”

“The Spaniards don’t care about Rami ibn Jum’uah,” said Ramón, or Rami, rather. “And this is my first time back in Dar al-Islam in eleven years.”

Taos, Vilayet of New Mexico, 1282H/1865M

The provincial capital of Taos was in a festive mood, its adobe buildings decked with red and gold banners, its cobblestone streets full of revelers in their Friday best. This year, sheep-shearing season coincided with the holidays, so all the shepherds had come north from their winter pastures with their flocks, hoping to sell not only the wool but the fattest sheep for qurbani. A few cattlemen from further west had converged on Taos as well, with small herds of beef for the local market.

Eid al-Adha wasn’t for another week, but the holiday season in Taos kicked off with the Festival of Mansa Muhammad ibn Qu, the Mandinka sultan who’d discovered the New World some five hundred years prior. Rami couldn’t remember celebrating the festival in his youth, but it had been popularized in Mexico over the past few years as an alternative to Ibn Battuta Day, which was celebrated in the Moroccan possessions across the Caribbean Sea to mark the date the famous Moroccan explorer had turned his sails west. Taos loved to party, though, so it had gone all out for the new holiday.

Rami wasn’t much of a reveler, himself. He had been in the hills with the flocks for so long that seeing hundreds of people, rather than sheep, around him made him nervous. Avoiding the thronged plazas, he made his way to an unassuming coffeehouse on the corner of Az-Zahrawi and Ibn ‘Arabi Streets.

He pushed through the batwing doors into the dimly lit interior. The aroma of tobacco and hashish filled the air, but Rami was not interested in either of those pleasures. He ordered a cup of tea and found himself a table in the back, away from the smokers and backgammon players.

He stretched out his legs under the low table, enjoying the softness of

the cushion, the relative coolness of the air, and the subtle interplay of mint and sugar in the tea, and allowed his mind to wander. He'd come straight from the corral, where he'd left one of the hired hands to watch over the horses and those sheep brought into town for slaughter. After tea, he'd go to the baths—he'd washed in every stream he'd come across down south, but hadn't had a proper hot-water bath in months—and then to the mosque for the afternoon prayer. Only then would he go about the serious work of finding buyers for all his livestock.

The empty glass brought him back to the present. When he looked around for the tea-boy, Rami noticed a man sitting alone, just like him, in the opposite corner, sipping on what appeared to be nominally illegal mescal. The man wore the embroidered green caftan of a spahi officer, and he was scrutinizing Rami at least as hard as Rami was scrutinizing him.

Rami had to think for a minute before it came back to him. It was the Ouled Tariq bastard he'd wounded at 'Ain Jallut. Ibn Farid.

They both leapt from their seats at the same moment, each reaching for his gun, but the sound of metal against metal stopped them cold.

It was the coffeehouse's proprietor, a heavyset Native fellow, banging an old-fashioned short-barreled blunderbuss against an equally old-fashioned cutlass. "None of that in here!" he shouted. "You got a quarrel, take it outside."

Rami pushed his revolver back into its holster, and Ibn Farid did the same. Eyeing each other warily, they each set a pile of coins on their respective tables and inched toward the door. This brought them close enough together to speak in low tones.

"Should we settle this in the morning?" asked Rami. "Outside of town where we won't be interrupted?"

"Let's settle it now," replied Ibn Farid with a derisive look. "I wouldn't trust a cowardly Hamidi not to flee during the night."

"I might have let you off with a paper-cut as I did that day in Texas," said Rami as they pushed through the door into the daylight, "had you not called me a coward. Is a Muslim's honor not sacred to you?"

"It would be if you had any."

A pair of Black patrolmen—from the governor's private police force—walked by, eyeing Rami and Ibn Farid with suspicion. It was probably just the cloud of hashish smoke that had followed them through the door.

When the patrolmen had passed, Ibn Farid jerked his head toward a mostly deserted alley branching off az-Zahrawi Street. "You have a sword, Syrian?"

Rami shook his head. He had not worn a long blade since he left the army, as there was little use for one in the hills with the sheep.

“No matter,” said Ibn Farid. “Gunfights are all the rage these days anyway. We’ll just have to do it quick and run away before the police come.”

“You won’t have to worry about the police,” said Rami. “Worry about Munkar and Nakir.”

They turned into the alley and spread out some thirty feet apart. Though the alley was deserted, they could see revelers passing by on the streets at either end, and hear the beating of drums and tambourines.

Ibn Farid was wearing a cavalryman’s belt over his caftan, with both saber and pistol suspended at his left hip, where he could reach either with his right hand. It was a two-shot pistol, Rami noted. He wore two guns, himself, both five-shot Turkish revolvers, one on either side, with the grip pointed back for a quicker draw. Between the quicker draw and the extra bullets, he figured he had an unfair advantage, but that couldn’t be helped. He’d held back last time, but this time he’d go for the kill.

“Have you said your shahadah?” Ibn Farid asked.

Rami grabbed for his gun, the right one only, since he’d need the left hand to cock it, but Ibn Farid was faster. He held his pistol at arm’s length before Rami’s had even cleared the holster.

Ibn Farid’s shot went wide, and Rami got his gun up and worked the action, firing three rounds in quick succession, when he was interrupted by Ibn Farid’s second shot, which caught him in the chest and knocked him on his back.

Laying there in the dirt, staring up at the clear New Mexico sky, Rami could do nothing but say the shahadah, as Ibn Farid had taunted just moments earlier. There was an outcry in the nearby street, and the sound of boots racing toward him.

Rough hands grabbed him, turning him sideways and prodding at his chest wound—on the right side, thank Allah, and lower than the lung—and the corresponding point on his back. The patrolmen’s dark faces loomed over him, haranguing him with questions and abuse.

“Allah curse your mothers!” one of the men shouted in his face.

“I knew you were up to no good.”

“Someone go for a surgeon,” said the other. “And the rest of you help me find the other one, Arab bastard in a green caftan.”

Staked Plains, Northern Marches, 1291AH/1874M

"I'd heard you were still alive," said Ibn Farid. "I had to flee the city, but my commander refused to turn me over to your governor's men. No jurisdiction, he said, and I had been acting in self-defense anyway. I was kept in a cell for my own protection, since some of your kin were calling for my blood. Some of the enlisted men brought news about you."

"Then you know I was tried for inciting public disorder and only escaped the chopping block because a few enterprising Banu Hamid broke through the wall of my cell the night before my execution. They hid me in a wagon and dumped me over the border in Spanish territory. Luckily, my family has spoken Spanish as well as Arabic since Andalusia, so I just changed my clothes and my name, and soon had work as a laborer on the Camino Real they were building."

Ibn Farid laughed. "I knew you cursed Banu Hamid were Spaniards at heart. Just look at you!"

Rami couldn't very well look at himself, but he had studied Ibn Farid enough to know they were similar in complexion and features, both an inextricable mix of Arab, Frank and Native, though he supposed Ibn Farid's ancestors were Yemeni, Vandal and Muisca rather than Syrian, Visigoth and Mexica, but the end result was not so different.

"Well, you got me now," said Rami, getting back to business. "No police and no soldiers, except yours I suppose. You want to kill me?"

Ibn Farid stroked his beard. "I could have my men execute you. Or tie you to a stake and leave you for the coyotes. But I suppose we should finish what we started in Taos. Do you have a sword this time?"

"Nobody fights with swords anymore."

"I guess not. Pistols, then, just like Taos. I'd say that puts you at a disadvantage, but it's not my fault you don't have a blade. After fajr prayer."

"You're not afraid I'll run away at night, Qaysi coward that I am?"

"Not this time. You're alone and my men are watching the perimeter. Besides, where would you go?"

Rami ought to have passed the night tossing and turning, but he found himself inexplicably calm. Maybe it was the prospect of finally putting this feud to rest, after so many years of looking over his shoulder. But no, he would still have to worry about Ibn Farid's sons or brothers— or some more distant Ouled Tariq relations—trying to even the score. Maybe it was the confidence

that came with daily pistol drills after letting himself be bested by Ibn Farid with an inferior weapon. Whatever the reason, he slept better than he had in years.

He washed and prayed fajr alone beside his camels. So many years of herding in the mountains and trading alone among the Natives had so accustomed him to solitude that he much preferred to pray by himself, only joining a congregation when he happened to be in town on Friday afternoon.

After a lengthy du'a', he went to meet his rival on the open prairie half a mile from camp.

The sun's disk was still below the horizon, but its rays were already filtering up through the wispy clouds, painting the sky every shade of red and orange, as if a wildfire were raging to the east. A hot, dry wind was blowing up from the south, bringing with it clumps of tumbleweed that bounced across the otherwise empty plain of short grass.

Ibn Farid was there as promised, pacing back and forth with his hand on the grip of his pistol. Rami noted that he had switched out his old double-barreled flintlock for a five-shot revolver like his own. Seeing Rami, he stopped in his tracks.

"I was beginning to think you'd run off after all," he said.

"Astaghfirullah, but I'm going to enjoy this," said Rami.

The two men stared at each other for what seemed a lifetime. A tumbleweed blew across the prairie between them.

A shot rang out, and both men flinched. Neither had so much as reached for his gun.

Both turned toward the source of the sound, in the direction of the camp.

More shots popped and cracked in the same direction, and the would-be duelists took off running toward the sound of the guns.

"Bandits!" shouted Rami, running full tilt to catch up to the captain

"We better hope it's bandits," called Ibn Farid. "If it's Comanches, we're dead."

They were still a hundred yards from camp when the first horsemen whipped by, firing at them from the saddle. They were not Comanches, thankfully, but their leather clothing and wide-brimmed hats identified them as Malucos, which might be just as bad.

Ever since the Lusitanian state on the east coast had been destroyed by a Franco-Tunisian expedition—and its metropole conquered not long after by the opportunistic Castilians—the hardy Portuguese had been moving westward, intermarrying with Natives and escaped slaves, and amassing vast herds of horses, sheep and cattle. Sometimes they allied themselves with local

governors to keep the Natives and Bedouins at bay, but at other times they happily joined the same Natives and Bedouins in raiding the farms and villages of their neighbors. Rami had never heard of them raiding this far west.

He had hoped to join the Malucos himself when he was first exiled, but had been repulsed by their strange religion. He could deal with the Spaniards' Catholicism and even the Natives' idolatry, but the Malucos adored the cross and crescent equally, along with a pantheon of Native and African spirits. It was rumored they sacrificed their captives in bloody rites worthy of the Mexica, and, though Rami doubted this, he was in no hurry to find out.

Find out, he would, if he didn't make it back to camp before the

Malucos closed in.

Two riders galloped up to within a few dozen yards of Rami and Ibn Farid, firing their carbines from the saddle. Rami returned fire with his revolver, just a few unaimed shots as he kept running, and Ibn Farid did the same. Neither of them hit anything.

The Malucos wheeled around for another approach, but then Rami and Ibn Farid were within sight of the caravan.

The caravaneers had already broken camp to start the day's march, so the camels were mostly strung out in a file, rather than circled together in a defensive posture. Ibn Farid's guards and scouts were doing their best to form a perimeter, but Rami could tell they wouldn't be able to hold on for long.

He and Ibn Farid dashed past the closest guards who—luckily for Rami—recognized their captain and held their fire, and tumbled to the ground behind a kneeling camel.

"Your guards are too few," he told Ibn Farid when he'd regained his breath. "If we want to survive, the merchants and laborers must fight too."

Ibn Farid snorted. "You, at least, were a soldier once upon a time. But most of these civilians are no more than shopkeepers. They have no arms but second-hand flintlocks and heirloom swords that have never tasted blood."

"I have enough weapons for everyone," said Rami.

Ibn Farid's eyes opened wide. "I knew you were up to something, Syrian."

In fact, Rami's camels were laden with three hundred repeating rifles of Egyptian manufacture, destined for the rebels in the Western Vilayet. There, gold miners from every corner of Dar al-Islam—Andalusians, Moroccans, Mandinka and Songhai, Peruvians, Tatars from New Siberia—and even a few thousand Christians and Chinese, were rumored to be fighting for a republic free of the domination of sultans and emirs, and free of the enmities of tribe and clan. Rami didn't care much for ideology—he had smuggled weapons for tyrants and freedom fighters alike, but he had to admit the project

was appealing. He'd thought more than once about staying on the west coast once the cargo was delivered, and doing his part to make this dream a reality.

But first he had to get there.

"There are enough guns in my saddlebags for every guard and civilian here. They are repeaters, and I have two hundred rounds for each weapon, so even untrained shopkeepers can keep up a decent volume of fire."

"Allahu akbar," exclaimed Ibn Farid. "Can you get them distributed? I'll rally my men. Inshallah we can hold the bastards off long enough."

The battle lasted most of the day. Fourteen guards and merchants were killed in the initial onslaught, and another ten over the course of the fight. Dozens of animals were slaughtered as well. The Malucos retrieved their dead, so Rami couldn't be certain how many had fallen, but he suspected their losses were about the same. He had killed two or three himself.

They had made three massive assaults, three hundred leather-armored horsemen bearing down on the stalled caravan, while smaller parties harassed the flanks and rear, but the defense never broke. Once the Egyptian rifles had been shared out, Ibn Farid was able to mass fire against the cavalry charges while his trained guards fought off the diversionary attacks without too much effort.

By sunset, the scouts reported that the Malucos had repaired to a streambed some ten miles distant to regroup.

"To lick their wounds, you mean," said Ibn Farid, flush with the heat of victory.

"We're not in the clear yet," said Rami. "It'll be a week yet before we reach New Mexico proper."

"Malucos are little better than bandits. They'll look for easier prey, at least until they can get reinforcements, and we'll be long gone by then."

"Inshallah."

They sat in silence for a minute.

"There is a little light left yet," said Rami. "Should we finish our business now, or wait until after fajr and hope we are not interrupted again."

"You fought well today, for a half-breed Syrian Andalusian bastard. I thought we might postpone our quarrel until we reach Taos, at least. Maybe until we reach the Western Vilayet."

"If the authorities in New Mexico learn my identity, or discover my cargo, we'll never get the chance. I still have an appointment with the executioner."

“They needn’t know anything. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of the opportunity to defend the Banu Hamid honor.”

It was getting dark, but Rami was sure he’d seen Ibn Farid wink.

“Fair enough,” he said at last. “We’ll set our feud aside for now, until we reach the goldfields.

Tell me, you dirty Yemeni savage, have you heard about the Republic of the West?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jibril Stevenson graduated from the University of Puerto Rico more years ago than he cares to remember and, after a couple decades in government service, is currently pursuing graduate studies in linguistics. He lives on the East Coast with his wife and children, a lizard, an aging guinea pig and a brand new kitten. His short fiction has appeared in Toyon Literary Magazine, New Maps, Cosmic Horror Monthly, Frontier Tales (as Gabriel Stevenson), and elsewhere. Look for him at jibrilstevenson.wordpress.com or @jibrilstevenson on Twitter

PROXI

David Jensen

There were ‘good days’, her father called them, when thick ribbons of opaque atmosphere would billow from the stacks, dense enough for Ganna to breathe without assistance from her small suit. Warm enough to keep her skin from freezing without the heater pressed against her chest. She would stand in that tumbling soup wearing nothing at all. Craning her neck back, looking up.

I want you to promise me you’ll never leave the habitat without your suit, her father had said, his voice edged and chipped, threatening to cut in unexpected ways. *Even on the good days when the stacks are active, all that atmosphere can spread out, thin out, in seconds.*

No air, he kept saying. *Dangerous with no air*. But that only meant she could see the expanse above. When he was not there to stop her, to make her wear a suit, because he was out tending to the stacks towering over the horizon. Ganna could stand in the thick of it and see between the rushing gaps: a small yellow star. Saturated oxygen from the stacks would intoxicate her brain, make the star glow brighter; feel closer. And then she would collapse to the ground, her chest heaving, her lips forming the word: *Sol*. But the euphoria wouldn’t last. Always creeping, like acid up the throat, was the thought: *he would be pleased*. He would. Her tears adding to the meager hydrosphere, her sharp and rapid breaths pumping carbon into the atmosphere, trapping heat from the sun, *their* sun, Proxi. She was one small part of a biosphere he hoped to create, inconsequential to him until it thrived. But it was nowhere close to thriving. All of it only amounted to just a little more heat trapped here, the same as her. A tear from her cheek fell into the sand and was instantly absorbed. *He would be very pleased*. But then he would notice her skin-bare, curled up on the ground outside the habitat’s topside hatch, no suit. And his face would darken again.

One day it will happen. The air outside would permanently thicken to the point of closing the gaps. Painting in thick opaque coats, the window above her head. No stars during the day. Nightfall never visiting the tidally-locked surface. And just like the vast oceans and boreal forests her grandmother spoke of when she still had voice, the rest of Sol would be reduced to dim recollections in silent bodies.

#

72 hours.

Lev's face scowled in the neon red wash of these words. They mocked him from behind the screen. Dangling what he needed most literally above his head, laughing. Resupply from Sol. Launched 156 years ago, a decade after their own departure. It was the only one they sent. Lev would watch the years tick down to months, tick down to days. And now hours. Craning a scope above, Lev could see the burning glow of engines decelerating the uncrewed resupply. But it was in trouble, still approaching too quickly. He was informed the resupply would rely on his atmosphere to aerobreak for orbital insertion.

His atmosphere.

Bestowed upon him in transit to Proxi, when he was younger than Ganna. Lev's first memories were occupied by ugly and scrutinizing faces of the first shipboard generation looking down at him, muttering among themselves. Testing him, doubting him, and then choosing him. Concluding that he would grow into the man capable of creating a thick and permanent planetary atmosphere. One that would fill the lungs of every colonist to come without the need for suits, for subterranean habitats. And now, an atmosphere to decelerate the resupply. Proudly billowing canopies guiding it to the surface. Lev always feared he was not that man. And he told no one. Engineers would raise concerns, he would counter with optimism. And when that failed, anger would silence them. The atmosphere was sufficient; the aerobreak would work.

And then, 72 hours later when the resupply was reduced to an incandescent orange streak tumbling and breaking apart across the sky, he screamed. But no one could hear him, because he was wearing a suit for protection from his failure. His failure that was dominated by suffocating poison while the stacks were inactive. His failure that was cold enough to blacken skin, thin enough to burst blood vessels. And so everyone else topside scrambling for cover had to wear a suit as well. Lev stood fixed as scorched pieces of resupply and ejecta impacted around him, and screamed until his faceplate was covered in spittle. His voice gave out after a minute, but he never really stopped screaming. At his miserable atmosphere, at his partner's death and her mother's silence. At Ganna leaving the habitat without her fucking suit, over and over again.

"Here," Lev spat venomously at Ganna later that evening over dinner. He slammed a charred heat shield fragment onto the table. "A little piece of home for you." Ganna's eyes locked on his, dark with something worse than hatred. There was nothing there for him. Gently, lovingly, she placed the small piece of heat shield in her lap, and resumed eating.

She will die of old age under these domes. The thought made Lev want to cry, and to his astonishment, a rouge tear did squeeze out of a decrepit duct. At the same time, for the first time, he felt his hands itch to grab, to shake, to hurt in ways he was all too familiar with when he was her size. And then he came to, realizing what Ganna would see if she looked up in that moment. Fists clenched, tear-tracked cheeks, his wretched ineptitude exposed to the circulating habitat air like a tender nerve. He stood up fast, the seat back still clattering against the floor as he stormed away.

Ganna didn't bother watching him go. She was scrutinizing the wall planner - he was due to tend the stacks in 16 hours. Her skin prickled in anticipation for warm air rushing over the topside hatch, over her skin. For glimpses of Sol beyond the gaps. Perhaps she would take the heat shield fragment with her. Running a finger over its battered surface she whispered to it, tenderly.

"Welcome to Proxi."

#

Ganna held a waterlogged sponge at the ready.

"Lift your other arm, Baba"

Face blank, Ganna's grandmother raised her arm, dusty eyes fixed at the wall ahead of her. Gently, Ganna pressed the sponge against her skin.

"Did I tell you," she said, rubbing softly, "I saw home again yesterday? Sol."

No response.

"Do you miss it?"

Baba's right eyebrow cocked up slightly. An involuntary spasm, barely perceptible.

"I know," Ganna said, dipping the sponge into the basin, and squeezing the excess water into the recycler. "I miss it too".

Ganna read Baba's eyelid twitch. *You miss where you've never been?* It seemed to say.

"I do," Ganna replied, looking over her shoulder. The heat shield fragment was sitting next to the towels, its blackened edges curled inward like wilted petals. It wouldn't be difficult to find space for it on her bedside shelf, next to the pictures of forests and rivers Baba gave her. Back when her eyes weren't blank but instead fixed, with awareness and warmth, on Ganna's face. Back when Ganna heard her voice.

"I want to go back." She pressed the waterlogged sponge back against the road-map of wrinkled skin. "Don't you?"

The hooked nose flared, slightly. *Even if we could go back, we wouldn't recognize what it's become*, it said.

"Better than here," Ganna glanced toward the buzzing overhead lights, the synthetic white walls pre-assembled by hands long gone. Above her head, a feeble painted attempt at blue sky, with two white clouds. "Better than him."

You hate him.

Ganna breathed deeply. Her eyelids sagged with premature weight, her face muscles stiff. She was quiet for some time, probing for the hatred within her. But there was none to be found. For the longest time, he lived within her as an abrasive indifference that simply existed. Since the failed resupply three months ago, he became a physical danger that required constant vigilance. To remain small, unnoticed, out of sight, until his rage at sloping regression lines and topside mechanical failures passed. It was increasingly in vain. She could only be so small, or remain so quiet. But his menace wasn't distinguishable from that of the world around her. From the low-pressure pockets topside that would cause her to bleed without a suit; the irradiated wash of Proxi's flare-ups that sent everyone rushing for the habitat's protective depth; the tumor she had surgically removed from her earlobe. She feared their consequences but hated none of them.

"He isn't home," she said, finally. Her brow furrowed. "I want to go home."

You would be far older than me by the time you reached Sol, if you left today.

"Maybe that would be enough."

Ganna

Ganna jumped as if struck. The voice boomed from a speaker fixed against the ceiling, obscured by a painted cloud.

You are needed topside for training.

"In a moment," Ganna said, her wide eyes fixed on the cloud. She reached for a towel and placed a hand under Baba's arm. "I need to dry-"

TOPSIDE.

Ganna flinched, dropping the towel as if it had burned her skin. It fell, limp, into the bath. She felt the convection of rage through the speakers, growing hotter without limit.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the cloud, her breath quickening. She walked to the doorway, body awash in the pink glow of hydroponics systems that gave no warmth. Without thought, she scooped up the heat shield, and held it close to her chest. Rounding the corner, she did not see Baba, forgotten in the stale bath water, turn her head. Weathered eyes tracked Ganna as she disappeared beyond the hydroponics chamber, making her way to the topside

hatch. The limp in Ganna's stride, the rotten blossom of a bruise on the back of her neck, passed through foggy retinas. The corner of Baba's mouth twitched.

#

It was a good day. The horizon was overcome in a Rayleigh wash of red and orange, and Proxi loomed beyond. Even without the stacks running, the atmosphere was so thick that Lev was unable to make out the sun's curvature through the scattered intensity of light. He smiled and turned away from his victory, boots crunching on sterile pebbles that witnessed the same lifeless weathering for billions of years. Until him. Now, in the comparative time-span of a heartbeat, they will be pushed aside and broken down by the relentless growth of healthy vegetation. Lichens, ferns, woody plants, cloned fauna perched on branches and burrowed beneath roots. A self-sustaining biosphere, flush with negative feedback loops regulating the atmosphere without Lev's constant intervention. At this rate, Ganna's future children would walk across the surface without need for a suit in their elder years, just like his grandfather did as a child on Terra.

Lev stood before one of the habitat's solar arrays. The chirping alarm of reduced power generation had summoned him topside, muttering woes into his faceplate. How proud he was to find the source of the problem: sand-covered solar panels. Sustained wind strong enough to accumulate a thick layer of particulates on their surface in a short period of time. Problems caused by successes were the sweetest kind. He flicked the nozzle of a pressurized air hose, and sand swept off the webbed panel surfaces.

A red light winked on the visor of his helmet display: Ganna's name. She was beneath the hatch, powering up her suit. Taking her time, Lev noted, and anger started to crowd out his pleasure. It takes her all day to don the suit, but mere seconds to remove it topside while he's out tending the stacks. A stab of rage lanced through him, and he gave the hose an aggressive jerk, sending bullets of sand off the largest panel. Seeking calm, he again summoned the image of Ganna's children, their bare feet navigating gnarled roots and dark soil. But it would have been Ganna's own feet, were it not for the failed resupply. More bullets of sand.

Ganna's name turned green. Her suit was on, and receiving. She could hear his voice. Lev turned to see the topside hatch already open, a small suit-clad figure clamoring out. Ganna's eyes peered at him through her helmet faceplate.

"Close the hatch and come here," Lev said curtly, turning away from her. "I want you to learn this".

Silence as he stood expectantly, facing away from Proxi. And then through his helmet speaker he heard a tepid voice: "Hatch closed". A small shadow grew next to him, but he didn't look down.

"I am going to teach you how to monitor and maintain power supply for the habitat," Lev said. "Solar arrays today, geothermal systems tomorrow. How many solar arrays power this habitat?" He asked this with an abrupt bark, poised to seize on her wrong answer.

"Twenty seven," came her response. "Fifty six when the westward cable is finished."

Unabated, he followed up: "Why are we laying the cable westward?" Silence. He pounced.

"That's the direction facing Proxi, look," he pointed toward the intensity of light on the western horizon. "If that were Sol it would arc overhead, from east to west, over the course of the day. But Proxi doesn't move like that, its position remains fixed in the sky. Why?"

"We don't spin fast enough-" Ganna's voice began to whisper in his helmet.

"We don't spin fast enough," Lev said, talking over Ganna. He could hear her anxiety through the speaker, but pressed on. Pressed harder. "We're tidally locked. You go too far west and you'll burn, too far east and you'll freeze. Solar arrays do neither, so we place them westward with the cable connecting it back to the habitat. Higher insolation. More power. Are you listening to me?"

"...Yes."

That pause in her response. Another stab of anger.

"You need to understand, you will take my place before long." Finally, Lev turned down to look at her. "Tending the stacks, measuring the air, maintaining habitat power, everyone depending on you to do so. People who are here, people who have yet to come. Those before us who gave up everything so we may create a home here... Ganna, what are you holding?"

Her small suited arms were wrapped in a self-soothing hug, and metallic black protruded from them. Sharp edges glinted in the sunlight, and he realized.

"Drop it."

Ganna didn't move.

"Drop it!"

The heat shield fragment fell to the ground. Lev swept it aside with his foot.

“That fucking thing will cause a puncture! What am I supposed to do with you, Ganna? Soon I’ll be gone and it’ll be on you to shape our atmosphere. But I can’t even trust you with the air in your own suit!”

Rage cascaded through him, pulsed behind his eyes. Selfish, stupid, worthless. Hands crushed into gloved fists, he advanced on her right as a gap on the horizon parted the atmosphere. Light filtered through and blanketed the surrounding landscape. Lev faltered, blinking spots in Proxi’s blaze until his faceplate polarized. And when his vision cleared, there was Ganna. Crouched, her arms up in a trembling attempt to shield herself. Doing a poor job of it. The helmet was large in proportion to her small body, her hands barely reached halfway up the sides of her head. Facing away from Proxi, her faceplate had not yet polarized. Only her eyes were visible, wide and taught with terror.

#

“Describe it.”

Alla’s voice was gentle, calm. But Lev looked upon eyes wide with fear, skin stretched taught.

“You’ll feel it soon enough,” he replied softly, shifting to his side. Past their bed he could see through the small porthole window. Three orbs dominated the vast glitter of stars, two of them far in the distance, hugging to one another. The third orb, Proxi, appeared the diameter of a small coin and was increasingly painful to look at directly. “Feel it longer, even. Switching to deceleration only took about fifteen minutes, I barely got used to weightlessness before I was pushed back to the floor. But we’ll get a few weeks in orbit before descending to the surface. Weightless the entire time.”

“I’d settle for experiencing fifteen minutes,” Alla said. She rolled to her side and hugged Lev close. Thoughts of floating, spinning off the walls with every touch, gave pause to the anxiety gripping her chest. Six months until low orbit. If she was still around by then. The grip on her chest returned.

“It was wasted on me,” Lev murmured, his eyes fixed on Proxi. He resisted the urge to squint. “The other children were doing cartwheels through the air, pushing off surfaces, laughing. But I was terrified, clung to a wall the entire time.”

“No you didn’t!”

“I was seven, I don’t remember it too well.” A lie. The memory was never anything but fresh, stinging the entire time. The stale smell of the room when the air circulation temporarily stopped, the taste of bile stewing up as he felt the colony ship rotate and his feet leave the floor. Older voices – adult

voices – still ringing in his ears from not an hour prior to the deceleration switch. Words that had burrowed into him like a bad infestation, never to leave. *Candidate Selection*, and *A Great Honor*, and *Training Will Begin Immediately*. They looked down at him with calculating eyes and assigned his new surname: *Senior Terraforming Engineer*. Lev had met their gaze, grateful they did not look down further to see how badly his small legs were shaking.

“You’ll have another try in six months.” Alla watched Lev’s face, sensing growing distance as he squinted into Proxi’s light. “I just hope I’m there to watch you fly. Fly with you.”

“You will be.” Lev’s hand found Alla’s and squeezed, feeling the weakness in the grip, her once powerful mechanic hands now frail and slim. Withered, like the rest of her body, from a decades-long career working exposed beyond the colony ship’s protective hull. His grip subsided when he heard the faint sound of fidgets and coos from across the room. Alla shifted her head to look, briefly eclipsing light from Proxi.

“Look who’s awake,” Alla sighed. Lev started to get up, but she pushed him back onto the bed and rose to her feet with effort. Bed sheets slid off, revealing sunken skin over brittle ribs. Alla shuffled to the crib and lifted up a softly wriggling bundle of blankets. A small hand emerged from between the folds, reaching for her breast, but she redirected it to a bottle, murmuring gently, “Ganna love, you don’t want what’s in there.” Alla looked up to see Lev watching them, his face filled with anguish. She smiled softly.

“I never told you,” Alla said, slowly rocking Ganna. “But my last assignment outside the hull was spent fixing the laser communication array. I had complete control over it, and just past our bow I thought I could see Sol. And I had this wild urge to just use it. Who would stop me? I could send volley after volley of narrow beams back home toward any and every gravity well. Maybe it would reach someone who could respond. I swear, I was about to do it. But then I remembered the combined time for a message exchange was over eight years. Best case scenario. Far longer than the time I had left. So I relinquished control of the array.” She placed Ganna back in the crib and sat at the end of their bed, silhouetted by Proxi. “Light just doesn’t cooperate, does it? It won’t connect us with home, but given the chance it will break apart our bodies cell-by-cell.” She reached out and found Lev’s hand, gripping it this time with surprising force. “Not this time. When you get to the surface, you’re going to use it. Create a home with it. But not for the ones who tasked you with this. You’re going to do it for her.” She nodded toward the crib. “You’re going to do it for me. And if you can manage it, do it for yourself. Create something to carry your voice far.”

Alla looked into Lev's eyes with such intensity he felt a strong urge to hide his face. But he didn't. She smiled again, warmly. Much of it was a true smile. But he still saw tautness of skin, fear glistening in her eyes, as it would for the rest of her life.

Finally, Lev nodded, wholly unable to speak.

#

"Ganna."

Ganna didn't respond, only continued shielding her head, her eyes locked onto Lev like he was a wild animal.

"Come here." He bent down, gently held her by the wrists, lowered them away from her helmet and to her sides. He felt trembling through her suit. Her eyes wouldn't soften. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry. I lost myself, I never meant to be like this." Ganna pulled her wrists back, and Lev released his hold. "Please," he said. "I won't do it anymore, I promise. We are all we have out here."

Ganna's expression behind her faceplate remained unchanged as she backed away from him. Lev watched after her, unhappy and puzzled. But then he saw her name on his helmet display, glowing red instead of green. She switched off her receiver after he had shouted at her through it. His voice wasn't reaching her. Lev felt an abrupt tug on the back of his suit. There was a simultaneous and sudden rush of air past his body, a terrible numbing cold, and his helmet speakers were overcome with the klaxon alarm signaling decompression. When he gasped, deeply, he took a concentrated pocket of untreated air outside, and immediately lost consciousness.

Moments later, he lost everything else.

Ganna looked up, wide-eyed, into Baba's face. Exposed, rapidly blackening hands dropped the jagged heat shield, torn bits of Lev's suit still caught on its sharp edges. Soapy bathwater ran down her skin and froze solid against the pebbles. Their eyes met, in the smallest space of time, and then with a heavy pent-up exhale Baba toppled onto Lev.

For a long while, Ganna remained as motionless as they did. Gaps parted and closed in the atmosphere above, glimpses of stars peering through, Sol among them. But she didn't look up. Her oxygen meter ticked downward. The power supply for her suit's heater waned. Then the distant stacks rumbled to life, and within several stretching minutes encased them in a fresh cascade of atmosphere, warm and wet. She reached up and removed her helmet with a pressurized hiss, breathing heavily as damp hair whipped wildly across her face. There was something protruding from Baba's blackened

hands. Stumbling as she fought against disassociation and fainting, Ganna approached and bent down. It was an assortment of high calorie nutrient paste tubes, designed to be integrated in their suits.

And then she saw between the gaps of hair, Baba's face grow animated by roaring wind. The stacks continued to vibrate the ground beneath her feet, pulsing in sync with Baba's mouth opening and closing. For a moment the atmosphere, light, movement, all of it seemingly connected. She felt the word more than heard it: **GO**.

Ganna grabbed the tubes and ran without stopping.

#

Two minuscule lime-green leaves protruded from rockwool substrate, bobbing slowly in the circulating habitat's air.

Cotyledons, her father had said repeatedly among her earliest memories. *Kaa-tuh-lee-dens*. The first two leaves to emerge from a germinated seedling. The first four syllables to pass from Ganna's lips. Lev's hand guided her small fingers gently over the surface of the leaves.

"You will learn all this, one day," he said, smiling down at her. "The importance of this. I will teach you. I will try to make it fun. It *can* be fun."

"Cotyledons," Ganna replied, her wide eyes taking in the reflected stretch of chlorophyll green and emitted pink of grow lights. Rows of seedlings extended across the vast subterrane, stretching all the way down to the distant bulkhead connecting the habitat's germination and hydroponic chambers. She looked down, mouth gaping slightly, considering the cotyledon's stem briefly before curling a clumsy fist around it.

"No no," Lev said, patiently. He gently pried the plant from her grasp, and pulled her back to sit fully on his lap. "You know, on the surface, we have to do everything ourselves, with the stacks. That's just how it is. Edging too close to a runaway greenhouse effect? We change stack discharge composition, reduce atmospheric opacity to infrared emission – release more heat into space. An ice-albedo feedback is on track to glaciare the day side? Increase opacity, trap more heat. There's beauty in it, the ability to condense processes into decades that would naturally take millions of years, if at all. But there's also necessity. Your mother would often say home is wherever you feel safe. This isn't home, not yet. We can't occupy our lives topside and trust it will stay habitable. But one day it will. When the resupply arrives..."

"Yes," Ganna said quietly, nodding as if she understood his words as well as she perceived their warmth. Lev plucked another piece of rockwool,

cotyledons lazily swaying, and placed it into Ganna's outstretched hands. She was gentle with it this time. "Yes," she repeated.

"On Terra, these covered the landscape, swirled on the surface of the oceans." Lev continued, running a finger over the cotyledons Ganna held. "Our photosynthetic biosphere. Using sunlight to regulate and filter the atmosphere. Forming a habitable surface long before our distant ancestors evolved. But as we spread across the stars, this process becomes flipped. Here, it's our turn to set the conditions for a biosphere to take root and thrive. And in doing so, we receive a home."

A distant bulkhead opened, and a slim shadow grew in the germination chamber. Ganna felt cold air over her skin. She shivered. The cotyledons stopped swaying.

"So," called a voice, thick and gravelly. "*This* is where you've been. What exactly are you doing, Lev? Have you seen what our planetary circulation models have been spitting out while you're fucking around down here? Are you trying to cover the habitat under a kilometer-high glacier within the next decade?" A man entered the germination chamber, immersed fully in the grow lights, and Ganna sensed Lev grow tense, stiff. The man was impossibly old, skin hanging off bones like drying laundry. But he moved with a lithe certainty, malice in his stride, blotting out seedlings in his wake.

"Gone are the days when I could dissuade your behavior through simpler means, Lev," the voice grated. "But I have other ways to make you hurt. You know this. Get back to the stacks and do right by us."

Wordless, Lev removed Ganna from his lap, and placed her on the floor. She looked up, and was frightened to see a flash of resentment in his eyes, directed at her, before turning toward his topside suit stowed in a corner. He began to put it on. As he did, the soft rhythmic beating of an alarm emanated from somewhere inside the helmet. Faint at first, but growing louder every second. Lev paid it no attention as he secured the faceplate. Then he turned, and Ganna recoiled, overcome with waves of nausea and crawling horror. A jagged gash was splitting across her father's suit, right before her eyes. Exposed skin, swollen black and blue, leered at her through the torn polymer. His eyes were bloodshot, unseeing. The alarm was growing now into a thunderous wail.

Alert alert alert. Flare-up onset detected. Seek protective shelter immediately. Alert alert alert. Flare-up onset detected. Seek...

Ganna wrenched up with a panicked gasp, awake, head colliding against the fogged up faceplate of her helmet. She scrambled up into a crouch, surrounded by a skeletal blackened husk of wreckage. It was one small part of

the extensive debris field from the incinerated resupply, stretching like a scar across the landscape.

Salvaging wreckage was her life in the months since she ran. Mixing nutrient paste with scavenged heavy water intended for surface reactors. Prying loose filters and batteries compatible with her suit's air and liquid circulation systems. She was sick, often. But alive. Trekking northward within the habitable longitudinal band Proxi begrudgingly relented. Leapfrogging across wreckage sites Sol lovingly provided. Doing so became easier after she disabled each and every bit of her suit capable of telemetry. The rovers dotting the landscape, searching for her, finally stopped. Likely presumed her dead, and now with good reason: in the back of her mind she knew, sooner or later, a flare-up would hit. This sun would try and kill her. It seemed fitting to strike in her sleep.

Ganna glared toward Proxi and her faceplate polarized. The surface of the sun was churning with equal contempt. This bit of wreckage was exposed on the lip of an ancient crater. It wouldn't protect her. Her helmet display flashed red and Ganna felt panic bubble up in her throat; a lethal rem dose was imminent. Frantically, she peered over the edge of the crater. Right there. Just over 100 meters down, what appeared to be a small cave system. Maybe. A tight opening, whatever it was. But she had no other choice. She jumped, making a hasty attempt at controlling her descent. She immediately started sliding and tumbling wildly. Her faceplate slammed several times against rocky protrusions, the helmet display remaining active through a fresh spiderweb of cracks. On it, the dosimeter output continued trending upward against the rolling backdrop of boulders and sky. Ganna landed in a heap, bruised and bloody, at the cave system's mouth. She dragged herself inside, ragged breath catching in her throat, and the alarm in her helmet diminished. Despite the narrow entryway, the interior was spacious, tall ceilings and distant walls reflecting stray fragments of dim light, the rest receding into darkness. The air beyond the cave opening danced in silence as the flare-up reached its peak. Rhythmic pulses of ionized greens and blues.

She barely missed the worst of it, but was likely doomed all the same. The metallic taste in her mouth was overpowering. There was, what, a full minute between her suit's dosimeter finally waking her up and her finding shelter? Ganna shuddered. How she wished she could remove her helmet without feeling fire in her lungs. There were times during her northward trek when the air was safe, when she removed her suit and thermal underlayer entirely and slept deeply beneath its gentle passage across her skin. But there were fewer opportunities to do so, the further she journeyed from the stacks.

Her father's stacks... She couldn't go back, she could never go back. A different reason played out in her head each time she contemplated returning.

Most people in the habitat could not be trusted. They were dangerous, so it's better out here.

And the few people who were kind to her, well, they probably think what happened was her fault. They don't want her back.

It *was* all her fault. Why did she say those things to her Baba, she never would have said those things if she knew what would happen-

Wherever you feel safe.

Ganna noticed the air had darkened, and her dosimeter was silent. Wincing, she rose to her feet, and cautiously peered around the edge of the narrow cave mouth. A brilliant flash of blue lanced into the cave, as if Proxi were lying in ambush. The dosimeter squawked and helmet display turned a blinding white. Ganna cried out and dove for cover behind the cave wall, then immediately scrambled back to her feet, enraged. Bands of light continued to flash through the narrow cave opening. Gloved hands balled into fists, she screamed at the light as hard as she could. Spittle and blood flecked onto her stuttering helmet display as she vented her fury, every foul thought burning inside her like hot coals.

Fuck Proxi.

And fuck this place too, tidally locked against a flare star, why would anyone come here-

A burst of violet surged through the cave opening, this one bright enough to throw the high ceiling and walls into sharp relief. Ganna's cracking voice faltered as she looked up. For a moment, she doubted her eyes. But then the cave was illuminated again. The exposed portion of walls were covered in sprawling veins of flaky lichens, anchored deep into the rock. On the cave floor, all around her, healthy wet mosses soaked moisture like a sponge. They had cushioned her boots without her noticing. The entire cave was alive. Finding calm, and awed into total silence, Ganna slowly leaned in to magnify the moss on her helmet display. Lazily wriggling tardigrades were clinging to the stems, eating algae.

The flare-up passed, plunging the cave back into dim light and shadows.

Glowing numbers danced across Ganna's face. Atmospheric pressure was safe, and breathable. She removed her helmet and listened to the echoing drip of water, muffled by the vegetation all around her. Thinking. And then it swam up from hazy memory. The resupply contained materials for biosphere seeding. It wasn't intended to explode in the upper atmosphere and scatter across the northern hemisphere. And yet, brewing in the shelter of cave

mouths across the surface, vegetation was absorbing Proxi's reflected light. Stitching together the sprawling debris field, like platelets closing up a wound. The stacks set the necessary conditions; the resupply wasn't a failure.

He would be pleased.

The sudden thought lingered above Ganna's head, echoing off the cave surfaces as if spoken by someone else.

"He would," she agreed aloud, her voice muffled by the surrounding blanket of mosses. Hot tears began to slip down her cheeks. Her face twitched uncontrollably until she cried in full. For her Baba, her father, the agonizing sight of their heaped bodies in front of an open topside hatch. For the dim silhouetted outline she recalled of her mother. She wept for home. Her tears added to the cave's moisture, destined to become proteins in the chloroplasts absorbing Proxi's reflected light, the roots burrowing into the cave walls.

With a final shuddering breath, Ganna slowly regained herself and stood upright. She clipped her helmet against her hip and walked out into sunlight. Clouds were churning on the hazy horizon beyond the crater's edge. Above, the blackness of space was barely perceptible beyond the scattering. Ganna glanced at the narrow cave opening. It gaped back at her, deceptively dark and sterile, like countless others scattered across the landscape.

Ganna bowed over and vomited. Burning in her throat and nostrils. Eyes stinging. It was happening quickly, the symptoms of flare-up exposure, it must have been worse than she thought. Fatigue was creeping in, and her lungs prickled with labored breathing. The air outside wasn't safe. She contemplated returning to the cave, and removing her suit and thermal underlayer entirely. Curl up onto the bed of moss, and fall asleep. Stay asleep. Give her carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, water, all of it, to the small patch of biosphere growing inside. But in the distance, just beyond the crater's edge, another wreckage site peered at her, called wordlessly through the thin air to her. So she secured her helmet, and went.

But it wasn't wreckage.

Ganna didn't know what it was, other than being much larger than it appeared from a distance. No matter how many labored steps she took, it didn't seem to get any closer. But it did get taller as she ascended a ridge, reaching the very top. There at the bottom of a valley it stood in its entirety, far in the distance, absolutely massive: terraforming stacks. But these were new, skeletal, under construction. At its base, a framework of something else, she couldn't tell. She zoomed in on her helmet display and saw heat shields. Distant thuds and grinds of machinery were audible. She understood: a sister colony ship, from Sol. The minuscule movement of people could be seen

disassembling the ship, repurposing it into a subterranean habitat on the surface.

Ganna fell to her knees, utterly exhausted, dizzy. She removed her helmet and vomited again. Her suit was low on fluids, just like her. Batteries were burning up, shorting out. There were no more steps to take. It was impossible. The air burned her insides, ached her brain, and poisoned her blood. But the helmet was now too heavy for her trembling arms to lift and put back over her head. She was going to die here. Remorsefully, she wished she had given herself to the vegetation in the cave. But then the crumbling of rover wheels approached from behind, and remorse immediately turned to fear. Did a search party from the habitat manage to find her without telemetry? She was in no position to resist, and would be handled roughly. They would surely take her back, nurse her to just enough health that she could be forced back into the terraforming project, until she was utterly spent.

It wasn't them. It wasn't anyone she recognized. The technology of the rover looked different, alien. So did the suits of the two people climbing out, full faces visible through their faceplates, overcome with concern. They crouched over her. One of them picked up her helmet, examining it briefly with fascination before placing it gently over her head and securing it to her suit. Over an open channel, a flood of words issued through her helmet speakers, into Ganna's ears. She understood none of them. It was a different language entirely. Everything was impossible to comprehend. These were new colonists. They arrived here, and she had no idea, none of them did. There was no mention of this from her father, from anyone. She looked up at the taller one, through his faceplate, and saw kindness in his eyes.

"Sol?" she asked into her mic, feebly.

The tall one nodded. Exaggerated up and down motions, to ensure Ganna could see.

"Terra?" she ventured further, excitement rising. She tried getting to her feet, but faltered. "Are you from Terra?" The two colonists looked at each other, their faces bewildered. They must have switched to a private channel, Ganna could see their mouths moving rapidly, but her helmet speakers were silent. The tall one switched back to the open channel, and placed a hand onto her shoulder.

In the years that followed, when Ganna became well versed in their language, the tall one, Dai, would tell what they knew. Of societal upheaval on Terra that must have erased records of the first colony ship to Proxi. The flashes on the planet's surface a century before, visible from their Martian cities, and even some Jovian moons. Then an unbroken silence and ruinous

glow that never went away. But for now, Dai could only muster a variation of three words in Ganna's language.

"Home gone. Your home. Gone."

#

Rusty white was the color of topside, for as long as Ganna could remember. White quartz from the primordial beginning, when the newborn surface was glowing hot, accreting under fiery bombardment. And then, a gentle blue, after everything calmed enough for liquid water. But Proxi dominated the sky, and the surface wasn't yet tidally locked. All of the water's hydrogen burned off into space, leaving the oxygen behind – heavier, highly reactive, and alone. Forced to find another home with whatever else would take it. The carbon in the air, the iron in the rocks. If oxygen could choose, perhaps it would still be with the hydrogen, wanting to be water. But elements only react. And so: rusty white, under poisoned air.

Ganna squinted. When she did, small dots of green became visible, mixed in with the rust. Uneven across the vast stretch of valley, patchy like beard stubble. It looked this way through every window on the habitat's topside observation deck, including the largest one facing east. But Ganna avoided looking through that window if she could help it. Instead she sat on one of the benches built into the smaller west facing alcove, her back resting against the transparent walls, holding her knees loosely to her chest. She watched feeble wisps of cloud drift out from under the ridge line shadow, and burn away in Proxi's light.

It had been 18 months of reclusiveness, and distrust. Surrounded by spoken language of the new colonists, one she had no interest in learning. But she learned. There was a pit inside her extending to aching depths when she used their words, imitated their mannerisms. At the bottom she felt trapped, looking up at a single dot of light, shimmering like a distant star.

Like Sol.

But Sol didn't remember her. It sent other children to Proxi without even realizing she was here. Those days spent topside, no suit, searching for the faint yellow between gaps of rushing atmosphere. The whole time there was nothing looking back, nothing searching for her. She should have known. Light from stars radiate indifferently in all directions. An infinitesimal fraction of Sol's light reaching her on accident, the rest lost to blackness. Ganna started speaking more when she realized this. There was a deliberate roughness in the use of her new language, like tearing at old skin that no longer fit. But this caught the attention of Dai, his concerned face wincing at

Ganna's harsh consonants. *You must speak your language or you will forget it entirely*, he said. So they spoke every day. In groups, Ganna used their language. Alone, Dai and Ganna conversed in hers. Dai improved quickly. He pronounced her words with delicate care. Ganna started doing the same with his.

But Dai hadn't been here for long. She knew, at some point, Proxi's light would break down the kindness in his eyes. Like her father. She chose her words carefully.

The subterranean hatch at the center of the observation deck's floor opened.

"I wasn't expecting to see you up here."

Ganna looked over to see Dai's head poking through. He reached an arm through to brush jet black hair from his eyes, which were wide with a joyful glint. She looked back to the valley.

"I'm always up here."

"Yeah, but today..." Dai's voice trailed off and he glanced toward the eastern observation window. "Well hey, I'm happy to see you." He gripped the handles on the hatchway and hoisted himself fully onto the deck.

"Thanks."

Dai walked toward the alcove where Ganna sat, but stopped just short of it. He squinted as he took in the valley. "Oh yeah," he said, a cautious smile on his face. "Definitely more green since last I checked."

"Not much."

"But more." Dai persisted, grinning. "Vegetation moves at its own pace. A much faster pace after today, if all goes well. The surface will look a lot better."

"Sure."

Hearing the silence, Ganna looked over to Dai. He gestured to the bench across her. She shrugged. Her gaze returned to the valley.

"You think the test is going to fail, don't you?" Dai sat down with a comfortable slouch. He cast a nervous glance again toward the eastern window. Through it, on the other side of the valley, a massive discharge port stood at the base of the newly completed stacks. Gaping like a vast expressionless mouth. The stacks towered overhead, dominating half of the deck's skylight. This never presented a problem for Ganna; she didn't look up much anymore.

"No," she replied flatly. "the test will go better than you realize."

"Yeah?" His voice was full of encouragement. But it was for her. Interest in what she knew, what she was thinking.

Ganna sighed and sat up a little straighter, looking at Dai. “Your colony ship took what, half a century to get here? A little less?”

Dai gave a small nod.

Ganna finally turned toward the eastern window. The stacks stared down at her through the skylight, like a stoic colossus. “Our transit took three times as long,” she said, looking up at them. “That’s quite the reactor pushing you across the void, and now you’re using it to power your stacks, just like we did with ours. In one year the carbon sequestration and oxygen production alone will outpace the past decade of our own efforts. The biosphere will eat everything you throw at it, will spread beyond the reach of the stacks, until it can exist without human intervention. Pulling carbon out of the air, replacing it with oxygen to breathe, autonomous in response to external pressures and shocks. So yeah,” Ganna looked away from the stacks, toward Dai. “Today will exceed your expectations. And the day after that.”

Dai leaned back against the bench, a smile on his face. “Now that is good to hear,” he said, closing his eyes. “Why didn’t you mention anything earlier? I would have slept better.”

“I assumed your engineers told you as much.”

“They’re saying it’s a coin flip. Some think the discharge rate won’t overcome the planet’s negative feedbacks.”

Ganna suppressed a snort. “They’re new here. The coming success is out of their hands at this point.”

There was a twist of bitterness in her voice. It was not lost on Dai. A small, knowing smile slowly spread.

“Perhaps it can fall into yours,” he said. He wasn’t seeking an answer in saying this. Instead he just watched her, still smiling, continuing to lean against the glass walls of the alcove. “You couldn’t imagine the surprise on approach,” he continued, “when we were close enough to resolve Proxima’s light passing through the atmosphere. There were spectral signatures of biotic compounds, and we wondered: *alien life*? No. Instead we found a young girl from a forgotten maiden voyage, dying of radiation sickness. It was a challenge, restoring your health. Undoing the damage. And once you were able to talk again, and the first thing you said was ‘don’t send me back’.” Dai leaned forward now, his eyes on Ganna. “I wondered if that’s all you would say. But then we started talking. And when I mentioned terraforming, you just went off. Your knowledge was overflowing, it was stunning. I figured you’d want nothing more than to join our mission. Of course I knew I figured wrong, when I first asked you. Maybe you needed more time.”

Ganna said nothing. She knew this talk would come. The things Dai wanted from her. The rest of the colonist, too. Why else give her a room, a bed,

clean air, clothes, medicine? And how did they plan to force her, when she refused?

She had no intention of finding out.

Unknown to anyone, a spare topside suit was stowed under her bed. Next to a duffel bag full of stolen supplies from food storage and engineering bays. She knew of a rover parked in the depot that would start without an ignition code, its cabin shielded from flare-ups. There was a well-rehearsed, second-by-second plan, ready the moment it became dangerous. She even acted on it a few times, spurred by the jolt of an offhand comment or poorly timed look in her direction. And then she was hyperventilating into her helmet, vision blurring at the edges, stumbling down subterranean hallways to the nearest topside airlock while everyone slept. Last time, she almost did it. The airlock was depressurized, duffel bag slung over her back, gloved hand resting on the release lever to the topside hatch. But her heart finally steadied, and her breathing slowed. She found calm. But it was never guaranteed. Eventually, she will pull the lever. And then she will be gone.

Ganna still said nothing. Dai did not break the silence. Then finally, she inhaled softly, hesitantly. "I hear the others talking," she said, choosing her words carefully. Keeping her voice neutral. "They've been asking me more questions, wanting more assistance. They're trying to put me on the terraforming mission."

"That's not their call," Dai said, simply.

"I see," Ganna said to Dai. With effort, her voice remained steady. But her mind gravitated toward another anxious inventory. The suit and duffel bag were under her bed. The rover with the chipped red paint started without an ignition code. She forced these thoughts aside. "It's yours then, is that it? You'll decide when I join the terraforming mission?"

Dai shook his head. "It's your call, actually," he said, relaxed, looking back out at the stretching landscape, the feeble green. "But no matter what you choose, you will always have a home here."

Ganna said nothing. But slowly, quietly, a breath she didn't realize was held released. Dai didn't seem to notice, keeping his gaze through the western alcove window. His face was full of Proxi's light, but he hardly blinked. Ganna considered her hands, holding her knees to her chest. She relaxed them and sat cross-legged, back against the alcove, as Dai did.

"That being said," Dai continued, "your work in the hydroponics bay has been fantastic. I wouldn't complain if you chose to keep that up. Half the reason I came up here was to keep myself from gorging on radishes... Oh, hello." The center hatch had opened. Colonists were hoisting themselves inside, filling up the observation deck, chattering animatedly. Dai turned back

to Ganna and smiled, rising to his feet. “The test is about to start, Ganna. Come on, let’s grab a good view.”

Ganna hesitated, but then followed. Among the sea of colonists, faces turned her way, and she braced for glares of expectation and resentment. Instead there was giddy excitement, it carried through the observation deck like a thick charge. Smiles grew at the sight of her, they shuffled to make room for her in the crowd. On the window’s display, a timer appeared, counting downward. The crowd started counting with it, in jumbled unison. But still, Ganna couldn’t bring herself to join in. She found herself wishing the timer was set for a little longer.

The mouth of the stacks disappeared in a shimmering blur. The windows of the observation deck shuddered, and the blur turned into an opaque cloud mushrooming out in every direction, covering the landscape of rust and white and feeble green, rapidly approaching the windows. Within minutes, a cascading rush of warm, damp atmosphere hit the thick glass with relentless speed and careened up, enveloping the entire deck before continuing on behind them. There was an immediate explosion of joy. The kinetic energy of it jostled Ganna in every direction. Observers were crying out, hugging onto each other, laughing. Some of the older colonists wept. The windows were dripping with condensation. Barometric and chemical data scrolled across, prompting another round of cheering. People spoke buoyantly of revised habitability timetables. Dai’s face was full of tears. Unable to contain himself, he scooped Ganna up into a tight hug, laughing words that were lost in the jubilation around them. Ganna realized she was smiling.

And then a year passed.

Ganna had made it a daily ritual to take long walks in the valley after she completed her work in the hydroponics bay. When the stacks were active, she went without a suit. This made the other colonists nervous, but no one ever attempted to prevent her. She would pause from time to time during these walks, and stand in the silence of a landscape animated with change. It was increasingly vegetated. Brave stems ventured far from growing pools of water, relying on precipitation and condensation for nourishment. They put down roots with confidence it would come. And then gradually, naturally, Ganna’s thoughts shifted to terraforming. As she wandered the valley she sensed the surrounding biogeochemical cycles, exponentially catalyzed by the stacks. There was a feeling of heightened autonomy in the biosphere. She suspected photosynthesis and aerobic respiration increasingly accounted for the uptake and release of carbon all around her. There was comfort in the thought.

During one walk, Ganna reached the top of the valley where the air grew slightly thinner. Dai was standing in the distance, next to a parked rover. He was hunched over the base of a recently erected metallic structure. Others just like it were scattered throughout the valley. Dai stood upright when he saw her. He removed his helmet, brushing black hair from his eyes.

“What are you up to, Dai?” Ganna called, warmly, when she was close enough.

“Hey Ganna. Just failing miserably at calibrating the flux towers.” Dai called back. His eyes were full of frustration, but Ganna was unbothered as she walked up to him. Dai was laughing at himself, his gloved fingers punching another command into the terminal at the base of the tower. The screen flashed red. His laugh transitioned seamlessly into a groan. “We can’t automate stack discharge until it’s figured out. I’ll be out here for a while.”

“How about I take a look?”

Dai startled, and his eyes were wide with pleasant surprise. He stepped aside wordlessly. Ganna tied her hair back to clear her face, and leaned in to the terminal. Her eyes glowed in the screen light as she examined the outputs for several minutes. Then, bare hands tapped out commands. The screen flashed red several times. But on the fifth try, it flashed green. Dai looked from the terminal output to Ganna, and grinned. Ganna grinned back.

#

The twilight zone of the habitable band was sacred space. Color worked differently. Proxi was nothing more than a rippling thread of deep red light on the horizon, and stars gleamed brightly between the overhead clouds in its absence. The faint song of persistent easterly wind carried across the surface, through clustered vegetation and steam rising from geothermal springs, vibrating and echoing as if a living cathedral was not far off in the distance.

Ganna switched off the rover’s headlights, and sat motionless in the dim light of perpetual sunset. Her breathing was slow. It was accompanied by another, smaller. She looked down to the copilot seat. A child’s eyes were alight in the ruby glow of reflected light. His small features were familiar, a genetic mix of dozens of colonists. Ganna saw her own features there, and by extension that of her own family. Under Proxi’s light, the elements swirled with perpetual change in self-sustaining cycles. And so too did the genetic legacies of the colonists. Measured carefully, so the colony’s planetside generations of children could call every founding colonist a parent. Though she never volunteered for the role of surrogate, this was Ganna’s child.

“Yuki,” Ganna said, quietly. The small face turned. “Want to take a look?”

Yuki smiled broadly. Without another word, he swung the door outward and was gone with a scamper of small feet. Ganna ducked her head followed him. Their suits stayed behind. They had become an afterthought in the two decades since the Martian colony’s stacks were first tested. When she fully emerged from the rover, she was surprised to see how far Yuki’s little legs had carried him. He was shimmering in the distance against the band of Proxi’s dwindled light. Almost beyond her sight. Cupping hands to her face, Ganna called out.

“*Yuki!*”

Her voice carried far, pushed by the currents of easterly wind. It was strong, sustained, and Ganna felt like it continued on over the horizon before them, racing into sunlight. Yuki turned back, and Ganna waited. She listened to the stirring of woody vegetation. The hum of insects. Yuki stomped up and flopped onto his back at her feet, panting.

“Harder to breathe this far from the stacks, right?”

“Yes,” Yuki gasped.

“Take your time,” Ganna said, sitting down beside him. The ground was soft, cushioned by a bed of grasses. “We will start when you’re ready.”

Half a minute passed. Then Yuki said, “Okay.”

“I want you to find our neighbors,” Ganna whispered, leaning close to him as she looked up. “Tell me their names, and how far they are.”

Yuki scrutinized the night sky, turning his head slowly from side to side to take it all in. Then, he pointed at the brightest of the stars, two of them, bound closely to their barycenter.

“The sisters,” he said.

“Yes, but what are their actual names?”

Yuki thought for a moment. “Alpha Centauri A, B... part of our system, not far away.”

“Keep going,” Ganna said, leaning back. “Be specific.”

Yuki pointed west. “Sirius... Twelve light years.”

“Well done,” Ganna murmured. “That light is almost twice as old as you, Yuki.”

He continued on like this, and Ganna listened. Barnard’s Star. Procyon. Tau Ceti. And then, finally, Yuki gestured toward the horizon, “Sol, right over there. Four light years.”

“There it is,” Ganna said, looking over to where Yuki was pointing.

“More like four and a quarter.”

“That was home,” Yuki continued, keeping his gaze towards Sol. “But then you made one here.”

“It wasn’t just me,” Ganna replied. Her eyes remained fixed on Sol as well.

“They’re naming parts of the town after you like it was.”

Ganna laughed and sat up slightly, propped on her elbows. “That’s because I helped us breathe a little better,” she said. “Protected us from Proxi’s light a little more. Do you think that’s all home is?”

“I don’t know,” Yuki said. His forehead creased. Ganna remained silent, letting his thoughts play out. “Can’t have a home without that, I guess.”

They were quiet for some time. The grass around them rustled with easterly wind. Just over their feet, something could be seen darting between the bushes. It was small and covered in fur. Ganna listened to all of it, animated by the atmosphere around them. The heat it trapped and released. The biological processes it sustained. The way it gently fluttered over her skin as it rushed westward into sunlight. Warming, rising, traveling eastward to the night side, cooling, sinking, traveling westward again. Perpetually. Her eyes drifted from Sol to the horizon, toward Proxi’s light. Ganna thought of Dai’s grinning face in front of an observation deck window dotted with condensation. The faces of the other Martian colonists smiling at the sight of her, parting to make room for her. Distant recollections of Alla’s body, leaning over her own. Lev before his eyes diminished in their kindness, holding Ganna close in the germination chamber. And Baba’s voice whispering in the darkness of a sleeping habitat, her words painting vivid images of mighty Eurasian rivers draining into the Arctic Ocean on Terra.

“It wasn’t just me,” Ganna said again, softer this time. She looked beside her. Yuki had fallen asleep in the bed of grasses. His chest was rising and falling slowly with the stirring vegetation around them. He slept like this in the rover, rocking gently with the terrain as Ganna drove them into the gradually brightening horizon.

Within hours, the stacks came into view, and then the town at the bottom of the valley. Cultivated fields extended outward in all directions. The edges were ringed by sprawling arrays of wind turbines, their heavy blades spinning with the powerful passage of air. Dark rainclouds were roiling in the distance. It was raining in full by the time Ganna pulled up to the central courtyard. Everyone was outside, chasing one another, dancing in the downpour, splashing in puddles. They had no suits. Most had no clothes on at all. Joyous voices stirred Yuki awake. He jumped from the rover while it was still moving, and sped off to join the crowd, shedding clothes as he ran. A modest flare-up was unfolding on Proxi, but there was little danger anymore;

auroras slowly heaved beyond the storm. Ganna stood by the parked rover and watched as Yuki was picked up and spun by his surrogate mother. Dai was beside them. He smiled towards Ganna, white hair plastered flat over his forehead, and she smiled back.

Between the parting clouds, Ganna could see Sol. It was positioned just right in their 11-day orbit around Proxi for them to appear side by side. A kaleidoscope of colorful tendrils extended from the two stars, pulsing on the surface, caressing the town, the biosphere dancing in puddles, the muddy lithosphere beneath her bare feet. The water and air all around. Sensing their warmth, she closed her eyes and let the propagated waves of light encase her like they were countless reaching arms. For a moment, she felt with a glowing certainty that she could touch them, feel them.

And then reaching up, Ganna held them lovingly, against her face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Jensen is a geospatial / remote sensing scientist with a research background in cryospheric and climate science. He enjoys photography, oil pastels, cycling, and gardening. He designed and built a hydroponics system, and uses it to grow basil in his basement for homemade pesto. He is extremely smug about this.

A DECENT LEVEL OF TRANQUILITY

John Tures

“Tenure was originally invented to protect radical professors, those who challenged the accepted order. But we don’t have such people anymore at the universities, and the reason is tenure. When the time comes to grant it nowadays, the radicals get screened out. That’s its principal function. It’s a very good system, really – keeps academic life at a decent level of tranquility.”

– John Kenneth Galbraith. *A Tenured Professor*. 1990. Houghton-Mifflin. Quote reposted by Herbert Mitgang in “Book of the Times: Galbraith The Novelist In An Economic Fairy Tale” in *The New York Times* by February 24, 1990 <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/24/books/books-of-the-times-galbraith-the-novelist-in-economic-fairy-tale.html>

“Let the record show this tenure hearing of History Professor Derrick Kraft began at 3:30pm on March 15, 2025, at Tewksbury College in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,” Dean Alexander Montgomery began.

Inwardly Derrick groaned as he glanced around the conference room. Dean Montgomery used the title “Doctor” only with those he favored. Even though Derrick earned his Ph.D. seven years ago, the Dean of Academia had never used it on him.

Blake gave him a look, as if to remind him not to lose his temper. As his chair in the history department, she had his back ever since he had been hired, his guardian angel. But would Dr. Prescott’s support be enough that afternoon?

The third and final panelist, Professor Jordan Tillman, would do whatever Dean Montgomery asked of him. Everyone knew Tillman, a fellow Ivy Leaguer, had his eye on Blake’s job...or even the dean’s position when “Monty” made his push to be the college’s next president, as Samuel Lawrence was nearing retirement age.

This wasn’t looking good. The president and board of trustees had the final say, but they usually went with the results of the tenure hearing.

Dean Montgomery finally finished his legalese, which he was required to say at the start of the tenure hearing. “And let me remind everyone that the college has rescinded its DEI policies earlier this year, so *you* cannot use them in any appeal.”

Derrick glowered as the Dean of Academia made this about race....my race. It was a Catch-22 of sorts. If you struggled, it confirmed everyone's views on racial superiority. And if you succeeded, it was to come with an asterisk, as if government policies were the only reason for your achievement.

Kraft thought *you agreed to this, caving to political pressure from the legislature so fast after the last election. Or did you want this all along?*

Fearing an outburst from the tenure candidate, Blake spoke up. "I'd like to point out that the bulk of the evaluation criteria comes from teaching, and Dr. Kraft has excellent evaluations from his students...some of the best at Tewksbury College. And he won the faculty award voted on by his colleagues for inspiring..."

"Yes, yes," the academic dean began in a bored tone. "He did win that *popularity* contest last year, perhaps owing to his celebrity status for playing for FSU, and *very briefly* for the NFL."

As Dean Montgomery repeated his well-worn lecture about how overrated student evaluations were, Derrick considered his short professional career. Even before the career-ending knee injury, he was seen as an oddity in the league. He got along with teammates, but coaches didn't seem to know what to do with him. Reporters weren't sure what questions to ask him, as if a football player couldn't be smart. He doubted any of them could master a playbook, as challenging as any textbook he had read at his alma mater..

His college experience was a double-edged sword. The Academic All-American defensive back could show his National Championship ring to dazzle recruits to their Division III football program. It also helped in recruiting students to the college, an asset in an era of spiraling costs. But for those like Dean Montgomery, it was a clear minus, as if athleticism was the reason he was a Rhodes Scholar finalist. His Wisconsin Ph.D. from a "state school," was similarly derided behind closed doors by the bluebloods at the college, even though UW was considered one of the best history programs in the country, public or private.

Blake pointed to Derrick's file. "His students have been accepted at some of the finest graduate schools, and private sector...."

"Where they become someone else's success," Jordan Tillman countered, looking at the dean for approval.

Kraft's eyes widened. "Doesn't it matter that our graduates do well on the job market, and getting advanced degrees?"

“Only if they’re donors,” came the terse reply from the dean.

The history chair pressed on to reveal Dr. Kraft’s successes. “And student scores improved on posttests over their pretest scores...”

“An imperfect measure, Professor Prescott,” snapped Dean Montgomery. His habit of interrupting Blake was legendary.

“I’m speaking,” she countered. Now Derrick had to give his Chair a look, pleading with her not to lose it. “When it comes to scholarship, Dr. Kraft has three publications...”

Dean Montgomery cut in, “All three of those papers had co-authors, which downgrades their impact.”

Derrick rose to his feet. “Those co-authors were undergraduate researchers!”

“As opposed to learned scholars.” Professor Tillman sniffed indignantly. “That makes them even less valuable.”

All sides paused, glaring at each other, before slowly returning to their seats.

“You can’t overlook Dr. Kraft’s excellent service record,” Blake continued.

“Ah yes...but much of this is in the *community*, and not on committees or task forces,” Dean Montgomery used his hands as makeshift scales, with college service clearly weighing more.

That’s rich, Derrick glowered. *Since you picked those positions and froze me out except for the meaningless “Academic Services Committee.”*

“But his work with the Historical Center and Meals on Wheels....”

Montgomery’s interruptions of Blake were as predictable as the sun rising in the morning. “What did you do, Derrick? Get a DUI?”

Through clenched teeth, the History Professor replied, “The volunteer work was with my church.”

“Ah yes,” Dean “Monty” put on his glasses, and scanned his copy of the file. “At that A.M.E. Church at the edge of town. I fail to see how this work benefits Tewksbury College in any way.”

The room fell silent. *What does Dean Montgomery have against me?* Derrick wondered. *I haven’t done anything to him.*

“Why don’t we get to the real issue here?” the academic dean shattered the silence. All looked at each other in surprise, then back at their leader.

“It’s your use of artificial intelligence in your teaching.”

Derrick held up his hand as if testifying in court. “Dean Montgomery, I swear I don’t let my students use it in their papers, and I have my undergraduates write their exam essays by hand in class.”

“And that’s just the problem,” the head of the tenure committee barked. “You *aren’t* using it more in class!”

Derrick and Blake exchanged glances, then swung their heads back toward Dean Montgomery. Even Professor Tillman’s face registered surprise.

The professor up for tenure coughed nervously. “I do teach them how to use it. They produce papers with MyA.I. but only for them to have a paper to compete with. It’s like a tackling dummy or a computer simulation to beat. But their original ideas that they come up with are what matter.”

A smirk preceded Dean Montgomery’s response. “As if your students from the farmlands of Pennsylvania or the mean streets of Philadelphia could ever compete for an idea with the brilliance of these computer systems that soak up more of the Internet every day.”

The academic dean took off his glasses and wiped the frames. “I’m sorry, Derrick, but you should have been training your students to fully use artificial intelligence and its perfect grammar, to do their papers and essays, if you really wanted to educate them.”

Montgomery closed the file with an ominous slam. “Now, please clean out your office in the Wallace Center by the end of the month and move to one of those spare offices in the basement of the Ballard Building until the end of the semester when you leave our employ.”

Montgomery rose to his feet. “Now that this hearing is concluded...”

Dr. Kraft cleared his throat. “You know, I thought something like this might come up, so I would like add this item to my application.”

The history professor slid three manila folders across the table, one to each member of the tenure committee. Tillman handled his gingerly, as if it had COVID, while Blake picked up her copy, clearly interested. Dean Montgomery continued to walk around the table, ignoring his copy of the folder.

“Mr. Kraft, it is too late to add any personal accomplishments to your file,” the committee chair added with a somber tone.

“Oh, it’s not about me.”

Dean Alexander Montgomery narrowed his eyes and snatched a copy of the file. As he read, he walked slowly back to his seat. No one said a word as they continued to pore over the details.

“So this California university replaced all of their professors with A.I. Chat Bots,” Professor Jordan Tillman gasped. “How is that possible?”

“It’s not just their professors, but their academic deans are starting to be replaced as well at that California college. The A.I. programs assign the schedules, admit or deny applicants, and pick the courses for students...pretty much anything you do, Dean Montgomery.”

Alexander and Jordan exchanged worried looks, the latter clearly sweating.

“Uh. This is all very fascinating, Mr. Kraft,” the dean began. “But I fail to see the relevance to us, or you.”

Derrick smiled. “Look at the fourth name on the report that helped design this university out in California and recommend it as a national model.”

Jordan blurted “It’s Dr. Timothy Collins...the guy we were going to bring in to repl-”

Dean Montgomery loudly cleared his throat to stop his subordinate from saying any more. But Professor Tillman fixed his superior with a look, lip quivering. His eyebrows narrowed. If he had spoken, the words would probably be “How could you?”

“As is customary, I’ll wait outside while you three reach a decision,” Professor Kraft offered, then surreptitiously winked at Blake, whose expression betrayed a slight smile.

“The vote was 2-1” Blake explained later at their favorite bar, The Lighthouse. “Dean Montgomery still couldn’t bring himself to vote for you. But you cracked Jordan like an egg.”

Derrick clinked his glass with hers. “Thanks for passing on the name Timothy Collins, the guy they were originally going to bring in next week to take my spot. It came in handy.”

Then his expression darkened. “While I’m glad to get tenure, that stuff they’re doing in academia with A.I. is pretty disturbing. It could replace scholars and original thoughts, professors and student learning. Undergrads will soon be required to spit out the same words approved by whatever company controls the program, and not their own.”

He sighed. “I always thought those using artificial intelligence were the radicals, but what if they’re the ones who are mainstream, and it’s those of us who require papers and original thoughts being the ones on the extreme in the coming years? That would make us...history?”

Blake squeezed his hand. “Well, at least now academia has one more tenured professor ready to fight that trend.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John A. Tures is a professor of political science at LaGrange College in Georgia, where he has spent more than two decades teaching and writing on American and international politics. His research and commentary have appeared in peer-reviewed journals as well as national outlets such as *Yahoo News*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Observer*. His book, *Branded* is out now via Obol House Publishing Company; his second book, *Independent Thought* is being published by Huntsville Independent Press.