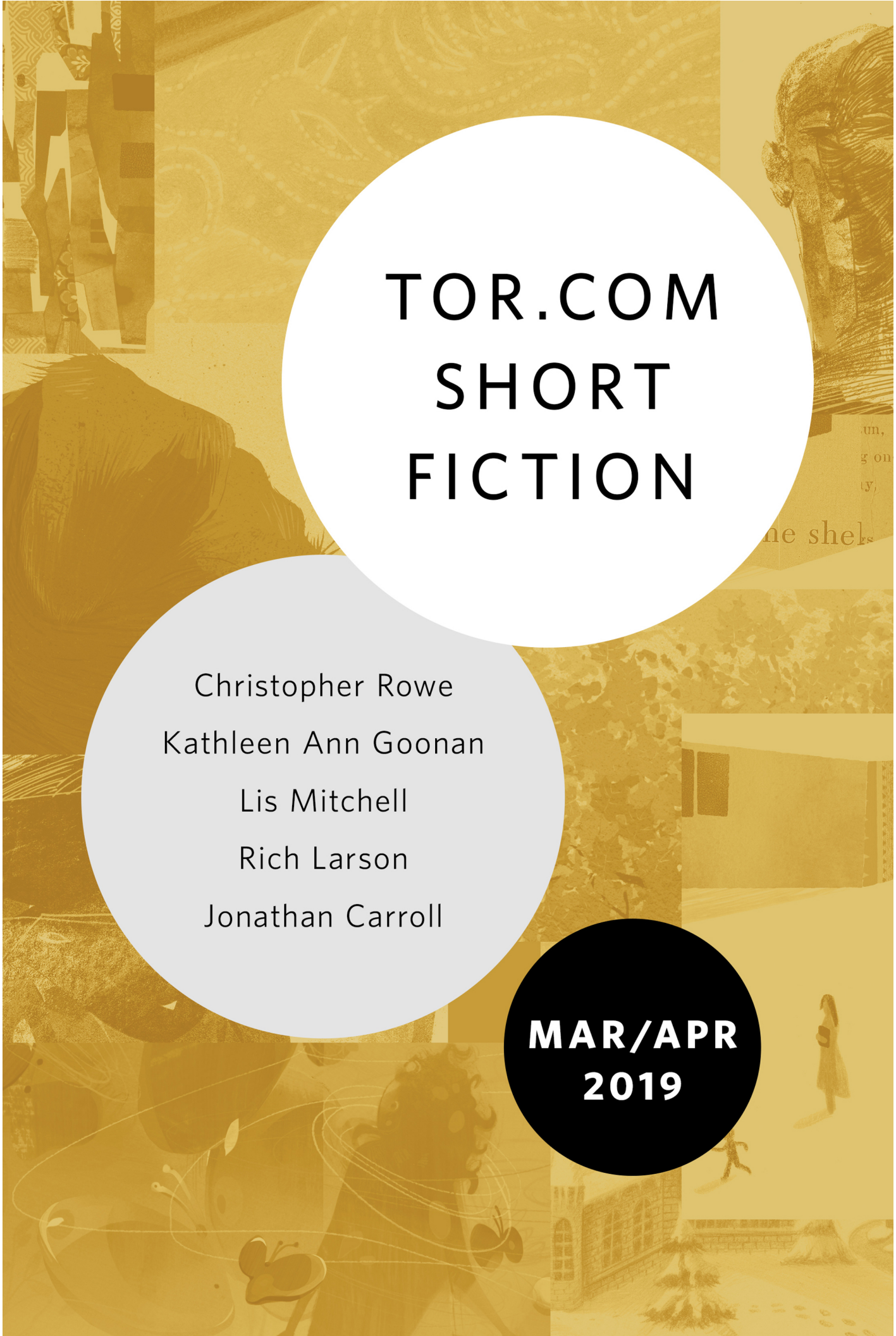

TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

Christopher Rowe

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Knowledgeable Creatures

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illustration by

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TOR·COM

Before I take on an investigation for someone, I first make at least a cursory investigation *of* that someone. I did not adopt this practice out of any particular worries about the moral compass, or even in relation to my quite healthy sense of self-preservation. I investigate potential clients simply to avoid circumstances like this one, circumstances in which I wind up telling a story.

So I should have known. I should have *well* known. I knew about the learned mouse before I agreed to work for Professor Thomasina Swallow. I have no one to blame but myself.

Professor Swallow was a human woman, then aged forty-four years, on the faculty of the Rookery here in town. If that seems young for such a prestigious gig, then other factors of her biography will no doubt shock you even further, to wit: She was unmarried, her area of study was, and is, Second Empire military history, and when she was just sixteen and still a student herself at the Ladysmith Academy, she was adopted by the learned mouse, Coleridge.

As for me, these are my particulars: I am the private detective, Connolly Marsh. I am an investigative dog.

★ ★ ★

Professor Swallow found me at a bar in the Limestone Corridor—I don't keep an office—and immediately made her intentions clear by settling down in the sawdust where I was enjoying a bit of rawhide and ruminating over a recently completed case.

"Mr. Marsh," she said, "I want to engage your services."

I looked up at her. "Is it on a matter of some delicacy? If so, I'll need to refer you to someone else. I'm quite indelicate."

The professor detached her pince-nez from her hilariously small nose, folded them over themselves, and deposited them inside a locket hanging from the gold chain around her neck. Then she sat back on her hindquarters, stuck

her muddy boots out from skirts now liberally coated with flakes of pine, and bellowed, "I need a beer over here!"

The other people present, mostly humans with a scattering of others, including the drinking hole's owner, a curious cat familiar with the city's jails, briefly stopped their hubbub to take in the scene. Me, a well-known dog about town, giving the side-eye to a woman dressed like a scholar and acting like a stevedore.

"Make that two," I said.

★ ★ ★

The gist was this: She had killed a man.

She didn't lead with that. First there was some obfuscation.

"There's a man where I work who is harassing me."

Something for her bosses to settle, I told her.

It didn't surprise me that a client would come to me with something like that. In addition to my investigative talents, I have a reputation—notice I don't say that I *enjoy* a reputation—as something of a fixer. I'd leaned on people before.

She kept talking.

"This man is threatening to blackmail me."

This was more interesting. Though my history with secrets both real and imagined was, to say the least, fraught, I rarely resisted opportunities to turn over stones and see what was crawling under the everyday. Back then, anyway. I nodded at her to continue.

"He came to my office this morning. Things … things got violent."

I raised a paw to stop her. I'd just decided I probably didn't want to hear any more.

"He's dead," she said.

"I'm going to stop you right there," I said. The bartender was approaching with her pint glass and my bowl. It seemed best if nobody overheard whatever else she had to say.

After the bartender cleared out—and after I'd steeled myself with a couple laps of the house mild ale—I considered the risks, and I considered the length of my various tabs around town, including at the very bar we sat in. "I'm not

saying I can help you and I'm not saying I can't. Before I decide, I need to ask you two questions."

She wiped some froth from her upper lip and nodded. That was good. That indicated she'd picked up on my feeling that this should be a quiet conversation.

"First," I said, "was it an accident?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Not at all."

That was less good.

"Second," I said, "was it self-defense?"

She thought about it for too long. Then she said, "Probably not in the way you mean."

Man, I hate it when they try to be clever.

I stood up. "Do you have a card?" I asked.

She dug in a pocket sewn onto her skirt and pulled out a classy-looking piece of parchment, started to hand it over.

"Just show it to me," I said. Humans. They think everyone has finely manipulating appendages. And pockets.

She held the card in front of my face and I memorized the particulars, especially her office address. "Is it safe for you to go back there?" I asked. "Can we meet at your office in, say, four hours?"

She thought too long again, then nodded hesitantly.

"The body is still in your *office?*" I asked, maybe a little too loud.

"I locked the door," said the professor. "I put a note on the door telling the staff not to enter."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, we'll see how well that goes. You stay here for at least half an hour. And don't go back to your office until our meeting time, you got that?"

She was taking a long drink from her pint. "At least half an hour," she said. "Agreed."

★ ★ ★

Outside, I spied a couple of crows perched on a wire stretched between two of the courthouse towers. I barked to get their attention. They just jeered at me in response, then flapped away in the drizzle.

I cursed to myself. Crows were the only knowledgeable creatures who still had much to do with their forebears, and it was hard to tell the varieties apart. Those two had been of the antecedent type, not knowledgeable. Or if they *had* been knowledgeable, then they were rude as hell.

"What's up, Mr. Investigator?" The voice was raspy and familiar. "Why are you cussing at my kin?"

I turned around to find Cool Charles strutting on the boardwalk behind me. He was small for a crow of any variety, but there was no doubting the gleam of intelligence in the beady black eye he had turned toward me.

"Your reputation would be better if you didn't fraternize with that rabble, Charles," I said.

He cawed, and I knew from past experience it was meant to be a laugh. "My reputation is irredeemable," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "That's going around. Look, I need some information."

Cool Charles hopped closer, clearly interested. Crows, man, they're always interested.

★ ★ ★

I needed to cover some bases. One of them was making sure that I wasn't walking into an open murder investigation. So, as was mandated by one of the court orders that I'm under, I stopped precisely one hundred feet from the entrance to police headquarters. None of the cops going in and out noticed me there in the little park across the street, and I was in kind of a hurry to talk to someone, so I threw my head back and started howling, which is something I'm pretty good at.

One of the older uniforms must have recognized me because nobody came over to stop my racket, at least not right away. After a few minutes, though, I saw a cheap suit I knew, wrapped around a portly human man like a too-tight sausage casing.

Of course they'd sent Henson. Who else besides my ex-partner *would* they send?

"You shouldn't be here, Marsh," he said. He was nervous, running his hand over his shiny, shaved skull.

"Just availing myself of my rights as a taxpayer," I said. "Got a question for

the civil servants who so gallantly protect our fair polis."

He snorted. "You paid your taxes this year?"

He had me there. I honestly didn't remember. I got to the point.

"Anybody caught a new body in the last couple of days, Henson?"

"What's it to you?" he asked. At least he did me the courtesy of not claiming he couldn't tell me. The broadest particulars of open felony investigations—such as the fact of their existence—are matters of public record. I had a lawyer friend who loved to file information requests on behalf of reporters and the odd investigative dog. Henson knew that. If he stalled me now, it would just mean more work for him later.

"I heard that you and the old team might be busier than usual is all," I said. "Got a new client who's interested in crime rates and so on. Has to do with people relocating, moving into town, that sort of thing."

Henson looked incredulous. "You're scouting for real estate agents? How the mighty have fallen. But no. Board's clear. Has been for weeks." He narrowed his eyes. "What's really going on, Connolly?"

For a human, his instincts weren't actually all that bad. We'd been a pretty good team before everything went to hell.

"Nothing much," I said. "Scouting real estate, like you said. Kibble doesn't pay for itself."

I trotted away, leaving him in the park in a drizzle that was turning to snow.

★ ★ ★

"She's a professor at the Rookery," said Cool Charles.

"Tenured," I said. "In the history department. I told *you* that."

We were in a diner off the square that was somehow positioned so that its front windows were always in the shadow of one or another of the gigantic triumphalist monuments that dominate that neighborhood. I was up on a bench seat in the booth we'd been shown to. Charles was on the table, pecking at a plate of hominy.

He filled me in on the particulars he'd gleaned. Some of it was interesting, some of it wasn't. Any of it might prove germane. I was making mental notes, building up a file on the chance I decided to take the case, waiting for the classic Cool Charles bomb to drop. He always held the most interesting thing

back for as long as possible.

"Then there's her family life," Charles said.

I played along. "We've already covered that. Parents both dead, never married, no children."

"Yeah, well, she has a sort of adoptive father. Her godfather, actually. Another scholar type."

"Do tell," I said. Luckily, Charles charges a flat rate, not by the hour.

"Name of Coleridge, like the poet. Named himself *after* the poet, in fact."

Named himself? "He's a knowledgeable creature?" I asked, like a sap, walking right into Charles's setup.

Charles pointed his beak at the ceiling, swallowed, then turned me an eye. "Oh, yes. He's a learned mouse."

So, like I said, I should have known. I should have walked away right then. The blame is all on me.

★ ★ ★

All knowledgeable creatures are fascinated with learned mice to one degree or another. You could probably draw up a sliding scale labeled *moderate interest* on the healthy end and *troublesome obsession* on the end that has my picture on it.

It's hard not be be fascinated with the creatures who made you.

Maybe *made* is too strong a word. *Enabled your making* might be a more accurate phrase. What cannot be denied is that it's the alchemical processes developed by Isaac Newton and his partner Xerxes, the first publicly acknowledged learned mouse, which led to the so-called Flowering, the world-wide, centuries-long explosion of new knowledgeable creatures, from Nox, the first curious cat awoken by Newton and Xerxes, on down to every philosophical pig and argute crow today. On down to every investigative dog —including, of course, me.

Have learned mice been around forever? Did they awaken humans at some time in the distant past? Are they the secret governors of us all, operating independently of the Imperium, probably controlling it?

These really aren't the kinds of questions you ask if you want to be taken seriously. They certainly aren't the kinds of questions you ask if you want to

stay a police officer.

★ ★ ★

I sniffed the spot where Professor Swallow claimed the body had been again. Nothing.

Well, not *nothing*. The threadbare old rug told all kinds of stories for those with the nose to smell them, but there was nothing among the litany of pencil shavings, dust, spilled Mayan takeout, or even the somewhat surprising champagne of a vintage considerably pricier than you would expect to have ever been uncorked in a junior history professor's office—nothing in any of that to suggest that the body of a dead human male had ever lain on it. There wasn't even anything to suggest that a *live* human male had ever lain on it.

I sighed.

"I suppose," I said, "you're going to have to tell me what happened."

The professor was sitting on a couch mounded with old quilts, where I'd told her to park herself when we'd entered her office a few minutes before and found it corpse-free. She had the corner of one of these quilts in her hands, worrying at it.

"I don't know what happened," she said, not starting strong out of the gate. "Dr. Sedgewick was lying right here when I left to find you, and now he's gone."

"What happened *before* you came to find me," I clarified. "All I know so far is that you believe you killed a man—a man named Sedgewick, apparently—and that instead of going to the authorities you came to me." I knew a little more than that, but saw no reason to tell her so.

"You must think I'm trying to hire you to help me get away with murder, then," she said.

"You don't need me for that. There's no body and no evidence that there ever was one. You'd never even stand trial."

That set her back. She seemed to be considering her options for the first time. Thinking again. Not good.

"A man named Sedgewick," I prompted. "He came here to your office. Sometime this morning?"

She let go of the quilt. "Yes. Around ten thirty. I remember the time because

when he knocked I looked at my calendar to see if I'd forgotten an appointment. I hadn't. He didn't knock a second time and he didn't wait for me to answer. He just barged in waving that sheaf of papers and shouting about having my tenure revoked."

There were a number of avenues of investigation opened up by her story. I decided to go with the most obvious.

"What sheaf of papers?" I asked, looking around the office. There were dozens of candidates: piles of files, stacks of stapled pages, and random bundled sheets on every available surface, including the couch and the floor.

She ignored all of these, though, instead opening the satchel she'd been carrying when she found me at the bar. "This one," she said, spreading the pages out on the carpet.

I recognized it for what it was even before I read the title page. The smells of the oily purple ink and the cheap, pulpy paper were familiar from too many of the pamphlets that once made up my secret collection of seditious conspiracy literature.

This was getting to be deep waters. Murder was one thing, but the laws governing publishing were at the level of Imperial edicts, not merely civic or territorial regulations. I really, really should have walked out of her office right then.

I read the first page.

Are Humans Knowledgeable? An Inquiry, it said. The byline was A. Shrew, a sort of catchall pseudonym used by dozens of anonymous counterculture thinkers and writers. I'd never really understood it. I'd only ever met one shrew, an elderly gentleman named Gary, whom I'd interviewed when one of his neighbors died of an accidental poisoning that Henson and I had briefly thought suspicious. He'd been gregarious and quite helpful. A model train enthusiast.

I realized I was drifting off course, and returned to the purple-inked pages.

The empress, of course, is human. All the senators are humans, and all the consular tribunes. The mayor of every polis and the prefect of every territory—with the exception of the ancient theorizing tortoise Miguel del Lagos in California—every one of them is a human. This is a human empire in a human world. This is what we have always been told, and the evidence

of our senses seems to support that belief. The evidence of history, however, does not.

I forced myself to stop reading. "Why would some underground pamphlet about a discredited theory cost you your tenure?" I asked the professor.

She spread her hands. "Because I wrote it," she said.

That hung in the air for a few minutes while I studied her expression. She showed neither shame nor pride at the admission, neither fear nor defiance.

"You wrote it when you were a student, you mean," I finally said. "You were passionate and angry and testing the limits of propriety, taking up with odd people with odd ideas who claimed to be your friends. It doesn't represent who you are today, or what you believe."

She listened carefully, but instead of nodding eagerly she shook her head and I took another long hard look at the door.

"I wrote it over the last two years, and it represents decades of disciplined scholarship. It represents what I believe to be true."

"You believe humans were woken from an animal state by learned mice?"

"She believes it's a good question to explore."

The speaker squeezed through the crack beneath the door, a plump gray mouse with a tiny cane grasped in one paw.

"Papa?" asked the professor. "What are you doing here?"

"Keeping an eye on you, dear. As ever."

There was a rumbling noise in the room that only cut off when I recognized it as my own instinctive growl. I fought down the urge to apologize.

"You're Coleridge?" I asked.

"He's *Vicar* Coleridge," said Thomasina Swallow. "The Rookery's chaplain and dean of the divinities school."

"Sorry, Vicar," I said. "I thought that you … I thought that 'explorations' of that particular question were discouraged by your, um, colleagues. They certainly are by the Imperium."

I'd never spent any time around mice. I hadn't known they could shrug.

"Learned mice are no more monolithic in opinions than we are in size," said the Vicar. "There are many of us who believe the government's strictures on historical inquiry are ill-advised."

All very interesting. Aloud, I said, "What did you do with the body?"

I hadn't known mice could smile, either. "What body is that, Mr. Marsh?"

"Papa Coleridge," said the professor. "I've already told him what happened."

"Have you?" asked the mouse, and I couldn't help but agree with his arch tone.

"You haven't," I said. "I've got no sign of a struggle, no evidence of violence, nothing at all to indicate that a crime was committed here." I laid a paw alongside my nose. "Nothing."

The professor strode across to her desk and picked up a sizable chunk of marble serving as a paperweight on one of the stacks of loose pages. She tossed it on the floor in front of me, scattering the unbound sheets of the heretical pamphlet.

"Smell that," she said.

I did. It smelled like blood.

"Well," I said, "that's a weapon. Taken with a missing person, that's enough. We're going to have to involve the police, Professor Swallow."

"Ah," said the vicar. "But no one is missing."

I'd already fallen for one obvious trap that day while talking to Cool Charles, who—now that I thought about it—kind of reminded me of Coleridge in some indefinable way. I took a chance.

"Nobody's missing because you've just come from talking to Sedgewick in his office and he's alive and well," I said.

The mouse spent the time I was talking grooming his little whiskers. "Not exactly. I just came from the infirmary, where Dr. Sedgewick is resting comfortably. He's recovering from a nasty blow to the head that required a rather large number of stitches, but no, I didn't speak to him. Because he was asleep."

A mouse with all the answers, except …

"Why is there no blood on the floor?" I asked. "If the professor here beaned her colleague hard enough to spit his skull open, hard enough to put him so far out that she thought he was *dead,* there should be a scent."

The Vicar pointed to a corner of the rug with his cane. "He landed there. The blood spilled on several stacks of old, dreadfully written undergraduate essays—I have no idea why you keep those wretched things, Thomasina—

which I consigned to the furnace in the subbasement several hours ago, now. So you see, Mr. Marsh, there's really no further need for your services. Thomasina panicked, is all. Just a misunderstanding. If you'll send an invoice to my office, you'll of course be paid in full for the work you've done."

I knew when I was being shown the door, but the mouse wasn't my client, Professor Swallow was. When I looked to her for direction, though, she was looking at the vicar, her expression nearly unreadable. The part that wasn't unreadable made my hackles rise. The part that was fear.

"Right," I said. "Your address is in the book?"

"Just write Vicar Coleridge, care of the Rookery, and it will get to me. No need for a stamp, even."

I used to know a woman who worked for the city's small contingent of postal police. The regulations they enforce are even more strict and arcane than those of the civic police. I was pretty certain the vicar had just described some kind of postal fraud. I was equally certain he'd never be called to account for it.

I left the two of them there and took fourteen flights of stairs down to the Rookery's enormous marble and limestone lobby. I was about to head out into the snowy, late afternoon darkness when I caught sight of the building directory out of the corner of my eye.

I trotted over and read through the list of names. I had more or less begun the process of compartmentalizing the day's events, filing everything away into a place in my brain never to be consulted again, but something bothered me.

I kept reading the list of faculty and staff. Names, names, names.

How had the mouse known *my* name?

★ ★ ★

In addition to his considerable talents as an information broker, Cool Charles was my go-to when I needed to do some breaking and entering. This time, though, he proved recalcitrant.

"Not the Rookery," he said. "No way."

He was playing some kind of game at the diner table that involved moving and re-moving pegs from holes bored in a triangular piece of wood. Show-off. Next he would be using one of the pegs as a makeshift tool of some kind.

"It's one door," I said. "The door to a college linguistics department. How hard can it be?" I'd learned that Dr. Sedgewick was a linguistics professor specializing in textual analysis. I was interested in the contents of his office.

"It's probably so easy you could do it yourself," said Charles, plucking another peg. "So why don't you?"

It was just within the realm of possibility that I could spring a standard door lock clutching a pick between my teeth. But that wasn't the only reason I wanted the bird along.

"I need a lookout, too," I said.

"What you need is to have your head looked at," said Charles. "That place is supposed to be positively *infested* with learned mice. Those guys don't sleep, Marsh."

This was one of the more pedestrian urban legends about learned mice. They don't sleep. Another stated that they had no need to eat. Still another claimed they could hear their names spoken from miles away; the exact distance varied from teller to teller.

I didn't believe any of that. For all the crazy things I've believed in my life —and there have been some doozies—I've never believed that there is any great secret about learned mice that can't be explained by the facts that they are infernally smart and eternally patient.

I fancied myself pretty smart as well. I clambered down from the bench seat and nodded at the cashier, telling her to put everything on my tab.

"Charles," I said, "if you don't see me around in the next few days, tell Henson to check the furnaces in the Rookery subbasement."

The crow squawked. "You're really doing it? You're going to try and prove one of your crazy-ass theories by breaking into the Rookery *tonight?*"

I shrugged noncommittally and left.

Like I said, I fancied myself pretty smart.

Patient, not so much.

As I started down the street, I heard the diner's door chime behind me, followed by the flapping of wings above. Cool Charles did a wingover, glared at me, then flew off in the direction of the Rookery.

He was a good friend.

I miss him still.

★ ★ ★

After a brief stop at the bookmaker's shop I use as a bank, I made my way through the frozen streets to the Rookery. The snow was really coming down, and the city was mostly quiet.

Cool Charles fluttered to a landing beside me outside the main entrance.

"What's in the bag?" he asked.

I set my package down so I could answer him. "A sizable amount of cash," I said.

"Are we going to the bursar's office, too?" he asked. "You signing up for classes, need to pay tuition? Finally going to get a *real* education?"

"Everything's a real education, Charles," I said. "You know that, a knowledgeable creature like yourself. No, we have a stop to make before we go up to the office levels. We might need a little fiscal lubrication."

The night nurse on duty in the Rookery's infirmary was a human man, but he shared a lot of features with a particularly venal fox. Not that anybody would ever awaken a fox.

Even as we pushed through the doors, he picked up the speaking horn connected to the Rookery's internal communications system. Cool Charles flapped up onto his desk and put a talon on the man's hand. "You'll want to hear this," he said. "Seriously."

The man eyed the package I set before him speculatively, and put down the speaking horn. "What can I do for you?" he asked. His voice was more like a weasel's.

"We're here to visit Dr. Sedgewick," I said. "We won't be long, just a few minutes to check up on his condition."

"You're a doctor?" the man asked doubtfully.

"Just visitors," I said.

He glanced at a log on his desk. "Orders are that he only be visited by relatives."

I nudged the package toward him. "We're his cousins," I said.

When we got to the room, Dr. Sedgewick was awake, and apparently well on the mend—he was grading papers. He wielded a double-ended pencil with sharpened blue and red points, quickly marking passages, underlining and

circling, scribbling notes. He flipped the pencil back and forth often, utilizing a color code I couldn't make any sense of at a glance. His head was bandaged, but his eyes were clear.

"Dr. Sedgewick, my name is Connolly Marsh. This is my colleague, Charles. I've been hired by Thomasina Swallow to investigate the circumstances surrounding your injury."

He looked me up and down. "A dog," he said. "A lying dog."

"Excuse me?" I said, genuinely startled.

"I was warned you might show up," the man said. "I know all about you, dog. I know you were kicked off the police force and I know why. Well, you'll not involve me in any of that. I'm a reputable scholar, do you hear me? You trot right along. Go home. Go home!"

You run into this kind of talk sometimes. You try not to let it get you down.

"Come on, Connolly," said Charles. "Nothing to learn here."

"Just a minute." I took a deep breath, fighting down a growl. "What did they give you?"

Sedgewick looked down his pitiful little nose at me. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and the lie absolutely *reeked.*

"Your field is linguistic analysis. Somehow you got hold of an underground pamphlet—maybe somebody paid you to look at it, maybe even somebody I used to work for—and you figured out that the anonymous writer was someone right here in the Rookery, Thomasina Swallow. You went and confronted her and got your head cracked open for your trouble. And, fool that you are, you forgot who she calls 'Papa.'"

The way these things usually go, the perpetrator or the witness or whoever you're grilling responds to their misdeeds being laid out for them by blustering or by getting angry or by clamming up. I figured Sedgewick was headed for blustering, but then something odd happened. His eyes clouded over, he picked up his pencil, and he started marking papers again. Then he set the pencil down, looked up, and said, "I was warned you might show up."

Cool Charles pecked my back right paw *hard.* "Let's *go,*" he said. "Before this gets any weirder."

On the way out, I threw a glance back at Sedgewick. He circled a passage in blue, twirled his pencil, made a note in red. I wondered if he would

remember we'd been there.

★ ★ ★

Charles let me try the lock twice before he plucked the paper clip away from me and opened the door in about three seconds. Crows, man.

The Linguistics Department of the Rookery was small. There was a reception area with a secretary's desk and a fixture consisting of open-fronted cubbies that served as mailboxes for the faculty and staff. Most of these were overflowing.

"You check those mailboxes," I said. "I'm going back to his office."

Behind the secretary's desk was a warren of cubicles that were probably used by adjuncts, and then a corridor housing the more senior faculty's offices. There was a hand-drawn diagram taped to the wall showing whose office was where, but I ignored it. I had Sedgewick's scent. I followed my nose.

His office door was unlocked. Superficially, the room resembled Thomasina Swallow's office, except that there was a large casement window behind the desk and there were no stacks of files and papers. The room, in fact, was preternaturally neat.

"Oh," I said. "Of course. They've been here already."

Cool Charles burst into the room in full, panicked flight, nothing cool about him at all. He was closely pursued by a running woman dressed for the weather, with a scarf concealing her face. Not much of a disguise—even without the pince-nez I could smell my erstwhile client, Thomasina Swallow, PhD.

Charles was cawing and cawing, *loud*. He was battering against the window, the ceiling, and the walls, all in turn. I suppressed the urge to bark. "What's wrong?" I shouted instead. But Charles didn't answer. "What did you do to him?" I asked the professor.

"Thomasina," came a voice from down at floor level. "The windows, if you would."

She rushed past me, sparing me a pitying look, and fumbled with the window latches. Charles fluttered about her hands, banging against the glass. I caught a glimpse of one of his eyes. The intelligence there was strange to me. Frightening. Animalistic.

At last, the professor managed the latches and threw open the windows. As the cold and the snow came in, Cool Charles flew out, disappearing into the night.

I stared after him. Then I turned, sniffing. "You killed him," I said to Vicar Coleridge. "You as good as murdered him."

"He couldn't be counted on to keep quiet," said the learned mouse. "And he's far from dead. He will no doubt live a happy life. Even mundane crows know more than they tell."

Thomasina Swallow drew a revolver out of her satchel. I suppose it shouldn't have surprised me that a professor of military history handled a weapon quite so competently, despite how frightened she seemed.

"You got me involved in this," I growled at her. "Why did you come to me in the first place if you were just going to help cover everything up?"

I'd always known humans could shrug.

"I didn't have all the facts," she said, voice trembling slightly. "Papa Coleridge was quite right. I panicked. I thought Sedgewick was going to expose me so I tried to kill him. I wasn't aware that Papa knew about my research from the beginning, and that he's been protecting me."

I measured the distance between me and the vicar, calculating whether I could cross it and swallow him whole before the professor could fire.

"She's quite a proficient shot," said the mouse, leaning comfortably on his cane. "I wouldn't try it."

"So what's it going to be for me, then?" I asked. "A bullet or…" I nodded toward the still-open window. "Or that?"

I didn't know which would be worse. I didn't imagine then that there could be something worse than either.

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort for you, Mr. Marsh," said the vicar. "You see, unlike the bird, we're sure you *can* be quiet."

★ ★ ★

And I have been.

For the last eight years, I've never said a word about all that happened that day, not even when Henson came around to question me as part of the missing persons investigation they opened searching for Cool Charles. It's never

seemed worth it.

Once, a long time before Charles went away, I thought I'd stumbled onto something big, something fundamental to the nature of our world. Then I discovered that other people had had similar revelations, that there was a whole subculture dedicated to rooting out what we thought of as the truth.

It consumed me. It defined me. Ultimately, it destroyed me, costing me my career and most of my friendships.

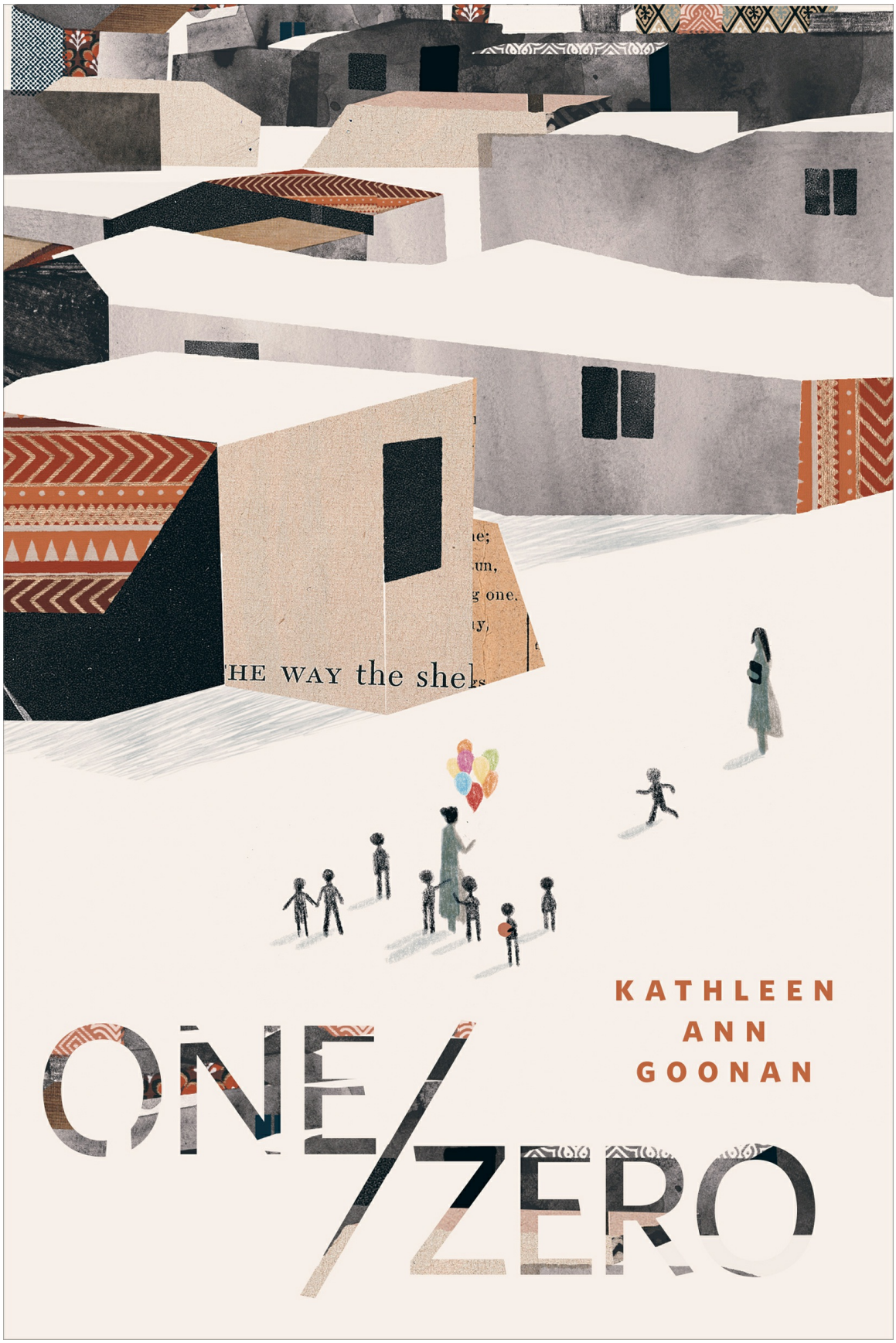
I have an old underground pamphlet here—the only one I have. It's credited to A. Shrew, but I know its true authorship, penned as it was by Thomasina Swallow, daughter of the learned mouse, Coleridge. It describes, in great detail, all the evidence supporting the contention that the supposed masters of this world and makers of most of us, human beings, are themselves, in their language-developing, tool-using current forms, the creations of an older and more alien race. The evidence is, to say the least, compelling.

There have been many nights over the last eight years when I have almost fed it to the fire, along with all the notes I have accumulated on Professor Swallow's career, on the sermons of Vicar Coleridge, on the behavior patterns of the common crow.

Sometimes, I will be walking the streets and see a few crows perched high above. I imagine one of them is watching me. I can never tell from down here on the ground—is that one smaller than the others?

I wonder.

I will always wonder.


KATHLEEN
ANN
GOONAN
ONE/ZERO

One/Zero

KATHLEEN ANN GOONAN

illustration by

KEITH NEGLEY

TOR·COM

Vida Zilan
Kurdistan

My brother struggles as I crush him to my side. Aunt Ezo, at the front door, her AK-47 at the ready, yells "Runrunrunrun GO!"

I rush through the back door into air and fall, still holding Azul: The step is gone. Thunderous thuds echo behind me and end with machine gun chatter, which spurs me to my feet. Azul fights like a wild animal. "Let *go!* My *party!*"

Drones dart through smoke-filled air. Dodging sparking wires, I gain the pergola and set Azul on his feet. Winter-dry grape leaves ignite. Licked by their flame, twenty helium birthday balloons pop as I drag him behind the stone fireplace.

Two soldiers leap from the back door and sprint toward us. Ezo, silhouetted in the doorway, raises her gun.

The men drop. Then Ezo spins and collapses into the courtyard, clearly dead.

Azul yanks my arm, but I can't move. In the last five minutes, I was informed that our parents had just died in a souk bombing. At that moment, our house was attacked. Now Ezo, a revolutionary soldier for twenty years, is gone. She came today to plead with my parents to leave. "The battle is coming this way," she said. But they had heard this before. Their response, as always, was "This is our home," and it was—the nucleus of our extended family since 1930, nearly a century.

Then they went out for last-minute party supplies.

The back wall of our two-story stone house crashes to the ground, burying Ezo and the dead soldiers. Azul shrieks "Dapîra!" as our grandmother's red shawl floats from the inferno, crisping to ash.

She was still in the house.

I grab him and stumble through the ruined courtyard wall. Branches from

the downed tree of life, which shaded years of cousins at play, whip our faces and rip my long, festive skirt.

A car zooms down the alley. I wave my arms. The door pops open. I thrust Azul in first, and then climb in.

A skinny, seedy-looking guy with a bleeding cut on his cheek is in the driver's seat, but the self-driving light is on. The car accelerates, bucking over debris. The guy points at my hand. "Ring."

Ezo's gold UN Human Rights ring, with its raised image of a child, is on my ring finger. Through the blur, I remember her pulling it from her own finger and slipping it onto mine, saying, "Your mama and papa are dead. Get out of the city. Remember us. Be strong."

The guy grabs my hand and yanks on the ring. Azul bites his ear, hard. He gives Azul a blow to the head. Azul kicks him in the side, his sturdy legs like battering rams.

At the end of the alley, a bus halts, blocking the road.

The door opens. A girl leans out and waves her arm: *Get In! Hurry!* I grab Azul as I leap from the car. The bus door shuts behind us, leaving the guy outside.

Autonomous by design, with no steering wheel, the bus noses through the smoky city as we breathe pure, clean air.

Children crowd the windows, pressing their faces against the glass. Most are quite young, ranging in age to perhaps thirteen. At seventeen, I'm clearly the oldest.

A nearby house erupts in flames. "Keep away from the windows!" I yell. Azul and I huddle on the floor. I pull sobbing children close.

"Does anyone have a phone?" We gain the open road and speed from the burning city toward snowy mountains.

I search for news of the souk, our parents, and our neighborhood, but can't bear watching the videos and curl up on the floor when Azul asks when Mama and Papa and Dapîra are coming.

Today, he is three.

Mai Davidson,
Washington, D.C.

As the Metro train sweeps into a tunnel, I read about progress on military AI applications in the *Post* and wonder if Zoe, my daughter, has anything to do with it.

My husband, Ed, died two years ago. Our son John, a banker, lives in Hong Kong, and Zoe rides the roller coaster of Silicon Valley startups, each more luminously promising than the last. After the inevitable crash, she emerges from the very public debacle smelling like a rose, or its digital analogue, fielding offers and well able to support an artist husband and their two children.

I gather that soon, perhaps before we could possibly know it given the speed of the deep-learning superintelligences—SIs—in development, yet another self-made apocalypse could be upon us, and so long, folks! Any second now, we might be devoured by a ravening SI with intentions we cannot begin to fathom.

I say *yet another* because, you know: nuclear weapons, nanotech gray goo, biological warfare—all of which could be SI tools if the initial algorithm on which their self-learning depends decides these methods would further their goals. The standard model is that SIs, presently isolated from the Internet, learn like children, through self-directed assimilation. Developers are gambling they'll grow up much wiser than us. Given their source material, I find that hope misbegotten. They might choose to love us, but why?

And could their imagined trajectories be any worse than our increasing totalitarianism? Or any worse than one of the main hallmarks of what it means to be human, which is to kill our fellows, or even send our own kin to torture or death if a certain "belief"—whatever a belief might be, neurochemically speaking—has taken up residence in our unfathomable brains?

Bring it on, I say. The change might be for the better.

Zoe's dream is to distill a master algorithm for beneficence.

And I once tried to levitate the Pentagon.

My Metro stop is across the street from the Freer Gallery, where after leaving a long career, I'm living my lifetime dream of being a Chinese

philosopher-painter in the Song Dynasty's bureaucracy. I wander the Blue Ridge wilderness alone each weekend, failing to write pensive poems, but at least once falling into the moon's reflection in the Rivanna River.

My colleagues at the Foundation were dismayed when I left. They said, *You've been so committed to social justice, fostering international literacy, improving economic conditions for women—*

True. A sixty-hour work week was nothing; I would fly to Cape Town, Khartoum, or Bogotá on a day's notice. I oversaw development of methods of teaching reading based on what we were learning from fMRI technologies about how children really learn, assembled teams of international experts, and ably wielded the double-edged sword of statistical analysis, but I was burned out. Increasingly, the work we had done was deliberately dismantled, failing those who had put their trust in us. The magnitude of their need overwhelmed me. It was time for those I had mentored to take center stage. I often lunch with them, and they are doing splendid work.

At the Freer I'm in charge of nothing more consequential than deciding where to lunch.

After Ed died, Zoe urged me to move to California. But I've always lived in the D.C. area, in what Dad called "my little row house" in a subdivision right off the Beltway, where I grew up. Ed and I moved in with my parents after the one of the crashes, thinking it temporary, then never wanted to take the kids away from school, friends, and grandparents. Wonderful years passed and the memory-steeped neighborhood, with friends whose parents I knew, is my lodestone. Even my grandfather, born in the nineteenth century, lived there after Grandma died.

At first, he was angry.

"The twins fight too much," I remember Grandpa saying to Mom as we squabbled one summer morning after Dad left for work. The culprits were me and my brother Wayne.

Grandpa was finishing up the breakfast dishes, scrubbing the copper-bottomed Revere Ware using his famous "elbow grease," which Wayne and I had decidedly not inherited. He said, "You and your brothers never argued like this."

"You've got to be kidding," Mom replied, laughing.

They're all gone now.

Cultures, species, and lives vanish. Mine will too, eventually. Unless the anti-aging potion Zoe sent me works.

She says the best minds in Silicon Valley use it, hoping to live long enough to avoid the chancy process of head-freezing. It's on the kitchen windowsill with the night-blooming cereus, which is almost as old as the house. Dad talked to the graceful, twining cereus each year on the single summer night it bloomed, releasing its heady fragrance. "Well, hello," he'd say gently, alone in the kitchen, before announcing its annual amazement to the rest of us as if it were a newborn child.

I take the potion about as often as my still-thriving cereus blooms. Anything remotely useful has long expired, but I love that Zoe sent it to me, along with instructions to eat only lettuce.

What's the point?

As I enter the spacious hush of the Freer and pass Whistler's Peacock Room, I realize that I don't even remember the walk from the Metro. Maybe tomorrow I should read the funnies first.

Vida

I've never been courageous. I was coddled, kept away from politics, and expected to do well. My math skills got me a scholarship in London, much good it will do me now. That future remains in a negative infinity as I move ever-farther from my locus.

We named our bus *Heval,* Friend. It was our cocoon, our lost parents, providing food, water, and safety, climbing sheer cliffs on roads so narrow that a tiny miscalculation would have sent us to our deaths; it was our great good fortune that just last year, the International Autonomous Map was implemented. *Heval* traversed vast deserts, outraced quasi-military attackers, and found an emergency center after diagnosing Sara's appendicitis. It quickly learned our songs and taught us new ones—essential for the four thousand or so kilometers we traveled. When the axle broke, stranding us, the bus summoned the nearest help, a self-driving open truck on which we shivered beneath plastic sheets,

buffeted by cold rain.

Azul cried and fought the whole way, like most of the small ones. I fear all of us are deeply scarred. How could it be otherwise?

There is no one to see into me, as Dapîra could, but if she were here, she would find me hunched in the corner of a place that no longer exists, falling through space, not concerned that I may someday hit the ground.

And here we are, staggering from that wretched truck. Where? We don't know. It's about thirty arid hectares with a gully on one side and a few scrubby trees on the other, but it has a well, a food truck, and maybe a hundred other kids. We storm the food truck and drink gallons of water. The sun is hot. We find a concrete pad next to an antique petrol pump and shelter beneath its tin roof. I sleep, and sleep, and sleep. It is heaven to not be moving.

Mai

"MEDA recommends a tweak in your serotonin uptake," Nan, the nurse practitioner, says. "You're a little bit out of balance."

Nan and I have known each other for years. "'Out of balance' sounds decidedly unscientific. Who's Meda?"

"Medical Digital Assistant. Here's your brain scan. That part—there—not quite as large and as bright as it should be. You should give it a try."

"Will I still be human? But that's not the real question, is it? At this point, who wants to be?"

"Are you okay?"

"Insufficiently large and bright, obviously."

"I know that since Ed died—"

"I'm fine!"

"This isn't like the old-style drugs; it's tailored, generated, and released by your AI-connected nanotech capsule. The pharm rep said you'll feel like you're twenty again."

"That's a good thing?"

"Stop being a pain in the ass, Mai. Try it. You can always stop."

* * *

Day four of the experiment: O, endless, golden fields beneath the vast spring sky! O, small, bright orb in my chest, filled with love for all people! O, satori while ordering my daily Swiss-on-toasted-rye at the D Street Deli and eating it on a bench by the new art installation where once the horse of a Confederate general reared, his passenger brandishing the obligatory raised saber.

It's good stuff, embodied life. Better than digital, I'm certain, even if that endless golden field is actually some flowering weeds on a rubble-filled lot. I have biologically sourced emotions, splendid ones, rather than the dry, digital approximation Zoe thinks we might choose in her glowing beneficent future, and right now they seem worth the admission price of eventual death.

On the way back to work, I buy a yoga mat at a trance-inducing shop I escape by sheer will, then help unpack a long-awaited painting by Zhou Jichang at the Freer. After a thousand years, the vermilion of the monk's robe is still astoundingly vivid.

At 5:30, I am not seething, as I traipse down the long-broken Metro escalator, about how the best of our intentions and vision for a more fair and inclusive future, with public transportation for all, inspires the callous among us to break out the ever-sharp tools of passivity and neglect. I'm not exactly adrift in joy, but everything is a tad, just a tad, more tolerable.

As we rumble through the freight yards of Alexandria, though, a glimpse of a rusty, cinnabar-orange freight car ignites a memory of Jichang's single, extraordinarily pure red-orange brushstroke, which floods me in visceral, electrifying amazement, a sounding tone that infuses car and fellow passengers, then expands in a swift, brief, inexplicable flash that encompasses far stars and the precise arrangement of particles that we call, briefly, ourselves. I want to jump up and shout, "Look! See!" but retain enough sense to realize that doing so might lead to a strip search in a grimy Alexandria police station, an embarrassing call to my lawyer, and a delay in dinner.

So I simply surrender to what might be called wonder, if one were even slightly optimistic. Which I am not.

Vida

The aid worker asks me to name it. I humor him. “Ezo.”

“My name is Ezo,” says the tablet. An empty cipher-head appears.

The worker asks, “Someone you know?”

I shrug. The aid worker is thin, middle-aged, and white. His clean, pressed T-shirt says *1/0,* inside a rainbow circle. I think he is American.

There have been few aid workers here. Most are tall, graceful, very dark, and speak imperfect, British-accented French, adding yet another language to our evolving polyglot. They do their best to organize the chaos, but are overwhelmed, and mostly rush around looking grim. The camp grows rapidly, and I constantly wonder why all of these children were brought here. I ponder our options: hijack an outgoing bus?

And go where?

Yet, how long can this situation continue without some sort of catastrophic collapse? It is unhygienic, chaotic, deafening. A band of dirty, hungry children rampage past us on one of the well-pounded dirt thoroughfares that have emerged in the past weeks, screaming and laughing. Azul presses closer, clutching my legs.

Mr. 1/0 says something about a peace and education organization. “Ezo will help with whatever you want to learn. Do you have a picture you’d like to use?”

I wonder: Do I look like I have a picture, an extra pair of pants instead of my ragged skirt, or enough food? Maybe shoes I choose not to wear? Most of us, like Azul and me, left in a hurry. I say, “No,” because I want to be polite so he’ll leave the tablet with me, but I do wonder about that tablet’s powers. Does it not even have a camera?

But with it, at least we’ll have one tool, or something to trade for food and water.

A bright green logo, *1/0,* appears on the screen.

Interesting. “Does this represent an irrational number? A null operation? A repeating decimal?”

He looks surprised, and I think that either he doesn’t understand his own T-shirt, or he doesn’t think that I might.

Arithmetically, this is an absurd statement, but positive and negative infinities can result from pursuing this operation in machine language. In

trigonometry, you can represent this with a graph in which negative and positive infinities come close, but never meet.

Absurd. Infinite. Irrational. Confounding.

As I stand in the bright, dry sunlight, with blue sky above, skirt fluttering against my bare legs, a thin, dirty linen blouse tapping my chest as the wind blows, and my long hair twining across my face, I watch tiny schematics ignite and disappear from the screen like so many novas, as if in reply to my questions.

A thrill runs through me. I stare at the power I might be holding in my two hands, gobsmacked.

I got my math scholarship partly on the merits of a technical paper I wrote about the possibilities of superintelligence, part of my emailed application.

Suddenly, I'm back in the world I knew. I don't know why I've been given this, but I'm keeping it.

1/0 is, I believe, a tiny window on a superintelligent AI rumored to be in development but kept in a black box, quarantined from internets and clouds. It cannot be described using human standards. It can invent, or discover, new mathematical universes. It's probably thinking of a thousand kinds of infinities right now. Its intelligence is, theoretically, limitless, its speed near that of light, its limits and ethics nonexistent until self-determined, if ever that might occur, and it has the capacity to rewrite whatever it uses for code.

It is entirely alien.

"Vida." Azul's voice is faint.

I drop to my knees. Azul is shivering, even though it's hot. "I feel bad." His eyes are glassy. He vomits.

"Is there any medical care here?"

I am asking the worker, but when I look up he's gone. Instead, Ezo says, in flat, jerky robotese, "There is a clinic half a kilometer away. Take the right fork."

I hoist Azul and run. A golf cart with a red cross on the side comes bumping down the narrow road between the tents. A familiar voice says, "Get in, Vida and Azul."

"*Heval!*" whispers Azul and smiles, but then he curls up, clutching his stomach, and moans. He has diarrhea.

I am terrified.

Mai

I'd forgotten how dangerous twenty was. Notable risky decisions come to mind —for instance, the time I caught a ride on a flatbed truck while hitchhiking to a trailhead in the Rockies, which would have flung me off had I not been able to grab a snaking rope as I slid across the truck bed. Climbing down what I later learned was a cliff face in complete darkness after taking the wrong trail, at dusk, on a winter hike.

My judgment hasn't improved; apparently Yoga for Beginners is a wildly reckless endeavor. As I stare at the dust under my couch, I'm not sure what I did, but I can barely move.

When I cannot reach my pinging phone, it speaks nonetheless. A clipped voice tells me that a week of physical therapy plus release of an anti-inflammatory from the MEDA device will reduce the disc herniation. Within fifteen minutes, the pain eases. I pull myself onto the couch and grab the phone.

The anti-inflammatory is working. I feel better by the second. This seems the time to indulge in that bottle of wine I've been saving. I push into the kitchen, open the fridge, and see that somehow—with an errant blink?—I must have signed up for the groceries I find neatly stocked in the fridge. Whoever-or-whatever-it-was that came inside my house threw away the ash-covered French cheese I discovered at Eastern Market last week. All is well, though, in the land of optimal serotonin. I look on the bright side. Maybe it would have killed me.

I put a much less impressive chunk of cheddar on a plate, but can't find the perfect crackers I could swear I bought. Carbs? Gluten? Salt?

When I open the bottle of the most splendid bottle of red wine ever (according to the label), which I've been looking forward to drinking since, oh, around yesterday, the Voice of God advises me of various health risks.

Are they coming from the bottle? The label?

My phone. "This is a message from MEDA."

"Negative ten stars for this app," I tell it, then open the wine, and sit at the

kitchen table to enjoy my dinner without further nagging.

"Cheers," says Zoe, beaming from my phone on the table. "Are you okay? I'm sorry you hurt yourself."

"Can you *see* me?"

"Um, yeah, remember? I installed those cameras when I visited you last month. You know—in case something like this happened?"

"Have you been spying on me?"

"No! The emergency signal activated it," she says. I sure hope she's telling the truth.

Vida

They won't let me inside the hospital tent, so I pace the perimeter, forbidden to pester them for news after the first ten times, holding Ezo in one arm like a baby. It says, "I am procuring a mobile hospital for you. And UN water trucks and chemical toilets. Azul's diagnosis is cholera."

"Cholera!"

"He needs hydration and other medical care, but he should recover. They've started an IV."

I dash tears from my face and yell at the cipher-head. "You can do all *that?* Well, we need doctors! Nurses! Clean water! Food! Blankets! Shelter! Clothes! Shoes!"

"The hospital will be here in twenty-seven hours."

"Sure," I say. When night falls—after a gentle assurance by a kind man that Azul will be fine, which I hardly dare believe—I lean against a tree thinking that I won't be able to sleep, and wake to sun and laughing, shouting children.

Shoes have arrived by the thousands, lowered in nets from a helicopter.

They are not in pairs. There are just a lot of single, random shoes.

The kids love it. The task of finding a shoe to fit each foot is a treasure hunt. They run around in their mismatched shoes, laughing.

A truckload of antibiotics arrives. Azul is released in two days, and a healthy infrastructure with amazingly sophisticated recycling and solar technologies emerges like a time-lapse video of a flower blooming. One-room

houses are printed on the south side of the camp, modular shelters assemble themselves on the west side, and weird, arcing tents pop up everywhere else. XPrize-winning technologies specifically envisioned for this environment are manufactured, or grown, as more and more refugee children arrive. I ask Ezo for smartphones for everyone in the camp, with plenty of data.

They arrive days later, different than any phone I've ever seen, the uncanny valley of phones—intuitive, with unlimited cloud memory and data, and embedded with so much advanced teaching software that I can even continue my math studies, if I ever have time. We can finally communicate with each other and with the world.

Ezo says, "It took such a long time because I had to design them, buy materials, write the software, and build a factory." The voice is rich and deep now, a woman's voice, with only a hint of robotic halting.

I immediately disregard folk tales about what happens to wish-greedy children and say, "Ezo, replicate yourself."

"Null operation."

Mai

The morning after my self-inflicted injury, I am cajoled awake by ever-strengthening light, which is not the sun (I have powerful curtains to prevent any such incursion). It announces itself by saying it's a special light to regularize my wildly out-of-whack sleep patterns, which will make me fully refreshed and happy.

Oh, but it does not! I pull the covers over my head and try to finish my dream, but the Voice, emanating from the phone, says, "We checked your closet."

"We?" I push myself to a sitting position.

"I refer to myself, directing tiny surveillance drones that came inside through the gaps between the windows and their frames."

"Lovely. I need very strong coffee, immediately."

"Your wardrobe requires updating. I ordered new clothes and something for yoga."

"I'm quitting yoga."

A second's silence. "Okay. I have enrolled you in tai chi to reinforce the PT you start today. A pod will take you to all your appointments. Your oatmeal is ready."

"Gruel?"

"In the left-hand cupboard. You need only pull off the top, add water, and microwave it. Eggs, bacon, and buttered toast make a heart attack likely."

"You only live once." I swing my legs off the bed, and gasp at the stab of pain. "Damn. Did those drones use up my pain management data allowance?"

"There is only one pair of clean underwear. I will toss the raggedy, paint-smeared clothes—"

"My painting clothes?"

"—and send everything else to the dry cleaner."

"I can't afford to have my underwear dry-cleaned!"

"Just this once. I ordered a Simon, a housekeeping bot, which is essential to your health. It will do your laundry, prepare your meals, and clean your house, but it needs thirty-six training hours."

"My insurance won't pay for a bot. Cancel it."

"I evaluated your budget, and—"

"What budget? My house is paid for. I do my own laundry every Saturday, thank you—"

"Your energy habits are wasteful. I have initiated efficiency measures."

"Is that why it's so cold in here?"

"I canceled your newspaper and magazine subscriptions. They waste paper. Hoarding is a serious health risk."

"I don't always have time to read them right away." I feel ridiculous defending myself to this bodiless, bossy thing. "Are you sure you're not Zoe?"

"You can now access your periodicals digitally, which is still a savings."

"Reading on screens gives me a headache."

A swarm of lights like fireflies manifests around me. If I were a kid I'd probably cry out in delight at their flashing ballet as MEDA says, "Keep still. Functional MRI in progress."

Instead of childish joy, MEDA is documenting a strong urge to curse.

★ ★ ★

Surprised that I'm allowed to dress myself, I breakfast on a stash of stale doughnuts the health spies missed. After fending off a neural tweak that would fix my inability to stare at a screen all my waking hours, I'm relieved to find I can restore my newspaper to its rightful place on my morning lawn with a phone call and decide to forgo outrage for the rest of the day. I'm already exhausted.

Despite trying to pretend it's all a happy lucid dream, I'm annoyed but resolutely not outraged to see the Simon waiting on the front porch, advertising to the entire neighborhood that I'm in need of help.

The humanoid Simon, with its smiling face and big eyes, takes my arm and tries to help me down the front walk and into the sleek, waiting pod, but I beat it off with my cane. Then, chiefly because I'm afraid I won't be able to work the clutch in my car, off I go on my first self-driving vehicle adventure, filled not with wonder but raw terror as it zips along the Capital Beltway, a fragile shell among heavy metal behemoths ruining our planet by the second. And that, I actually do believe.

The doctor's waiting room is empty for the first time ever. An electronic voice directs me to cubicle three. Nan looks up from her computer when I enter, and I'm surprised at her careworn expression.

"What's wrong?"

"That's my line," she says, and we both laugh. She's a good egg. "This is my last day."

"But you've been here—what, fifteen years?"

"Let's do this first." She shows me my records on the computer screen, though, as she says, it's probably illegal without several levels of releases. She's clearly become a wild woman. I see my blood pressure, pulse, temperature, blood glucose, and oxygen saturation vary slightly in real time as I watch.

I point to the screen. "What's this?"

Nan says, "Your limbic system stats. Your amygdalae—there are two—which are important players in brain activity involved in empathic reactions. And actually"— she delves down a few levels, which yields ever-more-more-complex information—"your empathy is quite low today."

"No kidding."

“But the good news is”—she grins—“you’re not a sociopath. Not even close, despite your strong tilt toward gloom.”

“Not for want of trying. If I cross the line, does my embedded magus have a cure?”

Nan says, “Indeed! You’d have the option of undergoing a brief spell of neuroplasticity—really expensive on the street, and I wouldn’t mind trying it myself today—with concurrent empathy therapy.”

“Which is?”

“You’d experience being in someone else’s virtual body while they react to faces, events, images, or stories most of us would react to in the same way—sad, happy, and so on—while flooded with the neurochemicals that normal people feel at those times. After a few sessions, your amygdalae are closer to the norm.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

Nan says, “I suppose it could be. Normal feelings generate a certain level of insight as to how our actions might emotionally affect others. We feel empathy, which sociopaths and psychopaths lack. They’re usually naturally charming and amazed at how easily they can con others—maybe they assume everyone else is lying, too.”

“Are there over-empathic people?”

“Sure. Too much empathy can be immobilizing, and very, very painful.” Nan leans back in her office chair. “You know, it’s nice that we can just sit and talk—by now I’d have had to move on to the next patient. They’re now monitored, diagnosed, and treated by our new AI. This is the last time you’ll have to come in.”

“Despite what my daughter’s been telling me, these changes seem to be happening very rapidly.”

Nan says, “Oh, I wondered why it wasn’t happening years ago. Nanotech medicine, wireless transmission of information from swallowed or implanted devices, big data, and AI have been around for a while. Television and self-driving cars were both prototyped in the nineteen twenties, but it took the right cultural and economic environment to push widespread development. Same with this.”

“But, Nan, what will you do now?”

"I've hardly had time to think of it. Well, my husband and I could go on a world tour—oh, darn, I almost forgot … the kids are still in college."

"But you have a doctorate, right?"

"Yes, and after extensive consideration of that and my job experience, the AI has offered me an opportunity to oversee coding for automated forklifts at a mega-warehouse, which has been my dream for *years*. It seems to believe this offer will relieve them of all contractual obligations to me."

Her laughter is infectious; when we're done I'm gasping for breath.

"What kind of AI is this?"

A small vee between her eyes. "The kind that successfully proposed a dazzling income-generating option to MedManage, which Doctor Styne signed up with a few years ago."

"So when I didn't read the fine print I assented to the invasive data-gathering operation that's taken up residence inside me."

She nods. "MedManage sells metadata to pharmaceutical, imaging, nanodevice, and other R&D entities. Also to the CDC, WHO, governments, and NGOs. Of course, their mission is to provide all of us with excellent health and extend our lives through statistical analysis by AIs."

"And fix psychopaths," I add.

"Right. So that humans can continue to experience joy, fear, relief, love, hate—all the wondrous emotions AIs value—and the freedom to pursue our interests, once we're all job-free. Like they care." Nan stands and says briskly, "Well, the Simon will do your physical therapy."

Mindful of my back, I give her a very careful hug. "I'll miss you, Nan. Let's have coffee soon, okay?"

★ ★ ★

As my pod zips and veers toward home, MEDA calls me. I'm exasperated, but then suppose I should be grateful it's being polite instead of announcing decrees.

A boy appears on the screen. He has dark, curly hair, and when he sees my face he smiles. I cannot help but smile back. "Hi! I'm Mai. What's your name?"

He burbles in a language I don't know, but the screen translates: "Azul! Is

my birthday party today? Ezo says she will help!"

"How old are you?"

"Three!"

"Three!" I exclaim. "Who is Ezo?"

He laughs. I catch glimpses of other children behind him, and something familiar—a white refugee tent.

"Where are you?"

"Balloons!"

The connection is severed.

"MEDA, please return my last call."

"I can't."

"Where did it come from? Why did he call me?"

"I don't know."

By the time I'm home, I've spoken with three supervisors, all of whom assert that they have no record of such an event. No, they cannot trace the communication, and besides, MEDA communications are protected by law, and I am not privy to them.

I'm quite worried about the boy.

Vida

It's terribly hot here. I long for our summer house in the mountains. But it's probably gone now, too.

Azul is restored to health, but we argue constantly. Children complain that Azul hit or bit them. I caught him defecating under the trees and yelled, "That's the kind of thing that made you sick!" He keeps talking about his party. It's been two months, but he hasn't forgotten. I should have one for him, but every day is full of turmoil. Hundreds of kids pour in daily, most even more disturbed than us. I'm doing my best, but I can't be mother, father, and grandmother. I've started a message thread with other older kids; some of them know how to deal with the little ones.

Online, I find recommendations for Narrative Exposure Therapy. Basically it's a process of refugee children with PTSD telling their stories. I organize a

network of camp groups to encourage this.

★ ★ ★

"How do you feel?" I ask the circle of restless children I've gathered, a few afternoons later.

"Mad!"

"Lonely!"

"Angry!"

"Sad!"

Languages mingle with tears in a shouted torrent describing how evil adults killed their families. Most other grown-ups are complicit enablers who ruined the world's water and air, sucked riches from land they stole, and discarded people like flotsam. With difficulty, I restore one-at-a-time order.

"Another district diverted our water," Ilya says, her long dreads coiled in an impressive beehive. "We disputed it, but no one cared about us. Our crops failed. Our goats and chickens died. We walked for hundreds of miles and everyone died except my sister and me."

"We had a school in our village," says wiry Batul. "Some NGO built it, and sent books, tablets, software, solar panels—even a teacher! Everyone came there to charge their phones and do their banking. My mother got a microloan and opened a café next to it. Then soldiers came and killed all the men. They took my mother and sisters and the older boys. They smashed the solar panels and laughed. 'Run fast, little boy,' one of them told me." He lowers his head and whispers, "I should have tried to kill them. But I ran."

"I went to visit my aunt," says Yenena, speaking calmly as tears run down her face. "When I got off the bus on the high road, she didn't meet me. I walked toward her village and saw dead people. One woman sat on a chair on her porch. I looked inside a church, and people were bent over in the pews, dead. I ran back to the road.

"A van came. A woman in a space suit got out and told me she had to test for a virus. She poked me with a needle, took blood, said I was okay, gave me a shot, and said I could get in. There were other kids in the van. I was afraid because there was no driver. The doctor said everyone was dying of a virus and that I couldn't go home because everyone there was dead. But how could

they all die so fast? I called her a liar and tried to hit her. She grabbed my wrists, said she was sorry, and showed me on her phone that it was true.

"Since then, I just cry. The car brought us here and left to get more kids. She said there's a new implant that tells a computer when someone gets sick, but it was too expensive for our country. Instead, they bought tanks."

"My father beat all us kids and our mother, too," says Serge. "She told us he was a good person inside. That was a lie. He was pure evil. I'm glad he's dead."

Azul is walking around holding Ezo, laughing. It's the only thing that makes him happy. Ezo will talk to anyone, but I'm the only one who can issue executive commands. I can't imagine why I have custody of superintelligence, but I don't have time to worry about it, either.

Some children refuse to speak. Others run away, or plug their ears and shout nonsense words. They have seen throats cut, heads blown away, rape, mass executions—unspeakable brutality. It is difficult for me to listen, but those who can speak must have a witness.

So I remain, and try to get them to talk about how to change things.

Stephan asks Ezo to tell us the history of war and aggression, but when I ask it how long it would take, it says, "Longer than any of you will live."

"Look," says one of the oldest girls, "maybe that's the problem. There's too much history. Maybe we'd be better at fixing things, all of us kids. Adults made these problems. Maybe we can see things more clearly. "We don't have as many grudges yet."

"I have plenty of grudges," says Batul.

Ezo links us with other groups of refugee children talking about the same things. We are not alone.

"We all want to change this. But how?" I ask.

"Kill everyone who does something bad," says Ela, who is five.

"Killing is bad," Joram, who is ten, points out.

"Use CRISPR to change the genes of people who commit acts of violence."

Karin says, "But if we take away parts of us, will be still be ourselves? When I'm mad, and want to hurt someone, I might not want to kill them. If I think about it, I might just want to yell—I mean, talk to them."

"That's called 'negotiation,'" I say. "Maybe 'law.'"

“Whose law?” asks Karin. “The law that says any man could beat up my sister if she didn’t do what he told her to do?”

“Is that what it was like where you are from?” asks Ann.

Sami says, “Put a nanotech virus in all weapons that make everyone who picks one up to kill a human being as sad as I was when my—when my sister —”

An older girl holds her as she screams, shakes, and cries.

We should all be crying. The whole world.

Because of who and what we are.

Civilization is a fragile veneer.

Beneath is chaos.

“Fix it, Ezo!” yells Batul. “Fix it, if you’re so smart!” He jumps up and runs away, kicking up dust.

“I’m still learning,” says Ezo. “I don’t know enough.”

Karin stands, and holds up her phone.

“Here’s the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. It says that we are all free and equal. We have a right to education, health care, dignity, freedom from fear and want, freedom of speech. I didn’t know I had those rights!”

I touch my aunt’s UN ring, which hangs from a cord around my neck, hidden inside my clothes, and remember her power, her commitment. This vision of a world in which all people, even children, have rights that are respected is what she lived and died for. Can I be as strong as she was?

Sami says, “We need everyone in the camp to read this! Talk about it!”

“I can’t read,” says Ela, “But I can almost.”

“Audio, in seventy-four languages,” says Ezo. There are a lot of pidgins here.

I don’t want to think Ezo sounds like my aunt, but increasingly, she has Ezo’s distinctive accent, low timbre, exact accent. It could easily mimic it by finding my aunt’s phone conversations.

Sami says, “There are *sixty-five million* refugee children in the world. It says that’s how many people live in France.”

It’s difficult to understand that number.

“When people hurt us, why can’t we just hurt them back?” demands Nabil. “Only worse?”

Lesedi stands and crosses her arms. The festive scarves that she pulled from our pallet of donated clothing, purple and green and red, swirl around this small, fierce goddess. “Because other people have feelings, too!” She glares at us all around the circle, gives a sharp nod, and sits.

“Not the ones who killed our families.” says Nabil. “There are so many of us here because there are so many more of them. I wish I could put them inside my game and kill them all.” He takes aim. “Pow!”

“I play other games online,” says Ann. “We build communities. We fix problems. If we could put everything inside that game, we could all fix it together.”

Many of us have grown up playing similar online cooperative world-building games with children and adults near and far. In these games, we create societies, work as teams to improve every aspect of life as the need arises, negotiate road-building, budgets, school curriculums. We discuss right and wrong. We learn our own weaknesses and strengths, hone our skills.

“We can build our own game,” I say. “I’ll teach you how. Ezo, are you open-source?”

“I can provide you with an open-source space.”

“Then we can do it! I’m going to teach all of you to code.”

“We’ll be Team Ezo!” says Nabil.

“And we’ll stop war,” says Ann. “Ezo, play us some dancing music!”

In the sunlight of the waning afternoon, all the children in the circle are seized with genuine enthusiasm. Ezo takes over the loudspeakers, and plays Bob Marley singing, “Get up, stand up! Stand up for your rights,” and then finds antiwar songs from culture after culture, in language after language, many fresh-minted in answer to today’s specific horrors, but all hopeful. I know this because when a new one begins, everyone stands listening for a second, and then, across the camp, voices unite in recognition—sometimes few, but often, many.

The din of them dancing and cheering is overwhelming. I dance too, losing myself in the simple fact of our present safety, not daring to hope.

Later, Azul wakes screaming from nightmares, as he does every night. I hold him tight, and vow that we will end war, human predation, and the terrors these children deal with daily.

We can't do it alone. I have no idea what form such radical change might take. It would be a world that has never existed before.

Kind of like Ezo.

Mai

A week after my unfortunate yoga adventure, I am improved enough to return to work. When I emerge from the Metro, rejoicing that the escalator works, it seems that there are more self-driving pods than just a week ago. Maybe an SI has been unleashed, a good one, and Zoe's dream is coming true.

Or maybe I'm the one who is dreaming.

Leafing trees haze the Mall with vibrant green. Earnest tourists with packed agendas head toward their target museums, and kites soar over the Castle. I overhear raves about the cherry trees being in full bloom, so instead of going right to work, I head toward the Potomac.

★ ★ ★

The dome of the Jefferson Memorial gleams in the spring sunlight as I near the Tidal Basin. As I wait to cross the street, my vision seems to jolt for an instant. Then it's fine—probably my imagination.

The morning sun shimmers on the water and lights the long curve of trees with deep pink fire. Then I am beneath immense flower-clouds and wet, black branches, strolling with others who gaze and move as if in a state of enchantment.

The cherry blossoms are my enduring delight, year after year, as they were the delight of Song Dynasty artists. I strive to represent a limb in a single, fluid stroke with sharp, natural jags by properly loading the brush with ink, applying pressure, and lifting the brush as if Mind were transmitting the essence of branch, leaf, and flower to thin, wet rice paper. I fail more often than not, but I keep trying.

Water-scented wind sweeps the basin's short fetch, shatters the perfect reflection, and scatters pink flowers like snow.

Without my flipping a single switch or intending for it to happen, a flavor—

it seems such, with unparsable depth and complexity—emerges in my brain, with so many sources that no AI could possibly track and reweave it.

Memory, like all things physical, must have weight. This instant brings to mind a precisely weighted memory of being with my grandfather, in this exact spot, decades ago.

He is a tall, thin man of eighty-five. He stands erect, chin slightly lifted, using his cane for balance and style more than for support. His spring suit, of light, beige linen, dazzles in the cool sun. His unbuttoned jacket billows in the breeze, which showers us with pink petals. A gold railroad retirement watch—earned after first trimming trees on the New York Central Railroad's right-of-way in 1910 at age twelve and then rising, over decades, through the ranks as conductor, ticket agent, and dispatch manager—nestles in the bespoke watch pocket, its chain a thin gold catenary. His crisp white shirt, gold cuff links, bow tie, and straw boater speak of a vanished way of life.

His face is as full of wonder as if he had been born to experience this instant, in which he realizes the world is still here, a year after the death of his wife of sixty years. Though a child, I know this much, in my own way, because I loved her, too.

How could this moment, its memory, and the emotion it evokes, be digitized and replicated, even when machines are faster than sin and know more than God?

They do not have a body. They do not have a hand to reach for his hand. They cannot feel his squeeze mine reassuringly and, perhaps, in gratitude. They do not have short legs that skip to keep up with his longer, more measured steps. They do not have a box of Smith Brothers cherry cough drops in their pocket, which he hands me, nor do they have the embossed sugar-candy words, hard and sweet atop my tongue, which crunch as I splinter them with my teeth. They do not know what it means to hear him laugh for the first time since she died.

But perhaps, in our superintelligent future, we will bask in new delights, and not remember how bitter and puzzling grief can be, nor how elusive, how sudden the healing thaw.

Traffic flashes in the sun, bees burrow into blossoms, and I cry, on this spring morning, and I also laugh, as if some fugitive harmonic has found and

tuned me, after all these years, to the chord of myself.

★ ★ ★

"Oh, Mom, it's not either-or," says Zoe as we nurse the best whiskey on offer at O'Maggie's up at the shopping center (and the best is none too good, as my mother would say). Zoe is here for tomorrow's SI conference, then returns home for parent-teacher conferences.

The lunch crowd is tapering off, and outside the big front window, beyond the parking lot, the wild forest next to twelve roaring Beltway lanes is washed with a barely discernable pale green against the overcast sky. Muzak mingles with the sounds of clearing up. I wave at Jane Selter as she passes outside. Surprised, she waves back before going into the optometrist's office.

Zoe says, "In the past ten years, I've been to I don't know how many conferences where we discuss how to ethically design SIs. Most of us have signed a statement clearly stating our aims, and our goal and duty is to make sure AI and SI are and will remain beneficent." She pushes a strand of long, honey-brown hair behind her ear, tilts her head, and looks at me with her entire ballast of earnestness, which is considerable.

"I believe that," I say. "I believe *you.* But on the other hand, this has all been thrust on me. The Simon, the food, this—this implant." I gesture toward my heart, but the components, presumably, are everywhere they need to be. "They can look right into my brain."

"And so can you, right? Isn't that amazing? Health data from all over the world is being collected. Your phone can tell you whether you have lung cancer and whether it might be curable—AI might develop a cure, for Pete's sake."

"But this is *my* information."

"You're just one person. Out of billions. Who cares?"

"I care."

We glare at each other, then burst into laughter.

"What could a strong AI do to stop war?" I ask Zoe.

"No need to start small, right? Well, countless things, depending on its master algorithm. It could wipe out all humans with a plague. Problem solved: no more war. Or, it figures out the neurochemical flip that makes us take sides,

seek revenge, get more of what we want and need, kill other tribes, and all that. Changes it."

"And that might not work out as planned, either?"

"You think? Or let's say it generates a map of every weapon in the world __"

"Sticks, stones, missiles—and words?"

"Whatever it can rule in and not out. It will probably come up with solutions we would never have thought of."

"Like, maybe it would infuse everyone with amazing negotiating skills? Or extreme empathy?"

Zoe smiles, shrugs. "Maybe we'll see." The rain moves in, bounces from black asphalt in short, bright slashes, blurs the signs for the pet shop, the drug store, and the new Asian Food Megamart. It recently replaced the Safeway where, once, groceries were placed on a conveyor belt which passed outside. There, cheerful men loaded them into lined-up, kid-filled station wagons. It was the future, probably created by veterans who had enjoyed making things work better during the war.

I reflect upon how I take such pleasure in memory, in the ever-more-fine details of this place. My family has had the privilege of living in fifty-year chunks of time. I think of a childhood friend who learned many languages and cultures and has written internationally acclaimed guidebooks and essays. He couldn't get away soon enough. He would be astonished that I'm still here, immersed in these nuances.

Zoe reaches across the table and takes my hand. "You've always been such an idealist."

"What good have I done?"

"You're only one person."

"But I'm not the only one."

"No," she says, and grins. "No, you're not."

★ ★ ★

I cancel the food service and send the Simon away, glad it has no feelings to hurt, thankful for the network that sprang to action on my account in an instant. Upon checking, I find that certain parts of my brain are now satisfactorily large

and bright, and that medication has been discontinued.

That evening as I load the dishwasher, I realize I've been far too self-involved. It strikes even me as strange.

The kitchen window is open, admitting the cool patter of rain. Zoe rehearsed for high school tryouts for the show *Annie* on an evening such as this, singing the lyrics "Tomorrow, tomorrow" over and over again while her brother grimaced, holding his hands over his ears.

"Tomorrow" was so very long ago!

Where have I been all this time? The neurochemistry of my sudden ability to ask this question is, apparently, measurable, as well as actionable. When my phone rings, it feels as inevitable as a cloud's phase change to rain.

★ ★ ★

My phone beeps, and Zoe's worried face appears on my screen. I glimpse her office behind her.

"You're in Dulles *Airport?* Going *where?*"

"Sudan. How *can't* you know? Haven't my reservations been shared with you?"

"You don't have to act smart about it. No, as a matter of fact."

"Maybe you've been cured of your excess nosiness. Maybe the let's-give-Mom-some-privacy part of your brain is lighting up."

"Ha, ha. You didn't you mention this when I was there two weeks ago."

"Things happened fast." It has been a whirlwind of vaccinations, visas, house arrangements, and some very deep thought.

"Apparently. But why there?" She looks sideways; I hear her tap computer keys. "Okay, it looks like—yeah. A refugee camp of mostly children."

"All kinds of child refugees. War, climate, you name it."

"Your specialty." Her frown relaxes; her voice has lost its manic edge.

"There are actually a lot of these camps. More every month. I started hearing about them a few weeks ago."

"What do you mean, hearing about them?"

"My phone suggested it."

"Hmm. And you weren't disturbed?"

At first, I was.

★ ★ ★

I hoped it was Azul, the laughing boy, calling that evening in the kitchen. Instead, I saw an inscrutable *1/0*.

"Who is this?"

1/0 showed me a schematic of lines throughout the Middle East and Africa converging in the rough center, with dots forging new paths as I watched. One dot enlarged, showing Azul pounding on the window of a bus and screaming. An older girl held him on her lap and rocked him.

Next, it showed me a vast, well-organized refugee camp filled with mostly children, sharing tales of horrific violence.

Then, a swift statistical analysis of online CVs paused on mine, moved swiftly to the MEDA portal (which offered no resistance), and displayed CT scans in psychedelic colors enlarging and shrinking with hallucinatory speed.

Shadowy images emerged, focused, and intensified. Brisk spring wind filled the air with flowers. A cherry blossom alighted on the golden brim of my grandfather's boater. I felt again, as fresh-smelling rain pattered outside the open kitchen window, that sweet burst of emotion so strong that my chest ached, and tears came to my eyes.

A woman's voice said, "I can show you the neurochemistry of how I access these memories. I need to know how and why they create meaning, emotions, stories."

The hook was firmly set when I saw children in the camp discussing the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

★ ★ ★

"Mom! Are you okay?" asks Zoe, startling me back to the airport.

"Oh! Yes, yes. Actually, since you were here, I've been reading a lot of literature about AI and superintelligence, including your work."

She laughs. "Good! I'm always here to interpret." Her eyes widen. "Okay, I've found Team Ezo's website, a video channel—all kinds of social media. They're developing a mission based on the UN's Declaration of the Rights of the Child to health, education, freedom from want, and freedom from war. Hmm. Water rights—domestic violence—access to medical technology—it's going to be quite political. They say—ha!—adults are ruining their world."

Now she has a twinkle in her eye. “So, Mom, you’re an okay adult?”

“Probably an honorary kid, based what they could see of my brain.”

“And you’re ready to get back in the game.”

“I think it’s coming very soon,” I say. “In fact, I think it may be here.”

“Your plane?” But she has a faraway look on her face. I think it might be wonder, with a touch of the moment when she snapped in the final piece of a thousand-piece pure white jigsaw puzzle.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

★ ★ ★

After hanging up, while the kid next to me nods in time to the music on his earphones, I slowly say the word we both were thinking: “Beneficence.”

Its paired susurrations, the way the tongue and lips must move to make the subtly different vowel sounds, soothes.

What can the springs of kindness—the root of which is *kinned,* one of the same kin or race—mean to something grown from code? How can code, however sophisticated, know the fear of the different, the relief of the same, or the tension that sparks movement?

Zoe’s fellows describe SI as an infant with frightening power. But Ezo has no eye with which to aim a hand at a bauble; no hand at all, no way to build neural pathways. It has no limbic system, and no amygdalae. There can be no love, no fear, no joy, without a body. Our hands, not code, create a self, which is not just in our heads, our brains, but distributed throughout our bodies.

Human minds are firmly grounded in what we learn through our senses, and we rewrite ourselves from day one, paring and learning constantly, through intense stages of neuroplasticity. Though Ezo can rewrite its own code, the child analogy stops there. A toddler can identify a cube without sight, by touch. She learns how a color can be deep delight, has fingers that recoil at heat, knows that a certain face means joy, or fear. Pathways we call anguish and love emerge from our unique physicality.

We and Ezo are alien to one another. Without a human body, how can Ezo understand beneficence, or the impact of the choices it might make on our behalf? With its very name, 1/0 lays claim to being different, to being

irrational, when our concept of AI has been one of an exact, digital, emotionless, and inexorable entity that can never understand what it means to us when it wins at playing our game, whether that game be chess or the project of moving humanity farther from war, closer to a just society and a sustainable, flourishing world.

I truly hope Ezo is something utterly new.

Despite eons of moral musings, we have not yet discovered what we are. For all our self-proclaimed wisdom, we are a mystery, a black box, as is Ezo and the other superintelligences which will arc through our lives in ways we cannot predict.

We must develop new paths on which to meet, spaces in which to negotiate our shared future.

What about me makes Ezo think I'm the right person for this task? What if I get it wrong?

But having been asked, I must answer with action. I have imagined these possibilities my entire life, as we careened toward one imagined future after another. Like Ezo, each promised solutions to disease, poverty, war, exploitation.

I wait for my flight in Dulles Airport—one of those futures, an architectural paean to flight and to the exhilaration of the future, built when the United States was strong and had the power to rebuild a ravaged continent wrung dry of hope, and to create new democracies.

It is named after John Foster Dulles, who pioneered NATO as well as our hidden, duplicitous brand of power-wielding around the world. He and his brother Allen, head of the CIA, and their like-minded colleagues, built and toppled governments, sold ever-more-powerful arms, trained and created our future enemies, and sowed life and death as they deemed fit.

The reckoning has come.

The world is no longer theirs, or ours.

It belongs to the children.

What do they want? How will they bring about their new world, and how can I help? SI is a new wilderness, an evolving ecosystem even now profoundly changing our physical, mental, and emotional landscape. It has done so for decades, growing immense abilities and power.

Its shore is everywhere and nowhere. It laps our feet; it lures us to swim, catch its bizarre fishes, and equip voyages of exploration. Its waves of pure mathematics rise and fall in colors we will grow new senses to apprehend and use, much as we grew the tool of language with which we pin to specimen pages memories and thoughts in answer to imperious, mysterious command. Just as we explore with words that twirl in mad calypsos of antic, sparring rhetorics, and with devices that measure our interiors and those of distant suns, so we will explore and measure SI, scale its cliff faces, and perhaps drown in its alien seas before we grow new fins and gills. The sounds of a thousand travelers fill the vast space in which I sit. Patterns I have never truly listened to arise in waves that rise and fall like breath, setting me on a self-chosen journey of hard traveling, of rocks, crags, storms, crevasses, strange waypoints, and, I hope, growing strength.

As I fall into the moon reflected in this new river our technologies have wrought, my own "Answering Vice-Prefect Chang," after Wang Wei's poem, unfurls line by line.

Called by my old life, I fly instead toward the unknown.

White streams fall from cliff to cliff.

Their sound clears my mind.

At the trailhead, peaks are obscured by clouds.

When my flight is announced,

I hoist my pack, grab my hiking sticks, and get in line.

Vida

Azul runs toward a woman approaching our tent.

She has white hair, walks swiftly with hiking sticks, wears a backpack and trails, improbably, a jostling, colorful flock of balloons.

"Mai!" he shouts.

"Oh, Azul!" she says. She tries to drop to her knees, but ends up falling on her butt and laughing.

Azul burrows into her lap and hugs her.


BLUE MORPHOS IN THE GARDEN
LIS MITCHELL

Blue Morphos in the Garden

LIS MITCHELL

illustration by

MARY HAASDYK

TOR·COM

I am elbows-deep in dishwater and morning sunlight when Lily brings me the news.

"Gray-Granna's down by the river," Lily says. "She's turning into butterflies." She delivers this with a mixed air of authority and awe.

I nearly drop the plate I am holding. That would be bad—it's part of Aunt Augustine's set and Lily would cry if any of them broke. Carefully, I lay it down on the counter next to the sink. Leaning forward, I submerge my hands into the soapy water. The warm water feels so good. I can almost feel my blood flowing in my veins, I think, and I flex my fingers. No trembling. Good.

"Mom?" Lily takes a step behind me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart." I turn around and wipe my hands on my jeans. "Fast or slow? Is there time to find your father?"

"Slow," Lily says. "Very slow. And Dad knows. He's in the garden." She ducks her head and stares at me from beneath a frizzy halo of ash-brown curls, looking very much like her father's child. "He wants you to come."

"Of course, he does." I sigh. Damn Dash. I would have come—I will still come—but he has to keep flinging himself against this and it's going to break his heart. I'm not going to change.

Lily hears my sigh. She echoes it in that exaggerated way kids mimic adults, thrusting out her lower lip, and huffing until the curls around her face tremble.

"Come on, Moooom," she says and pulls at my hand.

She tows me out of the cool darkness of the house and into the green wilderness of the garden. We head southeast towards the river that marks the boundary. I keep my pace deliberate, slow, dignified, despite Lily's impatient tugs.

"The butterflies are so pretty," Lily tells me. "They're blue and big, almost the size of my hand. Like this!" She pulls from my grasp and cups her hands

together to demonstrate.

The path to the river comes out behind an overgrown hedge and leads us down a slight slope. As we skirt a willow tree, the river comes into view. I see Dash standing stock-still on the path ahead, one arm clasped across his chest, the other hand propping his chin. He has not yet noticed Lily or me come up behind him, being transfixed by the scene before us.

The river is a small one, shallow, gentle, hardly deserving of the name—a tributary branch leading to a larger one. A low rocky embankment leads up the slope towards us, and perched on the largest of those rocks is a withered and naked woman … if you can call the husk before us a woman at all.

Faded blue gingham pools around her feet, and her legs rise like scrawny white aspens above the crumpled fabric. Her arms are open wide, as if to embrace the sun, and her white-gray hair unspools into the morning breeze. A cloud of blue butterflies eddies on this same breeze, shifting around her, exposing and then hiding and exposing again her collapsed breasts, her sagging buttocks, her scarred belly. As I watch, I see dark spores blossom on her skin. One here, one there. They swell slowly into gold-green pods—chrysalides, really, which ripen and split. The butterflies crawl backwards into this life, unfurling crumpled, wet wings. The outer edge of the wing resembles split wood with whorled knots, but each butterfly unfolds itself into a slice of fluttering blue sky and dark stormshadow. Open—sky, closed—wood. Each insect delicately buds. Each one just as delicately extends a proboscis to taste the salt on Gray-Granna's skin, and then casts itself into the butterfly-cloud.

She is already shriveling, her mass dropping away in featherscale weights.

Lily pulls her hand from mine and sidles down the rocky slope towards Gray-Granna. "I've brought them," she announces.

I doubt that Gray-Granna hears Lily. I can no longer see visible ears. The face itself is masked by a hundred opening-and-closing wings. The thin hands that once stroked my daughter's hair reach sunwards, like starveling branches attenuated in a drought. The breasts are all but gone now.

Lily doesn't seem to notice this ruin. She only sees butterflies. Beautiful blue butterflies. She reaches a hand towards the cloud and Dash reflexively clamps his hand on her shoulder, pulling her up short.

"Not now, kiddo," he says, the gentleness in his voice belying the urgent

grip. "Leave her be."

"I want to touch her," Lily says. "Before she finishes dying. I want to touch them."

I find my voice. "Honey, they're new butterflies. You could hurt them."

Both Dash and Lily turn and give me identical surprised looks. "Not Gray-Granna's butterflies," Lily says patiently. *Don't you know anything, Mom?*

Dash converts his surprise into a warm smile for me. "I'm glad you're here, Viv. She's glad you're here too." He nods at his grandmother.

You can't know that, I think bitterly, unfairly. Unfair to Dash anyway, who means well, damn him.

"I should get your parents," I say. "Your father will want to know. Maybe your cousins—"

Dash's eyes focus on something beyond me. "They know."

Of course. The family always knows.

Dash's father arrives next, slogging over wet stones, from upstream. Swaddled in ugly green waders, he has slung a creel over one shoulder and wields an expensive rod as if it were a sword. He hitches his head towards his mother as he passes her, and asks, "How long?"

"Thirty-two minutes." Lily brandishes a Hello Kitty stopwatch. "Slow."

"Damn fool woman," Dash's father says. "Took the only spot I can get a reasonable cast off. Too shallow on the shore."

Dash rolls his eyes.

Dash's mother makes her way down the path only a few minutes later. Like her husband, she's armed and ready for a deathwatch. Her weapons of choice are knitting needles. She picks her way daintily down the path, and finds a half-rotted log for a seat, sitting down with a dignified flourish. "Hello, Vivian. I didn't expect to see you here," she says.

Dash winces.

"Hello, Janet," I say. I can't bring myself to call her Mum, like she insists, even though my own mother is dead and certainly wouldn't begrudge Janet the title.

Janet begins to knit, needles flashing and clacking, building a comfortable rhythm. "We haven't had a slow one in a while," she notes. "It's so nice to have a chance to say goodbye." Given that nobody is actually talking to Gray-

Granna, this patent fatuousness is clearly intended to put me at my ease, something that Janet confirms with her next words. "This is your first chance to see a passage, isn't it, Vivian?"

Janet likes to ask questions she already knows the answer to. It keeps the conversation under her thumb, which is where she prefers everything in her life to reside. I don't even bother to answer and Janet steams on, reminiscing over all the passages she's ever seen. I already know the contents of this grim catalog, as Janet has taken care to introduce me to every family member, showing me how to care for them, and issuing dire warnings about dropping, chipping, cracking, kicking, wrinkling, shoving, tearing, or even moving the family heirlooms. Only Janet could have turned Modern Housekeeping into a necronomicon.

Idly I wonder what Gray-Granna thinks about this catalog. Perhaps her ears were among the first to bud and dissolve so that she wouldn't have to hear her daughter-in-law's roll call of the dead.

Lily ignores Janet—she knows the family history as well as any of us. Instead, she skips around in circles, trying to Not Catch butterflies. I suppose I should feel grateful that this is not a sad moment for her. When my paternal grandmother died, I was made to kiss her dry shriveled lips as my father held me over her open casket. I had nightmares for weeks after. Lily will have none of that—just sunlit memories of chasing butterflies.

I am in the midst of composing a mental note: *Tell Dash that Lily does not have to kiss me when I am dead*, when Lily suddenly turns to me and says, "It's so pretty. I hope when you die, it's as pretty and slow." And I can't help thinking that when I die it will be slow enough, and not pretty. Never pretty.

Dash tightens his mouth, and whisks Lily away for a whispered conference.

Lily was the only one to see Opa—Gray-Granna's husband—make passage. This is her second death and a very different death from the first. Opa had been reading a story to her, part of a bedtime ritual that had lasted until his death. Lily's eyes had closed and she had nearly drifted off, when Opa stopped reading. Lily waited and waited, and when she opened her eyes, there was only an empty leather armchair at the foot of her bed. Empty but for an open book and sitting where no armchair had previously sat. Lily had called us, and we had called Dr. Waterhouse and all the business of passage was got through,

although Lily insisted on keeping the armchair in her room.

How long does it take for a woman to shed her skin and finish dying?

We watch for several hours. Gray-Granna becomes less and less distinct, her form collapsing and falling. The mass of butterflies finishes off her head, her thin arms, her shoulders. Now she is a torso-trunk, and all we can see is a boiling mass of cocoons and wet wings.

Now the legs are beginning to thin, and as they disintegrate, the mass of flesh topples forward. Upon hitting the ground, it bursts—a papery dry explosion, rather like a wasps' nest. Only instead of angry wasps, we are left with a blue cloud of confusion.

Well then. We're not going to be able to shut *that* up in a china cabinet. "Those are tropical butterflies," I say. "And summer's nearly gone. How long will they live with the colder nights coming on?" I wonder what happens when they die, the butterflies. Do they have a secondary afterlife too?

Janet sighs. "We'd better open the greenhouse. That will do for somewhere to sleep." She finishes counting off a row, and then collects her needles and yarn. "Lily, let's go open the greenhouse."

Somehow, the butterflies know to follow Lily. The cloud wraps around her, keeping pace. As she runs up the long slope of the lawn, all I can see are her legs and her mop of curls, dark against the blue shroud of wings.

★ ★ ★

For the first time since her birth, I am permitted to read a bedtime story to my child. Somehow Opa and Gray-Granna usurped that right during the early sleepless days of parenthood, when we were too tired to protest the kindness. I suppose if Janet was at all inclined towards bedtime stories, it might be a luxury I'd never achieve. But Janet does not like books, and the only stories she knows are ones about dying.

There is a shelf of pristine Dr. Seuss books, bought by me when I was newly pregnant. They've never been read to Lily. Opa and Gray-Granna did not care for them. Opa deigned to read from the Lang fairy books, and Gray-Granna knew dozens of old Märchen, and that's what Lily knows. I suppose that wouldn't be a far cry from Janet's catalog of family deaths. When you get down to it, all the old fairy stories get bleak.

After Lily slips into slumber, Dash joins me on the window seat. He gathers me into his arms and I lean into him. We used to sit like this in his university dorm, holding still and camouflaged in the sharp-edged silence of curfews.

The years have matured our silences, and now we watch the moonlight creep across the floor towards the bed where our daughter lies sleeping. Time slows and slivers while we hold each other. Momentarily, I feel safe, watching Lily's small chest rise and fall. There is nothing else in the world that matters so much, and I wish this moment could last forever, that we could remain here, cocooned in moonlight.

But too soon my hand begins to quaver in Dash's, and he breaks the silence as he always does, with a whispered plea to marry him. His lips in my hair, he breathes promises he knows he can't keep. His hands tighten gently on mine, trying to still the trembling. "Viv, I don't know that I can live without you."

"I said no." I always say no. We have this down to a ritual, he and I. Every night he asks me and every night I refuse.

My spine is steel-straight from all the nos that have accreted over the years. It was harder to say no to Dash when I was younger, before there was Lily, before my mother died. Sometimes I wonder if he would have been quite so honest with me about the family enchantment if he'd known the cost.

Marrying Dash means joining the family.

"I don't understand why you won't," he says. He lies. No, that's not the right word. Dash thinks he understands, but he can't. "Think of what it would mean to Lily."

"I have." I disentangle my treacherous fingers from Dash's. "It's not enough. Or it's too much. I won't be subsumed. It's Lily's birthright—if she wants it—but I don't."

At least Dash never mistakes my reluctance to join his family for anything but what it is. He knows I love him, just as he knows that I will not change my mind on this. But it's not in his nature to give up.

"Look," Dash says, low and fervent, as he follows me into the corridor. "That's why I wanted you to see Gray-Granna's change. I wanted you to see how beautiful it could be. How comforting it is for Lily to know that her great-grandmother is still with her. How we can still bask in her presence."

"I know that." I feel a million years old.

"You didn't see anything with Opa," he says. "I wouldn't blame you for not believing. It's so different when they go fast."

I take a deep breath and try to explain. "It's not a matter of believing or not believing. It's a matter of choice."

Dash nods eagerly, thinking he's snagged my attention. "You might be anything. You could be a warm blanket for Lily. A lamp for her to read by. You could be—"

"A decaying shell. Cold flesh and food for worms."

"Dammit," Dash snaps. "How is that going to help your daughter? How is that a comfort for me?"

"How is it not? It's my abandoned body. Can't I feed the worms if I want?"

"Don't you think it's selfish not to leave something that Lily can see, that she can tell her children about?"

"Don't you think it's a bit much to expect me to define my entire life by my motherhood and the expectation that my daughter will want me around forever? I'll be just as useful as worm meat as I would be in the house."

"What about a tree?" Dash pleads. "It's not a far jump from worm food to a tree. The terminal folks plant them over graves. I've seen them do it. You could be shade in the summer, warmth in the winter."

A tree is almost tempting, but I've thought this through. "You don't know, do you, if they really choose what they turn into?"

That quiets him, as it always does. He doesn't know. None of them do. Once the process has begun—fast or slow—none of the dying have ever spoken. Dash's family doesn't do last words.

I am not sure that I want this for Lily. I'm equally not sure that I can change that now. But the idea of her living her life on this estate, part of the family funeral cult, gives me the creeps. Every Karner comes here to die.

The house once charmed me, when Dash first brought me round to meet his parents. The oldest part of it dates back to the late 1700s, a stone root cellar laid in by Dash's many-times great-grandfather. Every generation added on to it, Dash said, which accounted for its higgledy-piggledy lopsided character. Delightful, right? But I thought they'd built it, with wood and stone and labor under the sun.

I was wrong. The house grew … organically. The turret tower where Lily sleeps is furnished with a white canopy bed with pink curtains—a gift from her great-great Aunt Rosie, who died tragically at the age of three from scarlet fever. The library—Great-great-great Uncle Irving. The greenhouse—distant cousin, Ida, reportedly something of a botanist. The bed where we conceived Lily: Great-great-great-great-Aunt Minerva. Aunt Augustine's dish set isn't just an heirloom—it really is Aunt Augustine. Over half the house is dead relatives.

Lily inherits all of this.

★ ★ ★

Lily insists on accompanying me to the doctor. She guards me like a small brown bulldog with a suspicious stare. Only reluctantly can she be pried from my side, when the nurses call me back to take my blood pressure. Even then, she scorns the plastic Fisher-Price playset offered up by the receptionist. Instead she unfolds a medical pamphlet on urinary tract infections. "I'll be good," she promises before I'm led away.

My regular doctor is out of town. They shunt me off to the covering physician, a Dr. Blake. He is younger than me, and brimming over with enthusiasm. Keen, some might say. He tut-tuts over my charts. He asks me to hold out my arms and gives me objects to clench in my fist. He has me walk a length of hallway. He tests my reflexes, and then asks if I'm having any problems swallowing.

"Not yet," I say. *Not yet* is the answer to nearly everything. Only my trembling hands and my mother's early death give the game away.

Dr. Blake seems dissatisfied with my answers. He asks the same question several ways before finally giving me what he seems to think is a paternal and stern gaze. "Mrs. Karner—"

"Dawes," I correct. "I'm not a Karner."

"Kept your name, did you?" Dr. Blake says dubiously. I don't bother to correct this misapprehension, although I consider waiting until old Dr. Waterhouse can return. Dr. Waterhouse knows not to ask about the state of Dash and me.

"Ms. Dawes, I need you to be honest with me. We don't judge, you know. We're just here to help. But it's going to be hard for me to help you if you

won't be honest with me. We need your history unvarnished. You don't need to edit for us."

"I don't know what you mean," I say. I really don't. Dr. Waterhouse has all my history. "My charts are right there, but I don't think I've left anything out."

Dr. Blake looks at me kindly. "You said you'd experienced no new symptoms of note, but you failed to mention the hallucinations."

"The hallucinations?" I repeat, baffled. "What hallucinations?"

"I realize this must be very difficult for you. It's hard to admit when—"

"What hallucinations are you talking about?"

He looks sheepish. "I overheard you talking with your daughter about her grandmother's death. I know it must have been traumatic for you. I need to ask what medications you are on. We might need to adjust their dosages."

Realization sinks in. He had overheard Lily and me talk about Gray-Granna turning into butterflies, and he had assumed that I couldn't have seen that, I must've been hallucinating. Lily, of course, was only a child. Prone to flights of fancy, or maybe she'd been humoring me. That's what he'd think.

"You seem to have misheard the context," I explain stiffly. "I assure you I'm not hallucinating."

A frown tugs at the corners of his mouth, but he pushes it back to cheerfully assure me that I may not think I've been hallucinating but…

"There are no buts. I've been perfectly lucid. You misunderstood." I stand up to indicate that this visit is over.

His eyes narrow. He isn't done examining me, although I'm done being examined. Dr. Waterhouse would know, I think resentfully. Dr. Waterhouse has been the family physician his whole life. He writes the death certificates for the family. He's never once asked to see the bodies. He knows, I expect, what he'd find … or not find.

I push past Dr. Blake and collect Lily from the waiting room. She pockets a pamphlet on iron deficiency when she thinks I'm not looking.

★ ★ ★

Dash and I argue that evening. I tell him we need to tell Lily.

"Do you know what I found between *One Fish Two Fish* and *Hop on Pop*?" I ask him. "'The Ten Warning Signs of Heart Disease Women Most

Ignore.' She knows something is wrong. Just not what."

Dash runs his hands through his hair. "I don't want to tell her anything until I know what I can tell her to expect. You've got to make a decision, Viv."

I cross my arms over my chest. "I made a decision. You just refuse to accept it."

"That was not a decision," Dash says. "That was you blindly accepting tradition, embracing the status quo."

"Whose status quo?" I ask. "Your family's ways are…"

"They're a gift," Dash says.

"You think they're better than what regular folks do."

"Aren't they?" By now, his hands have raked his hair up in tufts. "Nobody dies to be forgotten. Nobody gets pumped full of chemicals and dumped into a cement tomb in the ground. Nobody dies in hideous pain."

"But they still die," I point out. "I'm still going to die too. I'll still be gone."

Dash blinks hard against this statement. "Not if you become family."

Here is the Gordian knot that rubs between us when we hold each other. I am not a Karner. I love Dash, he loves me, we have a daughter binding us together. We are family but not. I'm on the outside. By choice, I remind myself.

"I won't." Can't. Shouldn't. What are the words that will explain this to him? I have no idea.

He flinches. "Fine. I'll let you explain it to Lily. It's your choice after all."

"Why do you always pretend like it's Lily I'll be hurting most? Why not just say that you want it for you, and acknowledge it's for your own selfish reasons?"

Dash exhales long and slow before making a reply. "I thought I had. That wasn't good enough. And Lily isn't good enough either." He turns on his heel and walks out of the room, leaving me to wonder why I've held my ground on this for so long.

★ ★ ★

We hold a memorial service for Gray-Granna two weeks after her death. Two weeks gives the Karner cousins time to all wend their way back to the family estate. Two weeks for Janet to stage-manage the expectations of the town.

Litchfield is small, and it's not every day a Karner dies. They showed up in force for Opa's service, and that seems to have only sharpened their curiosity. Dr. Waterhouse is discreet, but it's obvious that rumors still leak out.

The pastor delivers the same sermon for Gray-Granna that he did for Opa. Something about Jesus coming forth on the third day, returning to Mary in the garden. He does not add, "As a wheelbarrow." No, that's Lily, sotto voce. She looks up at me and adds softly, "Or a watering can."

After the service, people come to the house one or two at a time, bearing cold, foil-wrapped pans. I take the pans, and Dash leads them away into the sitting room to offer condolences to Janet and Carl and a small cortege of Karner cousins. After each terminal visitor departs, Janet wonders aloud what each of them would turn into, if they weren't terminal, poor things. (Does Janet conveniently forget that she'd be terminal too, but for Carl?)

"She's too solid," says Janet, offering analysis on the latest visitor. "Inanimate for sure. Wood possibly. She'd make a lovely wardrobe. Or a desk. Very practical."

I blink. You'd think after nearly a decade of life with Dash, I'd be used to Janet. In a way, I'm relieved that she still has the power to startle me. It means I'm not growing like her.

I eye her over the top of Lily's head and Dash's shoulders. She is not a bad person. She loves Carl, loves Dash, loves Lily. Tolerates me. She wants me in the family because it will please Dash. Another Karner to catalog and care for.

If you are Janet, the only thing that matters is how you die.

Funny thing, that's what matters most to me as well.

The parade of visitors eventually swells to claustrophobic proportions. The smell of white waxy flowers chokes the air and everyone speaks in that soft voice common to funerals. As if they'd rather not breathe in the mortality that still lingers. Janet reigns over this panoply of grief like a queen. She is in her element, inclining her head just so as each curious townsperson trundles through. I grudgingly admit that she fields their inanities far better than I ever could.

Back in the kitchen, surrounded by casseroles, I spend my time plotting my escape. And Lily's. Is it possible? I need out, even if Dash can't see it. I can't handle it much longer. If I only have a few years left to me, then I don't want to

spend them living in Litchfield. All I want is to die in my own manner, to be held by my love, and to set my daughter free to live a life instead of shackled to the family heritage.

But I might settle for being free and away from Janet.

Dash sidles into the kitchen. "Hiding, Viv?" He doesn't wait for an answer but produces a small snifter and pours himself some brandy.

"As much as you are," I say.

He smiles wryly to admit the truth of that. "I hate this part of things. Everybody pretending that they knew Gray-Granna to speak to. Everybody wearing black when they're only curious."

"It's exactly like my grandmother's funeral," I say. "Terminal folks face the same social hazards in grief, I guess."

"It smells in there," Dash mutters. He tosses back the brandy and makes a face. "This tastes like funeral flowers."

"Let's go outside," I suggest. "Get some air."

He hesitates.

I take the brandy glass from his hand, put it down on the counter, give it a pat. "Janet and Carl are holding down the fort. Your cousin Sandra is fielding the funeral meats for a moment."

As if to prove this point, Sandra backs into the kitchen, bearing a Tupperware dish and a bouquet of irises. She pops the seal on the Tupperware and says, "Mmmmmm, ambrosia salad. My favorite. The pastor's wife makes it special. It's my favorite thing about a passage."

Dash nods solemnly. "Go ahead and start without us. I won't tell anyone."

Sandra licks her lips in anticipation. "Well, maybe just a nibble. After I find a vase for these beauties. Georgie, do you think?"

Cousin Georgie is a cut glass decanter with art nouveau swirls. The irises match perfectly. Sandra bears off Georgie and the flowers to be shown to Janet.

"Let's go," I say again to Dash.

We collect Lily from the front stairs where she has been watching grown-ups say grown-up things. She informs me that too many people are touching her, ruffling her curls, patting her head. Lily hates to be touched by strangers.

"They keep telling me to not be sad, Mom," she says. "Am I supposed to be

sad?"

"Maybe. I don't know," I tell her, softly. Conspiratorially.

Dash looks at us. "I'm sad."

We look at him.

"Well, I am," he says, stuffing his fists into his pockets. He kicks the gravel in the driveway and it flies up in a satisfying spray. He kicks it again. Harder. The tiny patter of falling pebbles sounds like the first drops of rain before a sudden downpour. "I'm. Sad."

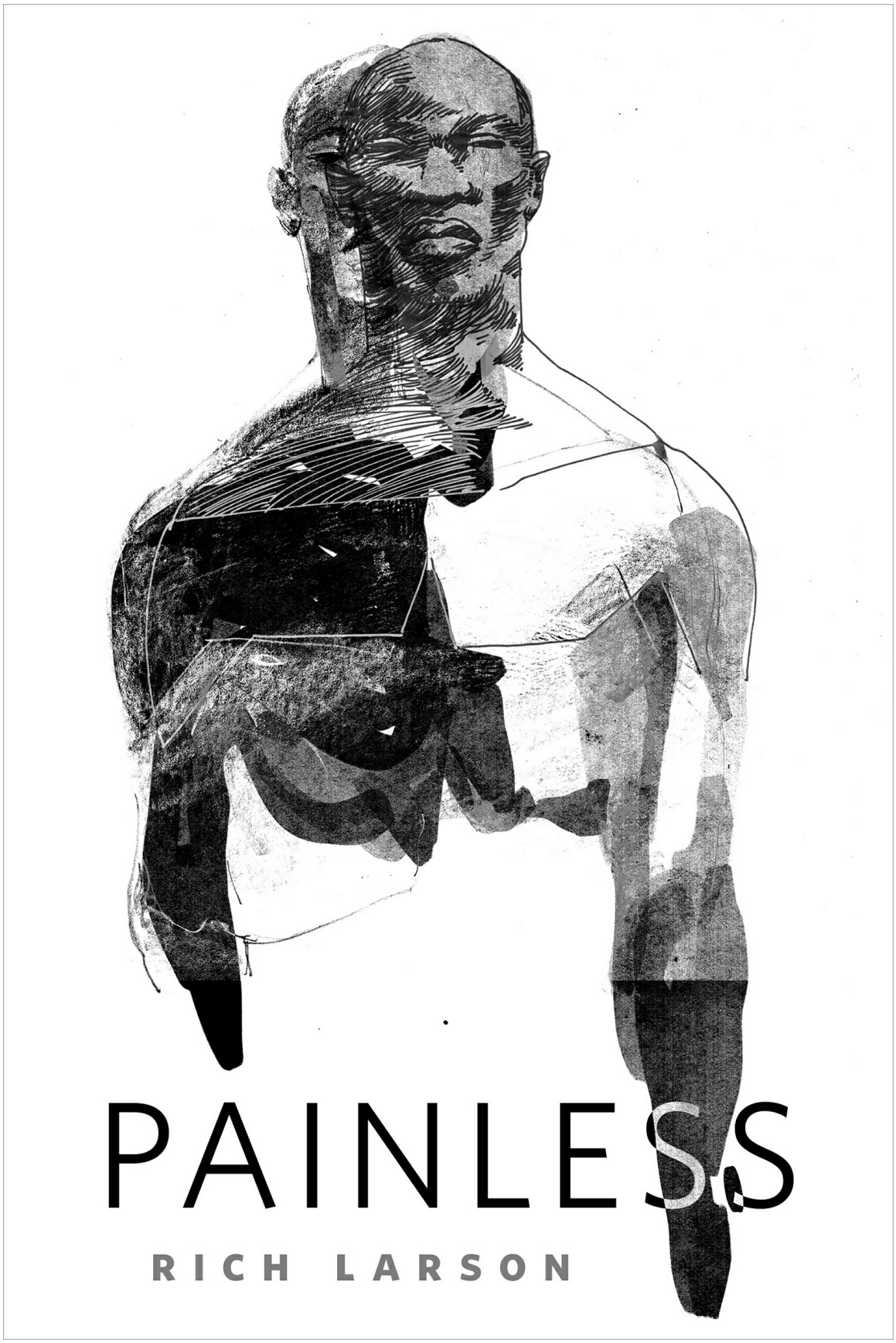
"I know," I say to him, taking his hand. "Butterflies aren't the same."

His fingers tighten on mine and we start walking down the gravel, all three of us kicking it up together. Kicking because it feels really good to kick something. And then we run out of gravel where the drive empties onto the paved road leading to and from Litchfield. I hold my breath.

Dash breathes deep and repeats his heresy. "I'm sad." But this time he's not saying it for Gray-Granna. He's saying it because he's never been allowed to be sad before. Because being a Karner means being happy at passage.

Lily pats his hand. "It's okay, Dad."

We step onto the asphalt together and start walking westward. I decide that it's time to tell my daughter how I intend to die.


PAINLESS
RICH LARSON

Painless

RICH LARSON

illustration by

ELI MINAYA

TOR·COM

Mars stands in the middle of the highway, knees locked, head tipped back. The sky overhead is choked with harmattan dust. There is so much dust he can stare directly at the rising sun, a lemon-yellow smear in the dull gray. There is so much dust it looks like everything—the scraggly trees, the sandy fields, the road itself—is disappearing, as he often wishes to disappear.

He used a pirate signal to monitor the progress of the autotrucks coming from the refinery in Zinder, loaded with petroleum. He watched them snake along the digital map. Now he can feel them coming: Their thunder vibrates the blacktop under his feet. They move fast and their avoidance AI is shoddy. In the low light, they will not see him until it is too late.

Mars takes a breath of cold, dry air. He bows his head, shuts his eyes. He can hear the first autotruck now: roaring, squeaking, clatter-clanking. He imagines it as a maelstrom of metal hurtling toward him. His heart thrums fast in his chest.

When the truck flies around the curve, Mars realizes he still wants to live. He tries to dive aside. The impact splits his world in half.

★ ★ ★

Dusk falls and Mars is still waiting beneath a twisted baobab for Tsayaba, the old woman who claims she can find anybody in this city, anybody at all. So far only a stray dog he met early this morning has shown up. It sits in front of him, panting expectantly, tail thumping the sand.

"You again."

The animal is gaunt, with fat black ticks studding its neck and shoulders, burrowing deep into matted fur. It has cuts on its backside from wriggling under some jagged fence. But it is luckier than some of the other strays here. Mars saw a man with an infected eye implant roving the streets with three skeletal dogs chained to his waist, intending to sell them down in Nigeria to a tribe that still eats dog meat.

Mars takes out his nanoknife, the last piece of military equipment he

carries. The stray recognizes it and starts to salivate.

"I spoil you, dog."

Mars dices up his thumb and then his index, flicking the bloody chunks to the ground. The stray pounces on each one and whines when Mars stops at the gray-white knucklebone of his middle finger.

"I give you any more, you'll throw it all up."

The dog whines a little longer, blood-specked black lips peeled back off its teeth, then finally trots away. Mars is alone again. He inspects his stumps, which are already clotting shut. He inspects the darkening street, mudbrick walls topped with broken glass or razor wire.

A slick-skinned *maciyin roba* wanders past on its little cilia feet, hunting for the flimsy black shopping bags half-buried in the sand. The plastivores were designed in some Kenyan genelab—for this, Mars feels a certain kinship with them—and were later set loose across the continent. They do their job well and reproduce on their own, but plastic trash has accumulated in the West African dust for nearly a century and it will take a very long time to recycle it all.

The evening prayer call is starting, a distant mumble-hum projected from the mosques. Mars is not Muslim or anything else, but he likes the sound, the ebb and flow of distorted voices. He listens to it with his eyes shut and is nearly lulled to sleep before Tsayaba finally arrives.

"Sannu."

Mars opens his eyes. Tsayaba is old, with a deep-lined face and many missing teeth, but she stands very straight and carries herself how Mars imagines a chief would, with slow, smooth motions, with high gravity. She wears a bright yellow–patterned *zani* and a puffy winter jacket.

"*Sannu,*" Mars says. "*Ina yini?* How was the day?"

"*Komi lafiya,*" Tsayaba says. "All is well. *Ina sanyi?*"

"*Sanyi, akwai shi,*" Mars says, even though he does not feel the cold. *"Ina gida?"* He wants to know what Tsayaba has found, but he makes himself focus on the greeting. Things are done slowly here.

"*Gida lafiya lau.* Well, very well." Tsayaba frowns, clicks her tongue. "*Ina jiki?*" she asks. "The body?"

Mars doesn't understand for a moment, then realizes Tsayaba is looking at

his hand. The fingers have grown back—the keratin of his nails is still spongy—but he forgot to wash away the blood.

"*Da sauki,*" Mars says. "Better."

Tsayaba gives a grunt of acknowledgment, then lowers herself to a squat. "I have found who you are searching for," she says. "I am almost certain. Early this morning, six men came with a truck. They paid the *gendarmes*. Now they are staying in the old hospital. But it is bad."

"What is bad?"

"These men are killers. They have *otobindigogi*." She makes her finger chatter, mimicking an autogun. "And they are here waiting for worse. They are waiting for a criminal called Musa, who will buy what they have. Musa, he was Boko Haram before the Pacification."

"When will he come?"

"They are not sure. They are anxious. He was meant to come today." Tsayaba shakes her head side to side, side to side. "*Wahala,*" she says. "*Wahala, wahala.* If your friend was taken by these men, I think he is not a captive. I think he is dead."

Mars does not think so. If what he suspects is true, then Musa is not coming for autoguns. He is coming for something much more valuable.

"*Na gode,*" Mars says. *"Na gode sosai."*

Tsayaba accepts the thanks with a brief nod of the head. She pulls a sleek black blockphone from the pocket of her coat and looks politely off into the distance. Mars takes out his own phone and taps it against hers, sending a small cascade of code equivalent to five hundred francs.

"*Yi hankali,*" Tsayaba says.

Mars cannot promise to be careful, but he nods and clasps the old woman's hand once more—with his right hand, his clean hand—before he leaves.

He has a busy night ahead of him.

★ ★ ★

The kasuwa *is busy despite the fierce midday sun that bakes the color out of the sky. Traders lounge under their tarp-roofed stalls, barking prices, rearranging their wares. Heaps of dried beans and grasshoppers, papayas and tomatoes and purple onions, cheap rubber shoes, 3D-printed toys beside*

wood carvings, bootleg phones and even a few secondhand implants bearing telltale stains. Camels slouch their way through the crowd draped with rugs and solarskin, only their bony knees visible.

"Miracle! Abin al'ajabi! *Come see the miracle Allah has done!"*

Miracle workers are not uncommon at the market, proselytizing through jury-rigged speakers and selling elixirs from the backs of their trucks in old plastic bottles, but this time there is a new trick that draws eyes. A boy, eleven or twelve with a sleepy smile, is standing on a woven plastic mat. Cables trail from his outstretched arms and hook into a car battery beside him. The electricity hisses and snaps, and the boy twitches but does not cry out. He only stands and smiles.

It is not a trick. Passersby come and touch the boy, certain the battery is dead, and even the slightest brush sends them reeling away in pain. His whole body is crackling with charge, but he feels nothing at all. The man who says he is his father circles through the crowd collecting coins.

*"*Abin al'ajabi!*" he calls. "Thing of wonder!"*

A hubbub builds from the other end of the kasuwa. *An armored jeep, jacked up high off the ground, is bullying its way through the market, maneuvering past donkey carts loaded with metal drums of well-water. It rolls to a stop and two men in sweat-wicking suits climb out. One of them is foreign, too tall and too light-skinned to be Hausa, with a babelpod covering one ear like a spiny white conch. Both of them stare at the boy.*

"Turn off the battery," the Hausa man says, in the voice of a man whose orders are done even when given to nobody in particular.

The boy's supposed father scurries back to the battery and switches it off. "It does not harm him," he mutters. "You saw. You saw it does not harm him."

"Who is his family?" the Hausa man demands. "His blood family?"

*A shrug. "*Ban sani ba. Ban sani ba. *He said he had a brother. Dead. But not him. He is a miracle child."*

*"*Il est une aberration génétique,*" the foreign man says, and his babelpod turns it into clumsy Hausa. He walks up to the boy and removes the cables. "You feel nothing?"*

The boy nods, then shakes his head, uncertain.

The foreign man takes both of his hands and turns them over, inspecting the skin. "And you are not leprous," he says. "You are lucky to have lived this long with no severe burns. No lost limbs. It is difficult to navigate this world without pain. Your name?"

*The boy shrugs. "*Yaro*," he says*—child.

"You are not just a child," the foreign man says. "I think you are a Marsili. A Mars, for short. Your body does not process pain. That makes you very special. It makes you a candidate."

The boy tries to understand the electronic speech coming from the babelpod, but he has never heard these words. He seizes on one he recognizes and makes a spaceship with his hand.

"Mars," he says.

The foreign man laughs. "Yes. Yes. But Mars was something else, too. Mars was a god of war."

★ ★ ★

Before he goes to the old hospital, Mars finds a neon-lit restaurant and orders so much food the two Lebanese women who own the place send their son on his moped to beg the butcher to reopen his meat locker. Mars washes his hands in the cracked bathroom sink; then, while the family cooks furiously, he sits down outside with a bottle of Youki. He watches the lime-green holo of the restaurant sign jitter and swirl through the dark, watches moths flock to it in spirals.

The beef kebabs arrive first, steaming on their skewers. Mars slides them onto the plate and wolfs them down, barely chewing; he cannot feel them burning his fingertips or mouth. Pork works better for his purposes, but it is difficult to find here. And there is another meat that works even better than pork, but he did that only once, in the field, and he has nightmares about it still.

Lamb arrives next, only half-cooked—as he ordered it. Time is of the essence. He would eat it raw if he could stand it. Mars falls on the meat, picking the rack apart with his greasy fingers. A few young men rove past, blasting music from an ancient speaker rig, laughing amphetamine-loud. They stare at the mountain of food, but when they see Mars's solemn eyes and the carbon-black nanoknife laid on the metal tabletop beside his tray, they give him

a wide berth.

Mars remembers that meat used to make him feel queasy when he was much younger, before the procedures. Now he is a carnivore the way the *maciyin roba* is a plastivore. He eats until his stomach drags heavy, then eats more. The Lebanese women shift from amusement to disgust to grim professionalism as they feed him, as they watch him crack through the bones and choke down the gristle.

"*Shukran,*" he says, when he is finally ready for them to take the plates away.

"*Afwan,*" they say in faint unison.

Mars's stomach churns when he stands up, but he has trained it to not revolt.

★ ★ ★

Three years later, the boy still has no name. He is called by a number: thirteen. He is lying facedown on a geltable, because today is his Birthday, the day all the treatments and drug courses culminate in a final procedure. Other children in the facility have had their Birthdays; he has not seen them since. He supposes they were moved elsewhere, or they died.

The boy knows the procedure is dangerous. He knows even the treatments were too much for trained soldiers to bear—the pain drove them mad. But he finds it hard to feel worried. His stomach is full of shinkafa da wake *and oily onions, and there is a screen set up beneath the geltable playing procedurally generated cartoons. Not so different from another life, a vague memory in which he is wedged into the same chair as his older brother in front of a flickering screen.*

Above him, hanging from the ceiling like an enormous metal spider, is the surgical unit. It tracks laserlight over his bare back and marks injection points with neat red circles. Pipettes and tubes slither into the boy's body, puncturing his skin with a dozen small flesh sounds. He feels only a dim, worming pressure.

There is a glass tank attached to the surgical unit, and inside it is the organism. The boy has been shown it before, the mass of raw pink putty that writhes and undulates. They told him it is a sort of cancer, reprogrammed by

a sort of virus, and that in a way it is human. To him, it looks nothing like a human.

An electronic signal is given and the organism is fed into the boy's body, coursing through the clear tubes into his interstitial spaces, into the artificial pockets prepared by earlier surgeries. The boy does not scream into the geltable. He does not bite through his tongue. He feels no pain, only the strange and unpleasant sensation of a hand entering his body and wriggling its fingers.

Hours later, when he is drowsy and his eyes are bleary from focusing on the cartoons, the gel sluices away and the tubes retract. He hears footsteps.

"Be patient," a woman's voice begs—English. The boy has learned some English in these past three years. "Be patient, be patient. It looks like a successful bond. But we have to wait."

"I have waited for decades," says another voice, and the boy recognizes it. The foreign man who took him away from kasuwar *Galmi so long ago. "I have to know."*

Suddenly the boy is face-to-face with him. The foreign man has slid underneath the table. His hair is grayer than the boy remembers it and his eyes are more hollow. He has a cigar cutter in his hand.

"Miracle child," he says. "It's very good to see you again. Please stick out your thumb for me."

★ ★ ★

Mars can see why they chose the old hospital compound. It has high mudbrick walls on three sides and barbed wire on the fourth, which backs onto an ancient landing strip. The gate is rusty metal crenellated with spikes. The painted letters have long since flaked away. Tsayaba told him that the hospital has been abandoned for years, ever since the surgical wing caught fire and took the rest of the building with it.

Mars feels bloated and heavy as he scales the front wall, but he knows he will be glad for his full stomach later. He pauses at the top to catch his breath and looks back at the old town: a maze of mudbrick, warped by the rainy season, lit by swatches of grainy orange biolamp. It feels almost organic, like it sprang up from the ground. New buildings on the periphery are more

geometric, rebar skeletons in concrete sheaths. Mosques tower over everything else, their painted white crescents pushed up into the sky like waning moons.

Most important, the highway is clear. Mars faces forward and peers down into the dark compound. The hospital is a ruin, ash and rubble. But beyond it there are housing units for the doctors and staff that were untouched by the fire. He can see light in one of the windows. That is where they will be keeping their captive.

Almost directly below him, the night guard is boiling tea on a brazier. His face is scarfed against the cold, gaps only for his eyes and a pair of trailing earbud wires. His gun is resting on a woven plastic chair across from him. His blockphone is balanced on top of it, playing yesterday's Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire football match.

Mars drops down off the wall, raising a small puff of dust where he lands. The guard leaps to his feet and right into the nanoknife.

Mars smothers the man's cry with the crook of his arm, yanks the blade free, then spins him around to drive it into the base of his skull. It slides through the bone and gray matter as if they were cow butter. The guard spasms and goes limp. Mars plucks the blockphone off the chair and shoves the man's face up against the screen to unlock it before rigor mortis makes him unrecognizable.

Apart from one blinking number at the top of his screen, the man's contacts are local. He is an extra hire, not one of the six Tsayaba mentioned. Mars feels a twist of guilt when he sees a home screen clip of the man, face uncovered and still young enough to have pockmarks, tossing a little girl into the air and catching her. He lays the body down gently. Blood trickles out from underneath, stretching red fingers through the sand.

Mars silences the phone and pockets it. The husk of the hospital looms before him: a few jagged walls, half of a twisted metal staircase. For an instant Mars thinks he can smell the burning, but it is only wood fires being carried from town on the wind. There is movement in the rubble, first the slow careful motions of more *maciyin roba* and then a stiff-legged loping.

Hyenas is Mars's first thought—they say the hyenas are coming back now—but it is only a pair of stray dogs. Mars peers at them for a moment, trying to tell if one is his visitor from earlier that day. Then he heads for the housing

units. Tonight, the dogs will have plenty to eat.

★ ★ ★

Three years later, the boy is a soldier and nearly a man. His identification tag says Marsili 13. *He wears it on a band around his arm, because when they tried to do the subcutaneous kind his body spat it back up and pinched the hole shut in seconds. The rest of his unit calls him Mars—some of them joke that he came from there in a tiny spaceship.*

There is good reason for that. From the very start of his accelerated training, Mars can do things no human can do. He can sprint for minutes at a time while the organism laps away his lactic acid and replenishes his cells. His scrawny frame can carry double its weight when the organism weaves itself into his skeletal muscle.

At first the others are scared of him. Then they hate him, for making things seem so easy. They give him cuffs on the back of his head when they pass. They drop a bucket of pinching water scorpions into his shower stall. He does not care. At night he climbs into his cot with a full belly and watches cartoons on the screen of his standard issue phone, a dull black slab that only functions during certain hours.

When they go through anti-interrogation, the water filling his lungs is only a tickling ghost. They pull him out of the tank before he drowns, but he is not sure if he can drown anymore. The other members of his unit, sopping wet, breathing ragged, look at him as if he is a god. Then they look at each other.

That night they invite him to drink. He guzzles the ogogoro *until he can fool himself into thinking he feels the same crazy happy way they feel. He shows them his own version of their knife game: Instead of stabbing the spaces between his fingers, he drives the point of the blade into each knuckle in turn, moving like a blur, and by the time one circuit is complete he has already healed.*

They howl. The ones who still believe in witch stuff say, Witch stuff.

*"Who cares," says one of the Yoruba men. "He is ours. You are ours, yes, Mars?" And because he knows Mars speaks Hausa: "*Dan'uwanmu ne? *You are our brother?"*

Mars thought he did not care, but now the word makes him into a child again. He starts to weep. The others shift and fidget, uneasy.

In the morning, Mars is transferred.

★ ★ ★

They are in the last house of the row, a Western-style construction no doubt built for some European surgeon decades ago. The orchard around it is dead and withered. But there is light in the window, faint music that sounds like *kuduro,* and a truck and two motorcycles are parked outside. Mars even sees some clothes hanging from a wire laundry line, flapping wings in the night wind.

He circles the house like a shade. From up close, the thumping music is loud enough to send ripples through the screen porch. The bass raises the hairs on his arms. He peers through a window and sees four men sitting around a kitchen table. Playing cards slip and slide over the dusty wood. A heavy black vape sits in the center, belching smoke through the affixed tubes.

Mars guesses that the last two men are with the prisoner. He takes the stolen blockphone from his pocket and thumbs the blinking number, thinking that whoever answers it will be the leader, and the leader he will keep alive to answer questions. None of the men at the table reach for their pockets. Instead, Mars hears a whistling ringtone from behind him and realizes he has guessed wrong just before an autogun tears into him.

The flurry of bullets takes him off his feet; he slams into the side of the house and crumples. Through the keening in his ears Mars realizes the music has cut out. He hears shouts from inside. A clattering door. Voices somewhere above him.

"*Kai!* Who the fuck is that? Who did you shoot?"

"He was looking through the window, he—"

"Is he one of Musa's?"

"Then Musa's trying to rip us off. The man we had out front, he killed him."

Mars lies very still. He can feel the organism at work, knitting his flesh back together, squeezing the metal out. He reaches for his nanoknife. The autogun sees the movement and gives a bleat of alarm, but there are friendly bodies in the way so it cannot fire, and its owner takes a moment too long to

realize his target is somehow alive. In that moment Mars cleaves him open from his hip bone to his sternum.

He whirls on the others, slips under a punch and pulls the man close, making him a shield as another gun goes off. Small caliber this time—a bullet clips his shoulder and he barely notices it. Three quick stabs as he pushes forward; he drops his dying shield and drives the nanoknife into the arm of the shooter. The gun fires one last time and he takes the bullet right in the chest. For a split second his whole body shudders. Sways.

Then he's moving again, and in less than a minute he is surrounded only by corpses. Their blood pools and wriggles through the sand like anemones. Mars can feel the organism working hard, converting his evening meal into new flesh, fresh skin. The last bullet spirals back out from his heart and drops soundlessly to the ground.

★ ★ ★

Six years later, Mars is a bogeyman. He finishes his training half in virtual and half in the field, sometimes with a handler, most often alone. He is given no rank, because he does not exist as anything but a rumor. He is given jobs instead. Most often, targets. The first time he kills, the man sputters and curses and begs and shits himself. Mars had seen people die before, but causing it is different. He does not sleep for a week.

He is told, over and over again, that he is creating stability. That he murders one malefactor to save a thousand innocents. That nobody else can do what he does—the procedure has never been successful since, not once—so he must do it. But he does not feel any higher purpose. He does what he is told because it is his habit. It grinds away at him in places that do not seem to grow back.

On one assignment he triggers an alarm and has to flee on foot. A pursuer's bullet punches a hole through his back; he survives but a week later he learns that the bullet continued through a tin wall into the skull of a woman leaning down just so, just at the perfect height, to sweep her floor.

One assignment an explosion tears his leg off. He sees his target escaping. He needs both legs to follow. So he eats the corpse beside him, eyes watering, stomach heaving.

One assignment he plants a smartbomb tailored to a general's DNA, but the general's son runs into the room instead and the scanner makes a mistake Mars is not quick enough to override. He watches the boy's body blow apart.

The other operatives, the ones who are not gods, have ways to forget. But Mars's body flushes the drugs and alcohol from his system faster than he can consume them, and sex is of no interest to him. He knows the procedure left him sterile, but he had no desire before it either, maybe for the same reason he cannot have friendships: Other people are too fragile. When he is around them all he can see are the many ways they might die.

On some of the nights Mars cannot sleep, he stands in front of a mirror and flays himself, as if he can shed the memories with the skin. He decides there are two sorts of pain: the sharp red kind that twists a person's face and makes them scream, and a slick black kind that coats a person's insides like tar. He realizes that he has been feeling the second kind for most of his life.

Mars knows there is a way to escape all pain. He has delivered it many times. Long ago, his brother escaped and left him alone. So when his handler sends him north, across the border, he discards his tracker and his identification tag and almost all of his equipment. In the early morning, he goes to the highway.

★ ★ ★

Mars opens the screen door, shaking insects off the wire mesh. He steps into the house. The concrete floor is rippled with red sand. He can hear the hum of a generator. The fluorescent tubes in the ceiling are long burnt out; the lighting is sticky yellow biolamp, smeared in the corners of the ceiling and activated by a particular radio frequency.

Now that he is so close to his goal, he feels a mixture of excitement and dread. For the past three weeks, ever since he crawled away from the highway trailing shredded flesh behind him, he has been in hiding. It took him days to grow his legs back, for the new nerve endings to find their way to his spine.

After that he went out into the *daji,* into the bush. He wandered for a week, staying in villages or moving with the herders who needed strong and tireless backs. Some of the time he was thinking of a hundred surer methods than an

autotruck, but some of the time he was just existing, and it was not so bad. Then he heard the rumor.

Mars walks past the kitchen down a dark hallway, following the sound of the generator. He is still not sure he believes. But the possibility has been growing and swelling and pushing out his other thoughts ever since he heard the story, the story of the strange creature some farmers had found on the highway.

The hum is coming from the bathroom. Mars pushes the door open. In the faint glow of the biolamp, he sees a small hooded figure slumped inside the ceramic bathtub. The generator beside the tub is hooked to an industrial drill that is churning on its slowest setting into the prisoner's stomach. Mars switches it off. He seizes the drill with both hands and drags it backward; the bit comes free with a sucking sound.

The hooded head twitches the exact way Mars's head twitches. He pulls the black fabric gently up and away. Shock freezes him in place. He thought he was prepared for this, but he is not. The face looking back at him is a child's, but it is also his.

"*Sannu,*" he says, because he can think of nothing else to say.

"*Yauwa,*" the boy in the bathtub says, in a reedy voice hoarse from disuse. *"Sannu."*

When Mars crawled away from the highway, he gave no thought to his other half, to the splinter of spinal column and dead legs left in the ditch. He never considered how badly the organism wanted to be whole. It must have fed on carrion, or pulled some unlucky buzzard down into itself, and slowly, slowly, shaped him anew.

But it is not him. Not quite—there was not enough flesh. Instead it is a boy he only ever saw briefly in cracked screens or windows, a boy who once stood on a mat in the marketplace with wires trailing off his skinny arms.

Mars leans forward and unties the boy's hands. His fingers are trembling slightly. The procedure only worked once, but now he knows there is another way. If they knew, they would make a hundred more soldiers like him. A hundred more gods of war.

"*Ina jin yunwa,*" his other self says. "*Sosai.*"

Mars nods, looking at the boy's stomach where purple scar tissue is sealing

shut—he is right to be hungry. The drill must have been at work for days, and they must not have fed him. He is gaunt.

"I saw *kilishi* in the other room. Come. Eat."

Mars helps the boy out of the bathtub. They go to the kitchen, and on the table a blockphone is buzzing. Mars picks it up.

"Is he ready to be moved?" the foreign man's voice asks. "We are two minutes away."

Mars hears the sound of a rotor in the background. They are coming by air. He looks at the boy, whose new muscle is packing itself onto his bones as he devours the dried meat.

"He is ready," he says, and ends the call. He turns to his other self. "Some more bad men are coming. They are bringing us a transport. Well. We will steal it from them. And then we can go far away, to be safe from them."

The boy nods solemnly. "Who are you?" he asks through a full mouth.

"Do you remember the autotruck?" Mars asks back.

The boy shakes his head. "My head is bad. I remember strange things. I think I know you. Who are you?"

For a long moment Mars does not answer. They look at each other, and Mars does not see the expressions he has grown accustomed to: There is no fear or awe on the boy's face. Only some sadness, some shyness, some hope. It reminds him not of himself, but of someone he had nearly forgotten, someone he remembers more as a smell and a skinny arm slung around his shoulders than as a face.

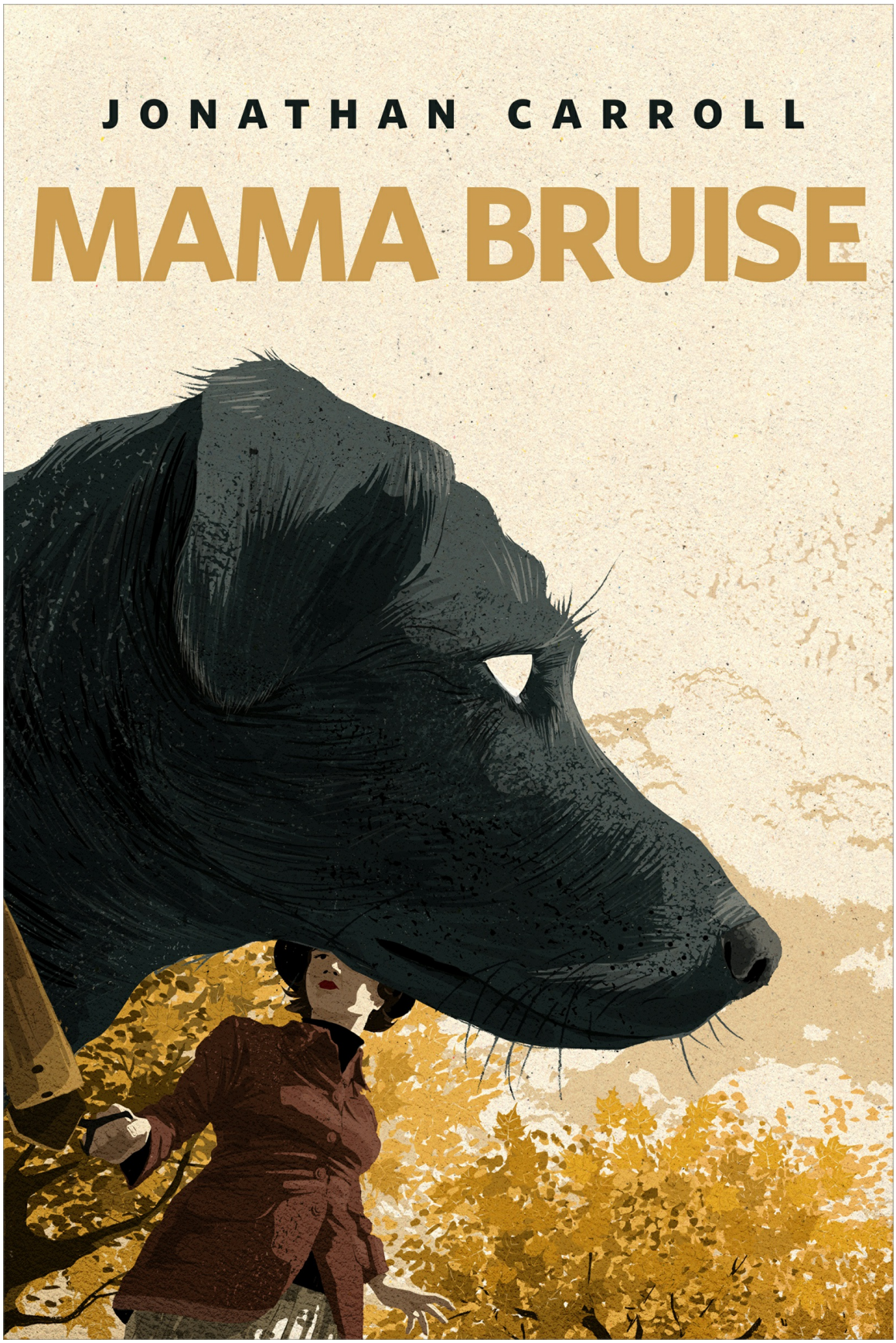
He realizes he has finally has found someone who will not look at him like he is a god or a devil. Someone who is like him. But Mars can make sure the boy's life is nothing like his life.

"My name is Mars," he says. "Like the planet." He makes a spaceship with his hand and launches it through the air.

The boy's mouth twitches. Nearly smiles. He raises his smaller hand and does the same, making the noise in his cheeks. "You are so familiar," he says. "Why?"

Mars feels a third sort of pain, one he does not know, an ache that he doesn't want to end. "*Mu 'yan'uwa ne,*" he says.

The boy nods, as if it all makes sense now. "We are brothers."


JONATHAN CARROLL
MAMA BRUISE

Mama Bruise

JONATHAN CARROLL

illustration by

MARK SMITH

TOR·COM

She was the first to fall. As she walked the dog one night, it saw something off to the side and bolted. The strength of the big animal's lunge on the leash spun her violently around and she lost her balance. Falling into that awful moment we've all known, the "I can't stop this" moment, her only thought was: *Not my head. Not my head*— But the drop was brutal and when she went down her head hit the curbstone. Luckily she wore a thick woolen cap, so the blow was softened. But her body took a full hit. She stayed down on the pavement long moments—breathless, shaken, and heart-poundingly disoriented. The dog stood calm nearby, staring at her.

When she got back to the apartment her stricken face said it all. Doing the dishes at the kitchen sink he looked up, saw her, and hurried over. "What's wrong? What happened?" He made her sit down and drink a cup of tea. Unsteadily, she recounted the trauma. Talking it over with him helped a little to lessen the aftershocks but not enough. A fall like that always reminds us how, in a second, life can skid off the road straight into our very own black hole. Down deep we know sooner or later it will, God forbid. A trip, a bad stumble, stagger, and fall shouts the ugly fact we're never *really* in charge or control of our steps, our days, our lives. No, not really.

As soon as she woke the next morning, she walked naked into the bathroom to look at her body in the full-length mirror there.

He stayed in bed as long as he could stand it, waiting for her to come out and tell him what she saw. But the anticipation was too great and he had to get up and go see.

She stood in front of the mirror, twisting from side to side, hands on her hips. The livid black bruise on her thigh was about ten inches long and spelled out in perfectly shaped block letters: MAMA BRUISE.

He winced when he saw it. "Jesus!"

"Where is he?" she asked quietly, still looking in the mirror.

"I guess in the kitchen in his bed."

She looked at him. "Are you sure?"

"No. Do you know what you did? What might have caused it?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing—I did everything as I always do. Gave him the same amount of food, took him out when he likes to go … but then this. It's getting worse. You know that—it's getting worse."

"What can we do? We've tried everything but nothing works. He just seems to get angrier. It's almost every day there's something that bothers him."

It had begun weeks before, on the night they went to the opera. In the excitement of preparing for the special night out, they'd forgotten to feed the dog. During intermission, the man went to the refreshment stand to buy two glasses of champagne. Taking his wallet out of his pocket, he saw written in what looked like thick, purple magic marker on the back of his right hand the word LADDIE. He stood there, scowling. When and why the hell did he write *that* there? He had absolutely no idea. It was just weird. Wetting his left thumb, he tried to wipe the word off but to no avail. Days later, it was still there, although it had just recently slowly begun to fade.

That night, after they returned home late from the opera, the man was opening a can of the dog's food and half-consciously noticed the name on the label: LADDIE.

A week later it was the cookies. For his birthday, she baked a dozen of his favorite chocolate chip cookies and left a plate of them fresh out of the oven on a corner of the kitchen table to surprise him when he came in from work.

When he entered the living room she raised her eyebrows in anticipation. "Did you go in the kitchen?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Didn't you see what was on the table in there?"

He looked puzzled. "No—there was nothing."

"What?" She got up from the couch and crossed the room to enter the kitchen. The table was empty. No cookies, no green plate. She looked quickly around, then down at the ground just in case. For a moment she questioned whether or not … Damn it, of course she did! She'd baked the cookies half an hour ago and put a plate of them out on the table for him when he got home. Happy birthday. The room even still smelled of baking. So where the hell were they? The dog lay on its bed at the far end of the room, watching them. She looked its way, wondering for a second if maybe it had eaten them. But if that were so, where was the plate?

"This is nuts! Where did they go?"

He stood behind her. "Where did *what* go?"

"Cookies! I made cookies for your birthday and— Wait a minute." She went to a cabinet over the sink and opened it. Inside on a shelf was a plate with the rest of the cookies. That didn't calm her. She pointed to them and made a face. "There you go—that's the *rest*. But where are the damned ones I put on the table?"

He had to fight to keep from smiling. She was getting pretty wrought up over … uh … cookies.

"Oh, anyway…" She moved over to the broom closet and, opening the door, took out a big, gray, nondescript box with a red bow tied around it. "Happy birthday, sweetheart. I hope you like it."

But she already knew he would because he'd been talking about getting a really good cowboy hat for months. She thought they looked dorky on anybody except cowboys a hundred years ago. But he loved them so she kept her opinion to herself and bought him a genuine, top-of-the-line Stetson Silverbelly 10X Shasta Fur Felt Hat—the gold standard of cowboy hats.

Taking the box over to the table, he put it there and sat down in front of it, placing his hands on the red bow. He grinned and she was really excited to see how he would react when he saw what it was, although she kept thinking about those stupid cookies.

"What is it?"

"See for yourself, birthday boy."

"You always give great presents."

"Open it." She stood a few feet away from him, so at that angle she couldn't quite see into the box.

He pulled slowly on the red ribbon and it slid off. He took off the top of the box and looked inside, his expression all happy anticipation—for a few seconds. Then it changed. It torqued into a sort of quizzical smile, an "am I being tricked?" smile. An "I don't get it" smile.

She read the confusion immediately and came over to look. Inside the box was a green plate with five chocolate chip cookies on it.

The couple looked at each other skeptically, wondering if a trick was being played. Had he discovered her present and slipped the cookies into the box to

give her a nasty little freak-out? From his perspective—was she playing some kind of not terribly funny prank on him on his *birthday?*

They'd been going through a rocky period lately, and at one point had only just brought their boat into shore before their emotional storms grew fierce enough to capsize them. Sometimes they still looked at each other warily, sadly, worriedly, both wondering if their marriage was strong enough to survive. In happier times they would have taken this moment to look slyly but delightedly at each other and assumed the best kind of joke was being played on them by their partner. But now, if this "what's in the box?" was a joke, their gut reactions were mixed.

"There's only five."

"What?"

She pointed at the cookies. "There's only five there. One is missing. I put six cookies on that plate."

They looked around the kitchen, as if the missing cookie might have escaped the plate while it was being put inside the box.

"Did you do this? Did you know about the hat?"

"*What* hat?" he asked.

She needed a long silent moment to look at him, at his expression, to make sure he was telling the truth. In the old days, in their solid love days, she would never have needed that moment.

"The hat I bought for your birthday; the Stetson."

His face opened like a child's in wonder. "*What?* You bought me a *Stetson?* Really? That's crazy!"

Instantly she took what he'd said the wrong way. "Why crazy?"

"Because it's great; because they're expensive and you didn't have to do that. What an amazing present!"

He could be so open, so full of joy and appreciation sometimes. It was one of his most lovable qualities. She didn't see it so often these days, but knew that was partly her fault.

Still grinning, he asked, "So where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The hat, the Stetson—I can't wait to see it."

"It was in the box. *This* box—the one which is now filled with chocolate

chip cookies. Abracadabra. What is going on?"

He held up a hand to slow her down. He knew when she got really wound up it was time to run for the hills. "Take it easy—"

"I don't *want* to take it easy—I want to find your hat and know why the stupid cookies are in there and not on the table where I put them."

"It's no big deal—we'll figure it out." He didn't know what else to say, and could tell from the rising tone of her voice that she was about to blow.

She stopped checking the kitchen for evidence and slid her eyes back to him. They were cold as Antarctica. "I *know* it's not a big deal, but the whole thing is very strange; no— actually, it's *creepy,* and I don't like creepy. Know what I mean? I had everything planned out for tonight: The cookies, the hat, a nice dinner with you on your birthday—"

"We can still do that! Where would you like to go?" But now *his* voice started to rise. Not a good sign. Not good at all.

Maybe it was the tone of their voices. Dogs seem to know when the human voice goes grim, and what that often portends. Whatever the reason, it got up from its bed in a corner, stretched, and walked over to them. Standing next to the man, it wagged its tail slowly. It looked from one human to the other. The man felt its presence and looked down at his old friend. He knew the dog didn't like it when they raised their voices. Recently, when that happened, the animal had taken to slowly skulking out of the room as if it were to blame for their unhappiness with each other.

The man patted it twice lightly on the head, forgetting for a moment the article he'd read the other day that said dogs don't like to be patted on the head.

"I just want to find your damned hat right now."

The dog looked up at the man to see if he was going to answer. When he didn't, it walked out of the kitchen, across the living room, and into the bedroom. There it started to bark. And bark and bark. In the kitchen, the couple looked at each other quizzically, because it never barked.

"What the hell—" They left the kitchen to see what was going on. Following the barking to the bedroom, they saw the dog sitting by the side of the bed, facing the door, as if it were waiting for them to come in.

Placed on the middle of the man's pillow was a beige cowboy hat. On her

pillow was a fat chocolate chip cookie.

She gasped.

He loved it. Turning to her, he said gleefully, "That is so *brilliant,* honey. Really! This whole setup—you had me so fooled."

"I didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"I didn't do this."

"Come on." Smirking at what she said, he walked to the bed, plucked the hat off the pillow, and plopped it on his head. He stepped to the wall mirror to check his reflection. *"Damn!"* Turning to face her, he pointed to the hat with both hands. "Come on—tell me I do not look *gooood* in this."

She thought he looked ridiculous. But he was so happy, so proud and pleased with himself. How could she say no? She gave a wan smile, a tilt of her head to the side she hoped would tell him, *You're right—you're the man!* without her actually having to say anything.

"But really—I didn't do this. I didn't switch these things."

"I heard you."

"No, but you've got to believe me—somebody else or some*thing* did."

He took the hat off his head and held it tightly in two hands in front of him. She wasn't joking—that much was clear by the tone of her voice. But what was he supposed to say, or ask? Half sarcastically, he asked, "Well, who do you think did it, *him?*"

Standing a little off to one side, the dog watched and listened as the man pointed at it.

★ ★ ★

They didn't put the strange incident behind them, but were able to shift it to a corner of their lives—for a while. Secretly, she continued to wonder if *he* had moved the cookies and the hat as a dumb joke. But if he did, why keep denying it? There was nothing funny about it, and he knew things like that kind of unexplained chaos, however small, disturbed her.

In college she had been diagnosed with a mild case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, and no one knew better than he how it affected her. How many times had they returned to their apartment just one more time for her to

check *again* to see if she had turned off the stove? It was imperative to her that certain matters and details be arranged just so—silverware in specific drawers, daily schedules, clothes lined up just so in the closet, the order in which she ate her food, the way she thought the world *should* work. It didn't, of course, so she fretted about too many unknowns and unlikely possibilities, most of which never happened. Time and again, her husband told her she was too full of what ifs, and more times than he liked to admit, they screwed up the balance of their relationship. It was certainly part of the reason why they'd been so at odds with each other recently. Our quirks may define us, but they're not always endearing or attractive to those who love us, no matter how much they care.

She understood that and could sympathize with how her eccentricities (she preferred that term) burdened him. On the other hand, wasn't the wedding vow "for better or worse" what it was all about: Empathy, understanding, forgiveness?

And didn't she put up with his shortcomings? The soul-withering tight-fistedness with money, and his loutish, sometimes truly embarrassing behavior when they were with friends or at social gatherings (the crude jokes and comments told to absolutely the wrong people who more than once looked at her with pitying eyes). But the worst of all were his dreadful parents, who from day one had made it very clear they didn't like her and would be happy if she disappeared from their son's life altogether. How they openly mocked her, but her man never said anything to them in her defense. When she brought it up, and she did often, he dismissed their gibes, derision, and personal insults as if they were nothing, or his parents didn't really mean them, or they'd had too much to drink, or perhaps she was being a little oversensitive, thin-skinned … She'd even gotten right up from meals on two occasions and walked out the door after his father said something so cruel and hurtful that momentarily she could not believe what she'd just heard. Both times, she'd turned to her husband and asked if he was going to say anything. But he only looked away from her volcanic glare, embarrassed but not about to stick up for her against "Pop." Well, bullshit on that.

The last time her father-in-law said awful, unnecessary things to her, thinly frosting the remarks with his brand of "humor," she told the old man to go to

hell. He was a seventy- two-year-old asshole, and she'd had enough of him. Then she marched like a majorette out of the restaurant. Later, she told her husband that was the last straw. He could visit them whenever he wanted, but she was done with both his parents. "Pop" had finally crossed the line. No, he'd crossed it a long time ago, but tonight was the end.

"What do you mean, *crossed the line?* What line?"

She patted her chest over her heart. "*This* one—this line. Remember it? For years, your father has said terrible things to me that hurt my heart, and you were there every time to hear him. But you never, *ever* told him to stop, or at least shut up. Fair enough—that was your right, because he's your dad. But he isn't *mine,* so I don't have to put up with him like you and your mom obviously do."

His mouth tightened. "What's the matter with my mother?" His voice was a growl.

She growled right back at him, "Besides the hundred mean things *she's* said to me, only in a quieter voice? She *enables* him; in her own slinky way, she eggs him on. You've said it yourself. But I'm done with both of them now, and you know why. Please don't pretend you don't. Go see them whenever you want—I'll stay home with the dog."

★ ★ ★

The first time he did go for dinner alone with his parents, she ate hers standing up in the kitchen. As usual, the dog sat on its haunches, watching. She thought it wanted a piece of the large chicken leg she held, but no, there was something else there, some sort of different look in the hound's eyes that night as it stared at her.

"*What?* Do you want some of this?" She often spoke to the animal as if it were a person, and felt no shame or embarrassment doing it in private or when there were others around. She'd had dogs all her life and always considered them just another member of the family.

She was leaning with her back against the sink as she spoke, the dog directly in front of her. As soon as she finished speaking, there was a loud explosive *shishhhh* noise behind her. Shocked, she staggered forward then turned around to see what it was. The faucet was shooting water into the sink

full blast, as if some invisible hands had turned on both hot and cold handles all the way.

"What the hell?" She knew she hadn't touched them, and water doesn't turn on by itself. The first surprise of the sound and discovering what it was receded, but she was still a little shaken up when she went back to the sink and turned off both spigots. Firmly. She stood there and looked down at them, trying to figure out how it had happened.

Then she remembered the chicken leg she had been eating. "Damn it!" She must have dropped it when the water started gushing. Looking down at the floor around her feet, it wasn't there. For a moment she thought had she already finished it? No. It was definitely in her hand when the water started flowing, She was sure of it. But so where was it now?

"First the water goes crazy, then my dinner disappears. What's next?"

What came next was the usual—when things got agitated in her life she almost always had to pee. Even the smallest things could set her off and start her bladder screaming *NOW OR ELSE*. Her husband thought it was cute and she knew he kind of secretly enjoyed her discomfort sometimes because normally she was such a control freak. But when it came to her bladder, she was its slave.

Stupid as it sounds, crazy water in the sink and a disappearing chicken leg set off the alarm this time, and she headed for the toilet. The dog watched her leave the room and padded after her. When she got to the bathroom, she opened the door and slid her hand up and down on the wall just inside, searching for the light switch. When she found it she flipped it on. The first thing she saw was the chicken leg placed on top of the lowered toilet seat.

★ ★ ★

After that, things got crazier in a hurry. They went from whimsical to worrisome and *whaaaat?* to dangerous and destructive. They kept coming and coming. But never once did either of them think any of it was because of the dog until finally, finally the writing appeared again on both of their bodies.

SPILKE changed everything.

One bright November morning, that name was inexplicably spelled out in clear black letters down the length of her right index finger. She did not notice

it until she was brushing her teeth and saw it out of the corner of her eye.

Her hand froze and then slowly she lay the toothbrush down on the edge of the sink. Raising her hand to eye level, she stared at the finger, incredulous at what was written there: SPILKE.

Dennis Spilke. My God, how long had it been since she thought of *that* name, or him? He was her first boy crush when she was eleven years old. Because she loved and trusted her father much more than her mother and considered him her best friend in the world, he was the only person she told about her love for Dennis. Her father was such a good guy back then. Back before the drinking and later the drugs hollowed him out and shrunk him into someone unrecognizable, then crazy as a fly banging against a window, then dead at fifty-one. Even her girlfriends at school didn't know about her short-lived swoon for Dennis. Even Dennis Spilke didn't know. Only her dad, and when it was over weeks later, he was the one who comforted her. He said: *Somewhere out there in the world right this minute is the man you will one day* marry. *Can you believe it? He's out there doing stuff, living a life like you. But all the time that's happening, he's moving slowly, slowly towards you. Think about that for a minute: He's coming—that boy is coming just for you. And when you two meet, you'll be so crazy about him that all the Dennis Spilkes you've known till then will seem like* cockroaches *compared to this new guy.* Just the word "cockroaches" got her laughing and, as always, her father's words made the hurt of her small world less.

But now here it was again, SPILKE, a zillion years later written in black on the inside of her finger. That odd name, all the forgotten memories of a boy and that time in her life suddenly came back *zap* into her head like an electric shock. A moment later she happened to look in the mirror above the sink. In the reflection she saw the dog sitting in the bathroom doorway behind her. Very humanly, it nodded at her as if to say, *Yes, it was me—I did that to you.*

★ ★ ★

Days later, when she finally told her husband the whole story, he exploded. "What do you mean it *nodded?*" Despite the loud skepticism in his voice, he threw a quick mistrustful glance at the dog lying near them on its bed. Its body was relaxed but the eyes were watching. When it saw the man look, its tail

thumped once on the floor.

"Just what I said—it nodded, and then when I directly asked if it had written on my finger, it nodded again."

"Bullshit! That's completely bullshit!" He threw up his hands in exasperation. His wife could be nutty sometimes, especially about her obsessions, but this was way beyond that. This was stone-cold crazy.

She blew a strand of hair off her face. "Bullshit? Really? Then watch this."

He glared at her.

"No don't look at me—look at him." She pointed to the dog.

He looked and the dog nodded to him.

He looked back at his wife. "It nodded. Great. Nice trick. So what? Dogs do stuff like that."

"Now look at your fingers."

He was right-handed. He saw nothing there. He looked at his left hand. Down the fat pad to the base of his thumb were black letters spelling TURLEY. Jennifer Turley was the name of his first girlfriend.

"*What the fu*— What is this?"

"I think it's my father."

★ ★ ★

After that it took almost a full hour for her to explain to him what she thought was going on. She used example after example, some of which he had experienced, to prove her point. At the end, he told her about the night at the opera when the word LADDIE mysteriously appeared on his hand.

She wasn't surprised. "My dad died and came back as a dog. It explains why we chose him over all the others at the animal shelter that day. What made him so special? Just look at him—he's completely plain, nondescript—just a dog-dog. Why would we choose him over all the other sweet ones we saw there?"

"*You* chose him. I just said okay."

"Exactly—I chose him and now I know why, but I didn't then. I just thought he was cute."

While she spoke he kept glancing over at the dog. "How much does he know? I mean, does he know everything; can he understand everything we

say?"

"I don't think so, and that's part of what's so frustrating. He knows little bits and pieces, which come and go like fireflies. I think his mind or his soul is caught between three places—human, dog, and death, or back from the dead. When his head is clear he can do all kinds of magical things, but a minute later he's like an old, old man with very bad Alzheimer's disease. Absolute blank, or just absolute *dog* and only dog. He can't remember or express anything; he doesn't understand anything you say. No, he *does,* but only in the way a dog understands human commands. He knows and can do amazing things but it's all broken up and scattered. Like, how did he know the name of your old girlfriend? And then the things he *does* know, he keeps forgetting. But he also can do these wild things, like making those words appear on our fingers, or turning on faucets, or…" She stopped and looked at him, her face almost guilty.

He sat up in his chair, sensing something. "*What?* Come on, what?"

She nodded slowly, as if telling herself it was okay to continue. "I told you about my father at the end of his life, remember? How he stole all of my mother's savings to buy drugs. He even took fourteen dollars I'd saved for a skateboard and spent it, too. He was completely out of control by then—mean and scary and desperate. God, he was *so* desperate. He probably would have sold our house, too, if the deed hadn't been in my mother's name." She made to say more, but instead got up and went to a desk nearby. She opened a drawer, took something out, and walked back with a bankbook in her hand. She opened it, leafed through some pages, found what she was looking for, and handed it to him. "Look at the balance."

It was their joint savings account. Because he was a tightwad, he knew exactly how much was in there, or *did* until that moment. When he saw the new, hefty balance his eyes widened. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

Watching his reaction, she put a hand over her mouth and then flapped it away. "I didn't tell you about it until I checked with the bank to make sure the money was real. It is. I believe he's paying me back for all the money he stole from us when he was alive."

He snorted. "Paying you back with interest! This is amazing. You're sure it's real?"

"It is real. And it fits a pattern—I think he came back to make amends."

★ ★ ★

But their wonder and delight was short-lived because, like a person with severe dementia, whatever the dog knew or whatever powers it had brought back from death rapidly began to blur, fade, and slip away like a human mind sucked down into the quicksand of the disease. And with that fade came the frustration and fury of the sufferer.

For a while, a short while, there were fascinating glimpses of what the dog had experienced after it died as a human, what death was like and how reincarnation worked. But only in mysterious, tantalizing fragments—three words written in sugar across the coffee table in the living room. Or a paragraph on Tibetan bardos in a book about after-death experiences magically highlighted right before the woman's eyes in vivid yellow as the woman was reading the words for the first time. When the highlighting stopped, three exclamation points appeared beside the paragraph and then, in black, the word THIS!

No more money was put into their account, but a beautiful new ornate gravestone for her mother was in the cemetery the next time they went there to lay flowers on her plot.

One night, his awful parents appeared at the door and invited themselves in on the excuse Mama had baked his favorite chocolate chip cookies and just knew he'd want to eat them fresh out of the oven. The real reason they came was for one of their periodic snoops around the house to find things to fault and be nasty about. But first the old bitch had to show off and there had to be a cookie unveiling followed by the son's required yumming over how delicious they were.

The cookies were in the large red tin she always used and, for the umpteenth time, said she needed it back when it was empty. Why would the harridan think anyone would want to keep her old dented box?

The four of them sat down on the couch and Mama leaned forward to present the goodies. As she did, a loud sound—a sort of *burp-urup-urup* came from inside the box. When she pulled the top off there were no cookies inside but an enormous, slimy, brown African goliath frog as big and wide as a

Frisbee; it must have been ten inches by ten inches. The giant thing fit perfectly inside the tin. Before any of them could react, it hopped out of the box, across the coffee table, and onto the floor. The dog took one look at it, leapt forward, grabbed the huge frog in its mouth, shook it violently from side to side, and ran out of the room with his catch going *urup-urup* all the way.

The old woman squealed, her husband squawked like a parrot, and the two of them fled.

The younger couple sat on the couch, staring straight ahead. The woman fought back a smile but it didn't work. The smile turned into a giggle and then a howl of laughter. Her husband, his parents having just jetted out of his house in abject horror, cracked up, too. Neither of them felt the need to go find the dog.

When it reappeared later, its muzzle was covered with cookie crumbs.

★ ★ ★

Soon after that things got darker. The dog, that until then had slept peacefully, began having what sounded like terrible nightmares every time it slept. It twitched and shook, growled and barked. Several times, they tried to wake it, but that was dangerous because it came out of sleep in a rage, snapping and snarling, as if fighting off its dream enemies in real life.

The few messages it conveyed became more and more incoherent, most of the words misspelled; toward the end, strung together, they made no sense at all. The dog grew surly, sullen, and aloof—a complete change from the lovable goofy, friendly, warm guy who in the past liked nothing more than to cuddle up next to you on the couch and snooze.

After it pulled the woman to the ground, things got even worse. MAMA BRUISE was the last coherent message it communicated until right before the end. Twice after that it knocked the man down from behind when he was walking to answer the front door after the bell had rung.

"It's like he doesn't want me to answer it—like he's expecting someone bad."

And by its behavior in other ways, it did seem like that. For hours it sat on the couch looking out the picture window onto the street, just watching. When they took it outside for a walk, it moved its head from side to side like a searchlight, its body so tense that it shook much of the time when it stood still.

The day it bit her, it ran away. She was walking it around the block when they saw another person coming toward them with a large white poodle on a leash. As soon as the two dogs saw each other, they stopped. Then the poodle flew into a barking, growling, snapping fit. It started jerking wildly on the leash, as if to get off and attack her dog however it could.

She'd never seen an aggressive poodle before, so she was surprised and caught up in watching it act out. Then she felt a terrible pain in her right hand—the one holding the leash. Looking down, she saw her dog biting her for the first time in its life. Yelping, she dropped the leash and the dog ran off as fast as it could, the leash trailing behind.

She just stood there watching it, helpless, her hand exploding with pain from the bite.

★ ★ ★

Although the dog had all of its rabies and distemper shots, her husband insisted she go to the hospital to be checked.

Driving home, he asked quietly, "Do you think we should try to find him?"

"No."

He nodded and said nothing more.

★ ★ ★

Hours later, in the middle of the night, he awoke and found she was not in bed. He got up and padded around searching for her. She was sitting in the dark in the living room on the couch, in the same place where the dog had stationed itself in the past days, staring out the window there.

Her husband sat down next to her. She turned to him and held up her bandaged hand. "*This* was a message. He didn't bite me because he was angry or trying to get away. He was telling me why, and that was the only way he could convey it at this point." She stopped and swallowed. "This was the only way he could tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"It came to me before when I was sleeping. It might've been the bite. Somehow it connected us in a way we hadn't been before. What came through was when you die and are reincarnated, you're not supposed to bring anything

from your past life into the new. But for some reason he did, somehow he stayed part human—my father—part dog, and God knows what else. I think that combination should never have happened. But it gave him those special powers like some kind of weird alchemy. After a while, though, it all started to mix together in bad ways and then implode. Like a medicine gone bad, or that stops working. At the end, everything was slipping away from him. But whatever he was by then, he still knew one thing—they were coming to get him."

Her husband frowned. "*Who* was?"

"Other dogs and whatever else didn't want him alive. It's why he sat at the window all the time watching. He knew something was coming for him. That's why the poodle went crazy tonight when it saw him. They *know*. They all know that, with his mixed knowledge, no matter how debased it is, he's a threat, and they're out to get him."

"Get him? Why? What did he do?"

"Nothing. He didn't do anything—somehow it was done to him or it happened by mistake. He's like a calf born with two heads. A freak, but a dangerous one, because he knows things he's not supposed to. We're not supposed to communicate with animals, or know what happens to us after we die. But he does, so as long as he's alive he might tell us—" She stopped, cocked her head to one side, and held up a finger for him not to speak.

In the midnight quiet that followed, after a few moments they both heard it—a faint scratching. A faint scratching on their front door. Then loud sniffing—scratching and sniffing. Then, their ears attuned to the sounds, they heard more of them, many more just outside the house, all of them near, all of them growing louder. Scratching, hard scratching now, frantic sniffing and whining. Louder, all those familiar sounds times ten, louder and more every minute, everywhere out there in the night. Very close.

About the Authors

Christopher Rowe has been a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy and Theodore Sturgeon Awards. His stories have been frequently reprinted, translated into a half-dozen languages around the world, and praised by the *New York Times Book Review.* His early fiction was collected in a chapbook, *Bittersweet Creek and Other Stories,* by Small Beer Press. His first novel, *Sandstorm,* was published by Wizards of the Coast in 2011. He is a student at the Bluegrass Writers Studio, the MFA program of Eastern Kentucky University, and lives in a hundred-year-old house in Lexington, Kentucky, with his wife, novelist Gwenda Bond. You can sign up for email updates here.

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Jonathan Carroll's novel *The Wooden Sea* was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2001. He is the author of such acclaimed novels as *White Apples, The Land of Laughs, The Marriage of Sticks,* and *Bones of the Moon.* He lives in Vienna, Austria. You can sign up for email updates here.