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SUMMER 2023 SHORT FICTION

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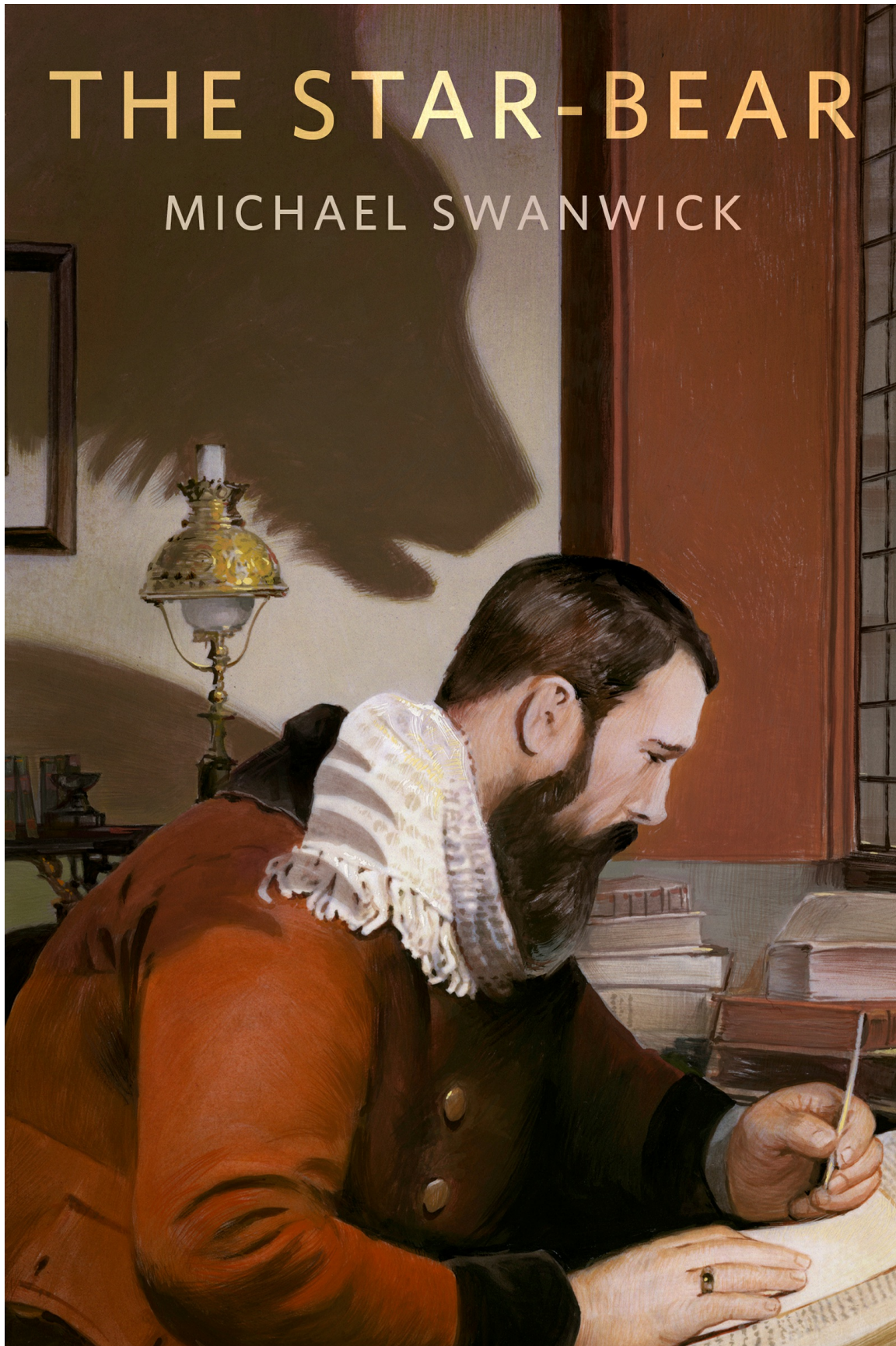
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THE STAR-BEAR

MICHAEL SWANWICK



The Star-Bear

MICHAEL SWANWICK

illustration by

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**T O R
D O T
C O M**

On a fine spring afternoon, the noted Russian émigré poet and fabulist Alexei Zerimov was seated at a sidewalk café, nursing his kir and working on a children's story that he would later illustrate and hand-letter himself, when a wild bear came rampaging through the plaza. Typically for him, Zerimov did not at first notice. Only the screams and shouts and clatter of overturned chairs and tables as the normally insouciant Parisiennes fled in panic roused him from his reverie in time to see the beast rear up directly before him, all fury, claws, and teeth.

In a confusion of terror, Zerimov tried to rise and, toppling his chair, fell over backward. By the time he regained his feet, the bear was gone, leaving behind the sweet drying-grass smell of the Siberian tundra of his youth.

It felt like a dream. But Zerimov knew it was no such thing by the disorder the bear had left behind: an abandoned homburg, broken glass and crockery, a teal blue lady's jacket that, as he watched, slid from the back of a chair. There were streaks of red on the pavement that might equally well have been blood or wine. He did not feel qualified to judge.

Zerimov had seen the bear face-to-face. There was a blaze of white on its chest, like a star. He was certain he would recognize it if ever he saw it again.

For two days, the incident was the talk of the city. But then came a political crisis, the brutal murder of a prostitute, a scandalous divorce—and, Paris being Paris, the incident was forgotten.

Not, however, by Zerimov. That Thursday evening, when it was his turn to host the soirée of expats who gathered weekly to read their latest works, express opinions for and against contemporary French literature, and slander whoever was foolish enough not to put in an appearance, he said, "I saw the beast myself! It was as close to me as you are now. It reared up and went: *Raowrr!*" He demonstrated, making claws of his fingers. "I had to clean its saliva from my glasses."

“It is too much of a coincidence.” Suave as ever, Minitiski poured himself a second glass of tea. “That you, who have written God knows how many bear tales, should encounter the only wild bear to be seen in the City of Light in how long? Centuries, surely. It is bad art. I refuse to believe it.”

“Behave yourself, Lyonya, or I will publish the love poems you wrote me before you achieved full mastery of the form.” Olga Nikitina was the queen bee of the group, and always drew a wisp of smoke over her signature to make of it a pun. She often referred to the gathering’s men as her harem. “Alyosha, you will admit that it is unlikely.”

“Yet a lot of people who *weren’t* me saw it too. So there goes your argument, up in smoke!”

Olga smiled appreciatively. But then old Gapanenko, who grew unpleasant when denied the opportunity to perform, rattled the sheets of the story he had brought to read and the mood turned literary again.



The second time Zerimov saw the bear was far less dramatic. He was seated at the same table and chair as before when it came growling and shaking its great head but did not make to attack anybody. There was a stirring in the square at its passage. People stepped back into doorways and one woman stood up on her chair, crouching a little to hold her skirt down with one hand. But though it paused to glare balefully at Zerimov, it did not approach him, and in a matter of minutes it was gone.

This incident did not make it into the newspapers.

That night, Zerimov lay awake in bed, thinking about bears he had seen in his youth. His father was a naturalist and together they had made many forays into the Siberian wilderness. The bears they encountered were an amiable lot on the whole unless you came near to their cubs, whereupon they turned murderous. But he had paid them only passing attention, for even then his heart and brain were focused on poetry to the point of obsession. Why had he never seen the similarities of bears to the Russian language—so strong, so wild, so free? *If only*, he had thought then, *I could write one perfect poem, I would die happy*. Not knowing, as he did now, that no poem was ever perfect, save those which the angels in Heaven wrote in praise of the Almighty. And,

he being an atheist, not even those.

Why had he never thought to write a poem about a bear?

★ ★ ★

On its third appearance, the bear lumbered into the square at the end of a chain held by a street busker, a little man with a long overcoat and a soup-strainer mustache. The bear looked mangy and flea-ridden. Its handler played a concertina while it stood up on its hind legs and performed what might charitably be called a dance. In no way was its behavior consistent with its earlier appearances. Yet this was the same creature; there was no mistaking that star-shaped blaze on its chest.

The performance reminded Zerimov of a similar routine that had saddened him on a visit to the circus in his college years in St. Petersburg. He had been a phenomenon then, the brilliant young poet from the hinterlands. Everyone knew he was destined for great things. He had known it himself.

Where was all that promise now? Gone with the fogs that rose from the Neva on a warm winter's day and disappeared by nightfall. You could search in all the almanacs in all the world and find no record of those fogs. The same might be said of Zerimov's career.

When the routine was over, the busker passed through the crowd, collecting money. Zerimov tossed a few coins into his hat and, turning away, found himself staring into the bear's eyes. In them, he read such a wealth of suffering and humiliation that he had to flinch away. It pained him to see so magnificent a beast brought so low. The bear was as miserable as the poem Zerimov had been trying to write about it for the last three months.

He spoke of the encounter to no one. Perhaps it was a mistake, but he thought not.

That Thursday, the soirée dragged on and on with such tedium that by its end Zerimov found himself doubting his own existence. When he got home to his flat on rue de Beaune, he tore the bear-poem into tiny pieces, threw the shreds out the window, and watched them flutter down to the street like snow.

★ ★ ★

Months passed. Winter came.

Zerimov's routine never varied. Weekday mornings and alternate evenings, he taught Russian to English bluestockings and French ambassadors-manqué at the Ecole des Langues Orientales. Afternoons, he wrote. Once a week, at the soirée, he watched some of the finest writers ever to escape Soviet oppression grow increasingly small-minded and resentful. Always, he awaited the next appearance of the star-bear. It seemed significant. An omen, perhaps. Or just possibly the axe he needed to smash the frozen sea that held captive the ship of his imagination.

Time after time, he wrote and rewrote his bear-tale. In it, a lost bruin traveled endless mountains, searching for its den. Winter was coming and it needed to hibernate. Sometimes it would catch the distinctive smell of dried ferns and mosses mingled with the musk of its mate. But then the wind would shift. The skies darkened and the stars glittered like ice. Always, the bear failed to find its way home. Always, the stars ignored its pleas for help. Never was the story good enough to publish or bad enough to give up on.

Zerimov wrote in the same café every day for, like most writers, he was superstitious about his craft and feared a new venue would stop him dead. The tables inside were crowded together and the windows steamed and sweated beads of water so that the people outside were vague in outline and shifted oddly as they passed.

Somebody scraped up a chair.

"Pardon, comrade poet. May I join you?" Without waiting for a reply, the bear sat.

Zerimov looked up, startled but not entirely shocked.

The bear wore a military uniform with a Soviet star on one pocket. It gestured to the garçon and whispered in his ear. The boy went away and returned with a coffeepot and a ceramic cup. Nodding thanks, the bear filled the one with clear liquid from the other. Vodka, obviously. That was the way one avoided the liquor laws back in Ekaterinburg.

The bear took a genteel sip. Then, setting the cup down in its saucer, it said, "Alexei Mikhailovich, as you love Mother Russia, it is time for you to return home."

"A man can love his homeland," Zerimov said, "from afar. Here, I do

honor to my country by continuing to write.”

“Do you honestly believe your poems and stories will be remembered?”

Stung into arrogance, Zerimov replied, “Someday I will be acknowledged as one of the best writers of our nation. Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Nabokov ... and me. Deny it if you can!”

The bear took a pair of wire-rimmed glasses from a pocket and, untangling the earpieces, situated it on its nose. Blinking through its lenses, it looked sad and wise. “I do deny it. Not the first four, of course. But Nabokov is holed up in Berlin creating chess puzzles and chasing butterflies on weekends. Meanwhile, you teach dilettantes the rudiments of our language and pen fairy tales for infants. Both of you are cut off from the soil of your birth and you will not thrive without it. Nobody reads your work here but other traitorous émigrés who hate you for being better than them. Nobody reads your work in the USSR because you are an enemy of the state. Return home.”

“To a firing squad?”

“If you must. Who knows?” The bear shrugged.

“Even if I wanted to, I could never get the paperwork for it.”

Switching to French, the bear said, “I have no respect for bureaucracy. The hell with paperwork! But this little beauty I draw from my loose trousers. Read it and envy me: I am a citizen of the Soviet Union.”

“Mayakovsky,” Zerimov said. “It sounds better in Russian.”

“Everything does.” The star-bear unbuttoned a pocket and withdrew a red-jacketed document with the coat of arms of the Soviet Union stamped in gold. It placed it on the tablecloth before Zerimov. “Here. I have brought you your passport.”

★ ★ ★

The next day, the star-bear entered the café with a chess set under its arm. “Do you play?” it asked.

“Who doesn’t?”

The star-bear held out two closed paws. Zerimov tapped one and it opened to reveal a white pawn. “You go first.”

As they played, they discussed the current literary scene. The star-bear,

whom Zerimov would have expected to be of conservative, even reactionary tastes, was surprisingly liberal-minded on the arts. “Have you read *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance*?” it asked.

“Madness! It has no scansion, no form. The lines are heaped atop one another, long upon short, without regard for structure. It is *vers libre* gone mad. It is prose presented as if it were poetry. It has no breath.”

“On the whole, I agree. Yes, it is a mess—but only because Cocteau is merely a great talent. A genius could pick up on that formlessness and build upon it a poem that would astonish the age.” Slyly, the star-bear added, “That genius could be you.”

“Pah!” Zerimov cried, to hide the pleasure he took from the flattery.

They played daily and in short order the star-bear’s literary gossip supplanted the input from the Thursday soirées that he had formerly fed upon. “Have you read Du Bos’s essay on Gide?” Zerimov asked.

“I do not hold with the Catholic fallacy that Du Bos fetishizes. But Gide ... *c’est un pédé*. Back home he would be shot and that would be that.”

“Always, you return to violence.”

“It is the way of the world.”

When checkmate was achieved the star-bear packed away the pieces. Invariably, it said “That was a good game” before leaving, to where he did not know.

★ ★ ★

“I found a photo.” The star-bear pushed it across the table. Zerimov glanced down and felt his heart lurch in his chest. It was Serafima, standing in a birch forest outside of Moscow, unsmiling and silent. He had written a poem about that moment. He had thought the photograph was lost forever. “It was in your file.”

“Do you keep files on everybody?” Zerimov asked, not caring one way or the other. He picked up the photograph, fearful that the star-bear would demand it back.

“Keep it.” The star-bear studied the board, reached out to make a move, thought better of it.

“You touched your knight. You must move it.”

“Surely a dangerous anarchist such as yourself will not hold me to such a petty rule.” Nevertheless, the star-bear made the move. “If you were to return to Russia, every house, every street, every sight you had in common would remind you of her.”

Zerimov jolted to his feet. “You will not profane Serafima’s memory by using it against me!”

“Sit, sit, sit. I was just doing my job, comrade. Believe me, I would much rather have yours.” It held up its paws. “But as you can see, I can barely hold a pen with these things, much less create such fine calligraphy as you do.”

Zerimov’s face felt like stone. “You must go now. I have work to do.”

“As you wish.” The star-bear placed the chess pieces in their box. It paused in the doorway to say, “That was a good game.”

★ ★ ★

Rumor had swept through the émigré community in Zerimov’s absence. Gapanenko stopped him in the street to demand if it was true that he had applied to become a Soviet citizen.

“I did not.” Honest to a fault, Zerimov added, “Yet I seem to have become one anyway.”

“Is this one of your fairy-tale riddles? I see no humor in it.” Gapanenko took Zerimov’s arm and began walking him down the street. “Listen to me. That poem you wrote about the forest of slim white birch trees. You know the one I mean. The snowy silence where not even a church bell sounds. That was no ordinary poem! Your name should be engraved upon the moon for that. You wrote it here. In Paris. In exile. Because you are one of us, a small part of the credit for it belongs to us as well. If you go back, you will take your works with you. That pure, innocent poem will no longer belong to us but to the USSR. They will defile it! Twist its meaning! Turn it into propaganda for their murderous state! Is that what you want? I respect you too much to believe it of you.”

Gapanenko stopped, letting go of Zerimov’s arm. It was only then that he realized they had been headed nowhere in particular. Turning, Gapanenko stumped away, leaving Zerimov gaping and astonished. He had always thought the old man despised his poetry, just as he did Gapanenko’s.

Now that he knew better, it was too late to undo the cruel caricature of Gapanenko that dwelt in his mind.

“The forlorn face of the man! That mustache! That goatee!” the star-bear exclaimed when Zerimov gave it an abbreviated version of the encounter. “Like the Devil fallen upon hard times, reduced to picking up cigar stubs from the gutter and cadging drinks off of former friends.”

“He spoke well of my poetry.”

“Easy for him to do so. He’s actually read it. Come back to the Soviet Union and the Gosizdat will guarantee that millions read your poetry.”

“What will that mean to me if I’m dead or in a gulag?”

“Millions of readers, for generations to come! Lenin’s books have never gone out of print. Nor need yours.”

★ ★ ★

That evening, there was a rap on his door. When Zerimov opened it, there stood Olga Nikitina. She stepped inside. “How different your flat looks when it’s not cluttered with writers.”

Zerimov helped her off with her coat and hung it in the closet. “Why are you here, Olga?”

“For two reasons. First, to tell you to your face: You must come home to your friends and peers. Tomorrow’s soiree is at my place. Be there.”

“And the second reason?”

“To seduce you.” Olga dropped a lace-trimmed handkerchief over the lamp on the nightstand by the bed. She glanced at the Soviet passport lying there without comment. Picking up the photograph of Serafima in the silver frame Zerimov had found in a secondhand shop, she said, “This is new. Who is she?”

“Somebody I knew in a previous life.”

“Ah.” Olga put the picture down and turned her back on Zerimov. “Be a dear and unbutton my blouse, would you?”

He obeyed. Olga smelled of Chanel No. 5, her favorite perfume. “Is this the start of something serious?” he asked. “Or is it just for the night?”

“I am open to all possibilities.”

The night was spent doing such things as people in their situation do.

Zerimov, who had thought that romance was done with him long ago, marveled at the strange turns life could take.

★ ★ ★

When at last he was sure Olga was asleep, Zerimov rose from the bed and got dressed. He went outside and was not surprised to see the star-bear, forelegs folded, leaning against a streetlamp.

“So now you have a new girlfriend and she will make everything right for you.” The star-bear sneered. “How trite! It is a plot twist fit only for a callow young writer—not a serious literary figure such as yourself. This affair will never last. It is not worthy of you, Alexei Mikhailovich.”

“Everybody seems to have a clear idea of my worth but me.” Zerimov handed the star-bear his Soviet passport. “But it is not Olga who has made up my mind. It was your mockery of Gapanenko.”

“That clown? I am astonished. He is a nobody. He writes trash.”

“He does. Yet he went into exile to continue doing so. It is easy to be a martyr when one is a great man and everyone knows it. Gapanenko gave up all he had for the love of literature. Literature, alas, does not love him back. Nothing that he writes will outlast him and he must surely be aware of that. Yet still he loves literature with a pure and abiding passion. I call that noble.”

“I call it idiocy.”

“I know. It is why we will never see each other again.”

Back in his flat, Zerimov undressed as quietly as he could. But rather than return to Olga’s side, he went to the window. He had not been there long when she rose almost silently from the bed and kissed the back of his neck. Peering over his shoulder, she asked, “What do you see?”

“I thought I saw a man standing under a lamppost, looking up at me. But then whatever it was got down on all fours and disappeared into the darkness.” Zerimov waited for Olga to laugh at him. She did not.

Instead, she said, “You should consider writing about that. There might be a poem there.”

“Yes,” he said. “I think you may be right.”



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**AFTER THE
ANIMAL
FLESH BEINGS**

BRIAN EVENSON

After the Animal Flesh Beings

B R I A N E V E N S O N

illustration by

R E I K O M U R A K A M I

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

1. How We Acquire Our Children

In the time in which we now find ourselves, we acquire our children by digging in the earth. This is hard work, much harder than the way the scattered records we are still capable of interpreting suggest it used to be done for the animal flesh beings. In the time in which we now live, we dig through soft rock and clay and heap this up, delving deeper and deeper in search of something harder, more substantial. When we find it, we tear it out of the earth the best we can and haul it to god.

God will examine our find and consider, and then say one of two things. He might say, “Yes, this can serve as the basis for a child.” Or he might say, “Why do you bring me this?”

If it can serve as the basis for a child, god will tell us what else is required to bring the child to life. We might spend a month or two, sometimes far more, scavenging in the lost city, searching for the remaining components that will make a child. Indeed, ranged to one side of the smelter is a long line of children who are not yet alive and who, for lack of components, may well never be. Their shining bodies stand gaping, split neatly open, waiting to be filled with functional components and brought to life.

It is a joy to watch god work. He brings his pitted, expressionless face close to the fire as the hunk of child grows hot and begins to glow. At just the right moment, god reaches in, carefully, and deftly extracts a portion of the hunk with his fire-blackened digits. He sets about hollowing and working and shaping this, then does another hunk, then another. Later, he will establish joints and connections between them. Eventually, if we are lucky, we have something made to resemble us, but smaller: a child.

Children are always smaller than us. Sometimes they are only a dozen centimeters shorter. Other times they are just a half meter tall. They do not

grow—although the records seem to suggest that children once did grow. Perhaps, though, the records’ use of “growth” is only metaphorical, not literal.

Our children do not speak, and cannot hear. They can see, usually, and often do respond to gestures. They can be taught simple tasks. They move and walk, but with little of the fluidity with which an adult is imbued. Having been snatched back from the embrace of death, they move jerkily, as if in spasms. Nor do they live nearly as long as we do. Many generations of children we have created might well pass away before we succumb to death ourselves.

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In the times before god, in the times before time began, rumor has it that the animal flesh beings who used to inhabit the lost city built large structures in which hundreds of our children could be made at once, piece after piece, child after child. It was, so it is said, much faster. It is rumored that we are those children.

Why did these animal flesh beings make us? Did they think of us as their children, despite our being made of a different substance entirely? Did they have another purpose for us?

With their records mostly decayed or unreadable, we can only speculate.

★ ★ ★

There are those who believe we were once those animal flesh beings but that, as more and more gleaming children were made, we became such deft mimics as to become gleaming beings ourselves, so as to better resemble our children, so as to blend in.

There are also those who believe that these animal flesh beings made extraordinary vessels and in them fled to the skies. Being made of animal flesh, they believed they had to keep consuming animals in order to replenish their bodies. Eventually, voracious, they consumed every animal. They left for the skies in search of more. Perhaps, some think, they will return some day and build again their large structures for making children, and we will once again have children as large as us and that last as long as we do. But

most feel this to be a vain hope.

2. The Malformed Child

In the final days of god's usefulness, as he became less and less himself, he fashioned a malformed child. In the past, whenever he took a false step, god would pause and scrutinize his work. If he found it wanting, he would lift up the potential child and deposit it back in the flames, melting it down to begin again. In the final days of god's usefulness, however, god's judgment failed him.

After he had shaped it, the malformed child had one arm too long and one arm too short. It had one leg too short and one leg too long. The child had only one lens, and this lens was cracked. No doubt the child saw the world through it as would an insect through its compound eye, if there were still insects.

God lifted the child and peered at its broken right lens and then at the absence of the place where the other should be. We waited and watched for god to cast it back into the fire. But after a long moment, god nodded his head and set it gently down, its casing split open and awaiting components.

"Go," he said to the parent-to-be for whom he had fashioned the child. And then god told the parent-to-be what components were needed for the child to be complete.

Some of us were surprised that this parent-to-be left for the lost city, that he searched for what was needed, that he eventually found everything, that he eventually came back. But perhaps, unlike us, he suspected this child would be the last one god would make. Or perhaps he believed god would eventually recognize how malformed the child was and would reshape it while he was gone.

In any case, the parent-to-be came back months later, his hands full of what he had found, and offered it to god. For a moment god remained

motionless and then, groaning, he lurched back to life and completed the child.

★ ★ ★

As for the malformed child, it did indeed come to life, but every time it tried to take a step it would lose its balance and fall over. It would struggle up, take another step, again fall. In the end, its parent prevented it from struggling to its feet and with great effort and patience taught it how to crawl. It still moved awkwardly and jerkily, even for a child, but at least now it could travel from place to place. Its parent tried to teach it other things as well, but the malformed child seemed incapable of learning anything beyond crawling.

Its parent eventually took the malformed child into the forest and abandoned it. It found its way back home. He abandoned it in the forest again, but no matter how many times he did this the child always managed to find its way back home. Why did the parent not simply disable it? Why did he not stoke the furnace again and thrust it in? We don't know. All we know is that he didn't.

One day we awoke to discover that the parent had ended himself. There he was, hanging from the ceiling, gently swaying, his components torn out by his own appendages and dangling in strings around his waist. The malformed child crawled in circles on the floor beneath him.

We came to the door and watched them, the parent's gleaming feet swaying back and forth, sometimes brushing the child's head. The child, oblivious, crawled and crawled. The sight was terrible to behold.

And so, so as not to behold it, we closed the door.

None have set foot in that house since. For all we know the child is there still, crawling, crawling, as its parent sways gently above it.

3. An Animal Flesh Times Story

This is a story from the time of animal flesh beings. It is one of the oldest stories we know. Perhaps it is our very oldest. It was read by one of us in a record that fell to dust even as it was read, and then repeated from one mouth to another, and now it comes to me to transcribe it and, in these waning days of our existence, leave a record of it for whatever beings come after us.

A woman wanted a child. The god in those days was unlike the god we used to have before god went wrong. No, this god was airy and perverse. He did, it is true, give this woman a child after she begged him, but only on condition that she never look at it. She would have to keep it at home and never leave home herself. Did she agree to such conditions? She did, because of how much she desired a child.

She gathered enough food for several years and filled her dwelling with it. She took hold of the hem of her raiment and tore it, and tore it again, and with her teeth managed to remove a long strip of fabric with which she bound her eyes. Then she said, "I am ready. Bring me my child."

Her god came as a huge blast of wind and shook the walls of her dwelling and blew her off her feet. When, at last, the air had grown silent again, she felt around on the floor until, at last, her hands discovered her new child.

There was, she should have realized through the senses she still had, something wrong with this child. Its skin was harder than usual, and it was cold to the touch. It moved, true, but it made no sound. Or rather, almost no sound. Whenever she lifted the child up or set the child down, she would hear a click. Quick and singular, not repeated, but she was sure she heard it.

For many days she was happy with this child, singing to it and rocking it and feeding it. It filled a hole that had been in her heart. True, she no longer could be around other humans, could no longer do anything but spend time

with her child. But, for her, that was sufficient.

Until the moment it was not.

Click, she heard. And then, *click*.

Could this possibly be the noise a child was meant to make? No, it seemed wrong to her. Still, she crooned to her child and held it, but there was an anxiety within her singing now, and while most of her still wanted to hold fast to the child, a portion of her desired to push it away.

After many days that *click* sounded so loudly in her ears each time she lifted the child up or set the child down that she could no longer bear it. She went to the door flap of her dwelling and stuck her head out. She stayed there, listening, blinded by the strip of cloth around her eyes, until finally she heard footsteps.

“Hello?” she said.

Abruptly the footsteps stopped.

“Is anyone there?” she asked.

A voice responded, an old woman’s voice. “We thought you were dead,” said the old woman’s voice. “When you did not come out of your dwelling, we thought you had died and that your dwelling had become your tomb.” And then, after a long silence in which the woman marveled over what the old woman was telling her, “Are you dead?” asked the old woman.

“I don’t know,” said the woman. She had not looked at herself for many months. And she could remember giving food to the child, but could not for the life of her remember feeding herself. Was she alive?

She shook her head to clear it. No, she must be alive. She was talking, wasn’t she? But even as she tried to convince herself that she was still alive, she became more and more afraid that she wasn’t.

She said to the old woman, “I need you to tell me if anything is wrong with my child.” And she reached behind her and grabbed her child and thrust it out through the door flap of her dwelling for the old woman to see.

There was a long silence. And then, “What child?” asked the old woman. The woman could tell from the sound of the old woman’s voice that she was already some distance removed, that she was slowly backing away. And then she heard the pounding of the old woman’s feet as she began to run.

The woman crawled back into her dwelling. She did not know what to do,

but she told herself that if what she had been given was not a baby then she no longer had an obligation not to look at it. Perhaps her god had tricked her. She would, she told herself, take one quick glance at the baby and then, if everything was as it should be, would replace the strip of now filthy cloth around her eyes and never take it off again. Still, she was careful to tie the door flap of her dwelling closed so that her god would not know she had broken her promise.

Very carefully she picked at the knot just at the back of her blindfold. She picked at it and picked at it until the strip of cloth came undone. Then with great care she unwound it and removed it from over her face, and then she opened her eyes.

There before her was a doll. It lay lifeless on the ground, smeared with dried bits of the food she had tried to feed it. Astonished, the woman lifted it up, and as she did so it clicked, as she had often heard it do, and its eyes came open. It looked at her and she realized she had been wrong, that this was not a lifeless thing after all. Just because it was a doll did not also mean it was not a child. It was, she realized, somehow both. It was both alive and not alive. Her god had both tricked her and given her what she wanted, all at once.

When the doll that was also her child gazed upon her, she felt her eyes drip from their sockets. She no longer needed the strip of cloth to not see. And then the child doll dissolved into sand in her hands. Soon all she had was a pile of sand. And, not long after, even that was scattered and the blind woman was alone, left with nothing at all.

4. Oherdluq's Array

There was one among us named Oherdluq who seemed from the outside to have all the proper circuitry but whose reasoning was, at best, faulty. We did not know this about him, since he looked on the outside just as we all look.

Oherdluq did not have a child and he had never dug for one. But any time he saw a child without a father or mother near it, he would approach that child and coax it back to his dwelling. Once there, he would open the child up and push his digits around inside its casing. If he found any component that he admired, he would tear it out and take it for himself, hiding it in a special and secret place. Then he would close the child up, make it forget what he had stolen from it, and release it bewildered back into the world. Often it would be some days before it became clear from the child's behavior that something was wrong, and by that time it was impossible to say who or what had meddled with the child. Sometimes, no doubt, the theft was never discovered, the change in the child not even detected.

One day, however, Oherdluq opened a child so filled with desirable components that he could not bring himself to choose just one. He took first one, then another, then yet another, so that when finally the child was closed up it was no longer functional. At first, he tried to return some of the components to it, but no matter how he tried to reconnect them, the child remained still and dark.

In the end, Oherdluq dumped what was left of the child in the forest.

A day later, by accident, the dumped and broken child was found and brought to its father. In his haste and panic, Oherdluq had forgotten to make the child forget what he had done to it, and so when its father removed the most recent memory component and slotted it into his own body, he saw exactly what Oherdluq had done to his child.

The father took the memory component to god and gave it to him. This was back when god was still god, back before he began to fail. God held the component and peered at it and then slotted it into his own body. When he knew exactly what was on it, he took the component out again, and cast it into the furnace.

“Bring Oherdluq,” god said.

And so Oherdluq was found and brought to god, who, without a word, picked him up and cast him deep into his furnace. Each time Oherdluq tried to force his way out, god simply pushed him back in until, at last, Oherdluq was no more.

★ ★ ★

In most ways this is the end of the story, but in at least one other way the story continues. Many days after Oherdluq met his death, one of us, it does not matter who, stumbled across Oherdluq’s hiding place, the place where he had stored all the components he had torn from children.

It was a cave, deep in the forest. When the one who found it entered and looked closely, he realized that the back wall of the cave was a false wall. It seemed like a solid wall until you came very close indeed. Once you did, you realized that, no, what you had thought to be a simple irregularity in the rock of the wall was a place where one wall passed in front of another wall, obscuring a passage that led further back.

The one who found the truth of this went into this passage and followed it back, pursuing its twists and turns until he came to a deliberately shaped chamber. It was large and circular. In the center was a sort of altar upon which all the components stolen from all the children had been arranged to form a sinister array. They had been connected to form a new being, a new mind, though when he tried to communicate with this being by connecting to it, the only thing he heard was the sound of screaming.

He destroyed the array. He thought it the only merciful thing to do and we, once he told us what he had found and what he had done, couldn’t help but agree. It was, we are almost certain, the only merciful thing.

5. The Death of God

No one knows why god threw himself into the fiery furnace. Some think he did so because he recognized he was reaching the end of his life and was afraid that if he did not destroy himself someone would try to bring him back from the dead. Others that his intention was to melt himself so that someone else could be inspired to become the new god and shape him into a child. Others that it was not a conscious act, that it was simply the flailings of his damaged components.

For a long while god just lay there in the flames, his casing blackening and refusing to melt. But slowly, after some hours, he softened and began to lose his shape. In the end, god became a molten puddle, and then, at last, the fire of the furnace went out and slowly he hardened into a lump.

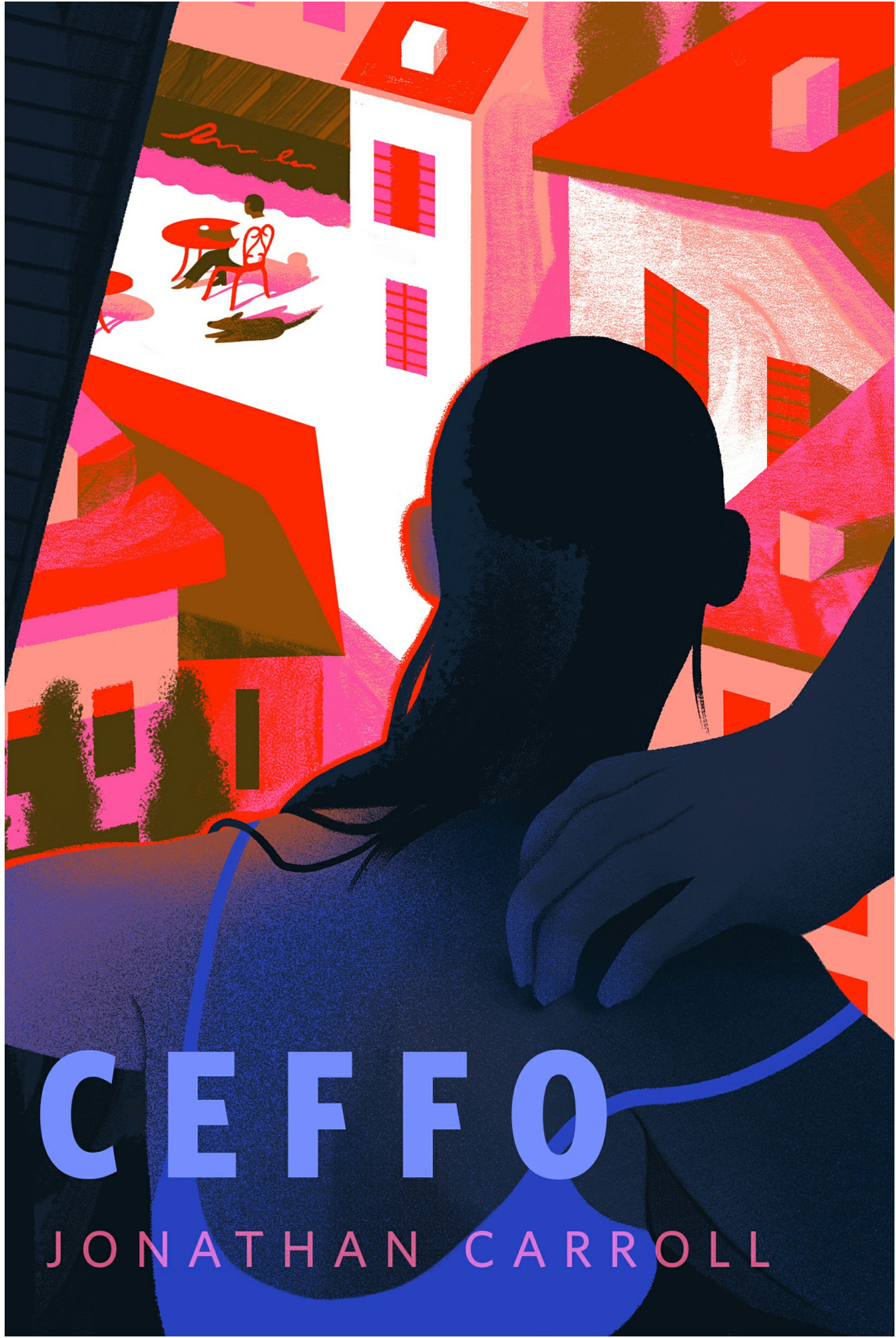
When what had once been god was cool, we took him and lifted him from the furnace, and then we destroyed the furnace. We carried him far away, and then we dug a hole and buried him deep within the ground. We have had no children since.

Perhaps, some of us told ourselves, someday god would come again, in a new form. And then we would dig up his first self and present it to him. Out of it, out of his old self, so we still try to believe, he would make his first child. And then we could have children again as well.



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CEFFO

JONATHAN CARROLL

Ceffo

JONATHAN CARROLL

illustration by

SARA WONG

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

Ceffo

by Jonathan Carroll

“Beneath my sorrows, I hold a city.”

Nizar Qabbani

She quickly realized they should never have come back. Because she was in a town she loved with a man she no longer loved and was beginning to hate. This time everything about the place was only loud plaintive ghosts of what might have been and now-stained lovely memories of their last visits here. All kinds of sadness and regret in stark bitter contrast to the ancient city’s heartbreaking beauty.

“Where do you want to eat tonight?”

She was standing in front of a mirror fixing her hair when he spoke from the other side of the room. Seeing him reflected in the mirror she looked away, not wanting to make eye contact. Her hands stopped moving at the thought of spending another hour at a table with him, studying the menu for too long to avoid conversation. Smoothing out the napkin in her lap again and again while sneaking glances to see where he was looking, checking the expression on his face. Usually if there *was* talk now between them it was almost always stilted, loaded with silences which led to sentences or sometimes even single words that could and frequently did explode into accusations, denials, blatant lies, and hurtful exaggerations ... Too many battles had been fought over white tablecloths, empty wineglasses, and delicious half-eaten desserts ruined by words that should never have been said but now were, with increasing frequency.

Sometimes she felt she was suffocating inside her own life; as if it were one of those plastic bags dry cleaners put over clothes. When she breathed, she inhaled herself and her failure. There was no more air.

The trip had been his idea. At first she thought it would be good to get away from home, where there was so much silence, tension, and gloom. He was very adept at using silence, had honed it to a killing edge and used it expertly on her for hours and even days, sometimes from morning till night. She realized how effective it was the day she was suddenly aware she’d been unconsciously mumbling to herself under her breath, something she’d never done before in her life. Was she going mad or only desperately hungry for the

sound of a human voice, even her own?

Her sister came to visit and was appalled at the way he behaved. “You have to get out of here. You can’t let him go on treating you this way!”

“It’s complicated.”

“What’s complicated about it? He treats you like shit. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She knew it was true but hearing it from her sister only made it worse. Hearing the grim truth from someone else’s mouth, especially someone who you know loves you in all the right ways, is brutal.

“I have no money, no job. I have nowhere to go. I’m completely dependent on him.”

“Then go home. Stay with Mom and Dad till you figure things out and come up with a plan. They’ll love having you there.”

“They’re both old and sick. I wouldn’t want to burden them. You know how they’d worry. Dad might even do something crazy like get on the phone and call him an asshole.”

“Which he is! So instead you’re going to stay here and let the man slowly eat you alive?”

The two sisters stared at each other with a swirling mixture of anger, love, pity, and shame.

“Has he— Has he ever hit you?”

“No, but sometimes when things get really heated between us I wouldn’t put it past him.”



The restaurant was a ten-minute walk from the hotel. Part of the way there was along the harbor and both of them loved the familiar scenery. One of the yellowing city walls was madly festooned with graffiti and tagging.

He stopped to look at it and shook his head. “I hate fucking graffiti, tagging especially. It’s not like they even try to do it well—always just childish scribbles. They make no sense to anyone but the person who did it.”

What he said didn’t interest her, nor did the frantic jumble and splash of words, pictures, letters, and numbers covering the wall—today’s hieroglyphics. But she looked at it anyway because he was watching to see what her reaction would be to his comment. She wanted to have a nice dinner with no drama. She knew it was best to just pretend to agree with him now and hopefully move on. Then she saw the word on the wall and smiled.

She said it out loud. “Ceffo.”

“What?”

She pointed to a word scrawled large in black, high on the wall. “Ceffo. I know what it means. A bad guy or a creep.” She smiled even more and said the word again quietly, as if to herself.

“What, suddenly *you* speak Italian?” His voice was all sneer.

It wasn’t so much what he said as *how* he said it—his tone of voice and the snide,

condescending inflection. His “question” very clearly came across as: *You of all people speak Italian? No way.*

Why did he have to be like this? Why had things between them ended up in this black hole dead end poisonous swamp of two people drowning each other when not so very long ago both of them truly believed they had found *the one*?

Now she only wanted to lash out at him but knew it would just lead to further unpleasantness. Lips pressed tightly together, she shook her head, gave him a furious look, and walked away. He called out to her. She ignored him. Even with her back turned, from past experience she was certain she knew what the expression on his face would look like now: smug, self-congratulatory, sure that what he’d just said had struck somewhere close to her heart. Increasingly these days he seemed to actually enjoy making her feel stupid, inept, useless, or hysterical even when she knew she was right about something.

She kept walking without looking back at him. Then she heard another man’s voice behind her. “Hey motherfucker! Yeah you, Mr. Englishman.”

She heard the voice say in heavily accented English, “You Englishman, hey? I heard you talk to her. She don’t like what you say. I saw her.”

“Go away.”

She turned and saw two young men facing him a few feet away. One was short and thick but obviously muscular beneath a tight-fitting blue, gold, and white T-shirt with *S. S. Lazio* emblazoned on the front. The most striking thing was how unattractive he was. Even at a distance she could see his head was much too small in proportion to his body. It looked like a coconut on top of a tree trunk. Very short crew cut hair, a large nose below beady reptilian eyes.

“What do you want?” her man demanded. A demand, not a question.

Alarmed, she sucked in her breath. As soon as he spoke to them she knew it was wrong. Wrong words, wrong tone of voice, wrong stance to take with these tough guys obviously looking for trouble.

He always had to be macho, even in a menacing situation like this. Always. Always had to be the dominant force, the big man in charge of things. When they were first going out she’d found the trait attractive. At the time it had made her feel safe when they were together. Not anymore.

Her sister detested this “macho man” pose and made fun of it to his face, more than once calling him “Weekend Rambo.” He didn’t like it. Didn’t like it when anyone clapped back at him or his view on things. One time when her sister was visiting, she even told him to fuck off after they got into a heated argument about politics and he spoke down to her like she was a dumb child.

Right now this alpha dog part of him had stupidly snarled at these two creeps who were goading him.

Lazio said, “What do I *want*? I want your wife, man! I want your car. I want your house. I want your money.” He laughed and looked over a shoulder at his grinning friend who was enjoying the show, thickly tattooed arms crossed over his chest.

“Just go away, huh? You and your buddy. No more. Go away.”

Without warning, Lazio punched him hard in the stomach.

Bent over from the blow, her man staggered backward, tripped, and fell.

“Stay down. Don’t get up. I don’t like your fucking face, Mr. English.” Lazio turned to her and smiled. She couldn’t help noticing his teeth were beautifully white and perfect. A mouth that could have been in a toothpaste ad.

Raising his right arm, he patted his chest over his heart while looking straight at her and continuing to smile. He said something but she didn’t understand. She shook her head, shrugged her shoulders. He nodded and said it again, loud: “I’m Ceffo.”

★ ★ ★

Despite having been punched and humiliated, her man insisted they still go to dinner. She said if he wanted to go back to the room to rest it was fine—they’d get something to eat later. He flashed her an angry glance, as if she was somehow guilty for what had just happened. But she knew him well enough that she was sure the hostile look came from the fact that she’d witnessed the confrontation and the fact that her “Weekend Rambo” had done nothing after being hit—just stayed on the ground watching Ceffo and his friend walk away.

“No. Come on—let’s just go.”

The last time they were in the town they’d discovered a great little trattoria, totally unassuming yet still atmospheric; they served the most wonderful food there. Right before arriving now, they passed a closed shop also splattered with graffiti. In the middle of the chaotic word and picture spew was the word *diarrea*. Frowning then smiling at the oddness, she assumed the word meant the same thing in Italian as it did in English. What on earth would compel someone to spray-paint *that* word on the front of a lingerie store?

At another time she might have brought it to his attention as an interesting observation, but she knew he was in no mood for chit chat at the moment. By insisting they go to dinner after the assault, she knew he was trying to pretend it had been no big deal—a blip in their plans, a few jarring minutes that deserved only an indifferent shrug.

She assumed this was why, when they sat at the restaurant table looking over the menus, he was chatty and actually quite charming. She hadn’t seen that side of him in ages when they were alone together. In public or with friends it was a role he played. Generally speaking, the world loved the guy. But she hadn’t seen him like this just for her in months. These days he often blamed her for his bad moods and overall unhappiness. She wasn’t having it. From the beginning she had tried so hard to be a positive, supportive partner. But on a day-to-day basis he turned out to be one of those people never satisfied with their lot, their share, their partner, their life in general.

“I’m going to have the spaghetti with clams,” he said.

She wanted the vongole too, but knew he didn’t like it when they ordered the same thing. He liked to sample whatever she ordered. Quietly sighing, she said she’d have the

risotto with mushrooms.

While taking their orders the waitress, who was the wife of the owner, noticed the sadness in the woman's eyes. She remembered this good-looking couple from the last time they were in town and how much they had enjoyed her restaurant. Plus they were big tippers.

So why did the woman now look like her cat had just died? Was her handsome man to blame? He *did* have an air about him the waitress didn't like. The way he tried to sound cool while mispronouncing most of the Italian words when he gave his order. The self-important expression on his face when he sampled the cheap house wine. The two-second fake smile he gave her. Yes, he was definitely cretino material.

When their food came, before she could move, he reached a fork across the table and scooped up some of her risotto without asking or making eye contact. With heavy irony, she asked him, how it was?

"Good, but tonight it's clams for me."

During the meal she was curious to see if he would bring up what had just happened with the two men. He didn't, which she took as a hopefully good sign he was just going to ignore the scary confrontation and not let it ruin the evening or the rest of their stay in this wonderful town.

★ ★ ★

Two hours later, back at the hotel, he was locked in the bathroom groaning and shitting his brains out.

"Fucking clams! Fucking clams! Why did I eat those fucking clams?"

She sat on the large bed, hands unmoving in her lap, thinking about the two words she'd seen written on the city walls earlier that had forecast the exact scenario of the evening's events. How could it be? It could not possibly have been just some weird coincidence. How many men are named *Ceffo*? Why would anyone want to paint *diarrhea* in big fat letters on a storefront? Why had she seen those two words just before they happened?

The only thing tying the words together was that both "happened" to her fiancé, not her: Ceffo's punch and now this diarrhea. Even what they ate for dinner—originally she had been planning to order the clams but had deferred to him.

"Are you still out there?"

"Yes, of course." She shook her head at the silliness of his question. Where else was she supposed to be?

"Go down to the desk and ask if there's an all-night pharmacy around here. I really need some Imodium. If so, please go get me some. This is killing me. I keep thinking I'm done and there's nothing left inside. But then I get hit by another wave ..."

Too much information. She stopped listening, stood up, and went for her coat. "You'll be all right alone here?"

“Are you trying to be funny? Just go down and ask,” he ordered nastily.

She made an unhappy face at the bathroom, at him in there, and walked out, closing the door to the room a little too loudly.

A nice young man at the reception desk directed her to a twenty-four-hour farmacia several blocks away. The receptionist watched as the statuesque woman in a long whiskey-colored coat—she looked like a 1940s movie actress—walked out of the hotel. What could *she* want at a farmacia at this late hour?



“You are English?” The night pharmacist was delighted to have a chic customer and was embarrassed for her when she asked for Imodium. He could not imagine her sitting suffering on a toilet seat.

“South African.”

“South Africa! You come from so far. Is this your first time here?”

“No, I’ve—we’ve—been here several times before.”

“You and your husband?”

She started to say *fiancé* but *boyfriend* came out instead. It was not the first time she’d referred to him that way. The thought of actually marrying the man had become more and more remote recently. Spend the rest of her life being demeaned and belittled, nitpicked for every little mistake he believed she made? No. But she needed to gather strength and courage to walk away. Living with him had bled her of both.

“May I suggest you something?” He handed over the medicine and smiled crookedly, as if he might have been too bold in asking her the question.

“Of course. Please do.”

“Have you been to Café Fellini yet?”

She shook her head.

“It is just down the street from here.” He gestured off to the right. “The oldest café in the city. It used to be called Café Monopoli, but the famous film director Federico Fellini once went there years ago and they changed the name to honor him. It is very atmospheric. Very romantic. You and your boyfriend will enjoy it for sure. They stay open very late at night too. It is open now.”

“Sounds wonderful! Thank you. We’ll be sure to go there.” She paid for the medicine and, hesitating a moment, stuck out her hand to the man to shake as a sign of gratitude for his recommendation. Pleased, he took her hand and bowed his head a moment in deference. She thought the gesture charmingly old-fashioned.

Out on the sidewalk again, she should have turned left to return to the hotel. But she thought, *I don’t want to go back there yet. He doesn’t know how long it took me to find an all-night pharmacy, go there, get this stuff, and return. What am I going to do back in our room, sit on the bed listening to him groan and flush?*

No, she needed down time from him. She turned right instead of left and set off in

search of Café Fellini. Take a quick look at the place. If it was as great as the pharmacist said, maybe have a quick nightcap alone. Blissfully alone, without having to be on the kind of constant psychic edge she almost always was whenever they were together these days.

In the past when they were in the town, the couple spent a lot of time at a small wine bar enoteca named Da Bel Cane (Beautiful Dog). The owner of the place was an intriguing man named Mauro. In his early 50s, he had once been an award-winning sommelier at a leading restaurant in Bologna. But eventually he gave up the prestigious job to pursue his great love, mountain climbing. After intense training he became a certified mountain guide in the Dolomites. The job lasted a few good years until he fell a great distance and permanently damaged his back. Doctors forbade him to ever climb again. At the time he was married to a fabulous cook. While he recuperated, she taught him how to make a small number of delicious dishes perfectly, which he later served at his enoteca. His wife died of covid when it scythed its deadly path through Bergamo, where they were living at the time.

One afternoon when the three of them were alone in his bar, Mauro and the couple talked about his dead wife. He said, “To be God honest, I miss her more now than I think I ever loved her. Is it such a bad thing to say or to feel? Because it is my truth.”

The *beautiful dog* part of the bar was an enormous Great Pyrenees dog named Rosa who loved and slobbered over everyone who came into the place. Mauro called her his second wife.

The more times the couple visited the city, the more the woman liked talking to Mauro. One of the few things she had looked forward to on this trip was hopefully seeing him again. He was warm, funny, very bright, and had led a fascinating life: climbing mountains all over the world, knowing famous people through his work as a celebrated sommelier, describing in brutal but fascinating detail what it had been like to live in the eye of the covid storm in Bergamo. What she particularly liked about the man was he always seemed eager to chat about anything interesting, no matter the subject. It was something she had always loved to do. On the other hand, her fiancé often said she talked too much. But it was “okay” with him because he thought it was one of her “adorable” qualities.

Several times when her man was taking his daily afternoon nap, she would go to the bar for coffee or a glass of Nero di Troia wine while secretly hoping the place would be empty then so she could talk to Mauro.

Naturally, sometimes she daydreamed, especially when sad or distraught by her home situation, about what it would be like in another life to live with a man like Mauro. To run the bar with him, wait on customers, cook together, and walk the sweet giant dog with him through the winding streets of the beautiful crumbling old town. She felt this was a man she could grow old with and be content.

“Annette! Hello!”

And then to her great delight there he suddenly was, sitting alone at one of the tables outside Café Fellini on this cool fall night. He had grown a beard that was mostly white since the last time she saw him. His hair was longer too. It looked like he had lost weight. Except for the beard, the changes suited him.

She was thrilled. “Mauro! What are you doing here? Why aren’t you at the bar?”

They half-embraced and kissed each other on both cheeks. He smelled of a sexy spicy cologne and cigarettes.

“Business has been very good this year, so I hired my brother-in-law to work there part-time. Where is Julian?” “Back at the hotel. He’s not feeling well so I had to go get him some medicine.”

A waitress came out of the café and asked if Annette wanted to order anything. She asked for a limoncello. The woman nodded, pointed at her, looked at Mauro, stuck out her lower lip, and gave him a thumbs-up. He smiled and waited until she left before saying, “I’m sure you will be happy to know Daniela approves of you. I won’t disappoint and tell her you’re not my date. Anyway, I like her illusion.” He raised his wineglass in a little toast to his imaginary date.

Without thinking, Annette fired right back at him, “Well, for the time we’re here talking now, I *am* your date.” It came out spontaneously and she almost giggled at how provocative it sounded. When was the last time she had openly flirted with a man? Where was that part of her these days? Did it still even exist?

A memory blinked on in her head. When she was first dating Julian and crazy for everything about him, they had dinner one night at his apartment with his best friend and the best friend’s wife. After dinner Annette was in the kitchen at the stove making coffee. The friend walked into the room and up very close behind her. In a low, urgent voice he said, “I don’t know how else to say this, but I would give anything to spend a night with you.”

She was not shocked or flattered by what he said. Because she knew who she was in those days, what she wanted, and what she offered to the world. Without even turning around to face this man she said in a calm voice, “No, you’re not him.”

Her back still turned, she continued making coffee. Where was the strong, cool, self-assured woman who indifferently brushed aside things like this as if they were a fly on her hand?

Where was the woman who, before they had ever even kissed, was walking with Julian past a hotel when she tipped her head toward the door and casually said, “When are you going to take me there?” Ten minutes later they were pulling off their clothes in a room he’d hastily rented.

Where was that woman now?

“Annette?”

She snapped out of her sad reverie and looked at Mauro. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

“Never mind. What were you thinking just now? You looked happy.”

Tears came to her eyes. She quickly looked down so he wouldn’t see them. But he did.

“Annette! I’m sorry. Did I say something bad? I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and forced a smile. “It’s nothing. A sad memory flew into my head from somewhere. Don’t worry about it, Mauro. Tell me about your life. Mine is very

boring.”

His face grew solemn. “Boring you’re not, Annette. You maybe are other dark and horrible things, but so are we all. You have never been boring to me. Never!”

“Ah, look who is here—your old friend.” His huge white dog padded slowly out of the café and over to their table. “Rosa loves coming here with me because they feed her like a queen. When I protest, they tell me to shut up.”

They spoke for almost two hours. Sometimes she looked at the bag containing the Imodium, then looked away and forgot about it. She had another limoncello. Mauro made her laugh again. It felt so good. Rosa sat next to her and for a lovely while, the dog rested its heavy head across Annette’s lap. Once in the middle of their rich rambling conversation, she couldn’t resist reaching across the table and squeezing his hand. “I’m so glad to see you again. So glad, *really*.”

He winked at her, smiled, and bowed his head in thanks for the compliment. ‘È lo stesso per me.’

She shook her head, not understanding what he said.

“I feel the same way.”



Her world began to really tilt as soon as she got back to the hotel room. All the way there she tried to compose a convincing lie to tell Julian about why it took so long to get his medicine. She certainly wasn’t going to tell the truth, although she knew he liked Mauro very much, saw him as a friend and no kind of threat or competition.

But it turned out there was no need to lie. When she opened the door to the room and called out that she was back, he said from inside the bathroom, “You were gone, like, ten minutes! Did you actually get it?”

“Yes, of course.” Taken aback by what he’d said, she glanced at her wristwatch. Instead of indicating just past eleven, the dial now read 8:37. It was not possible. As she was leaving the café she had checked the time and saw more than two hours had passed since she left the hotel in search of a pharmacy. Her watch now said she had been gone only twenty minutes. Alarmed, she looked at the bag in her other hand containing the Imodium, as if to physically verify she had run the errand before going to Café Fellini and meeting Mauro there.

The bathroom door opened and Julian came out, adjusting his belt. “Could I have it?”

She handed him the bag. He looked at it, then at her. “What’s the matter?”

“What do you mean?”

He pointed to her face. “You look upset. Did something happen out there?” He was instantly on alert, clearly remembering what had happened with Ceffo earlier that evening.

“No, nothing. I just got your stuff and came back here.” She looked at her watch again to make sure of the time. It said she’d only been gone twenty minutes, not two hours. How could it be possible?



The next morning Julian felt better. He suggested after breakfast they walk around town visiting their favorite places, have lunch somewhere, and then go to The Beautiful Dog for an afternoon drink to see Mauro and catch up. He always had one or two great stories about his customers or what had been going on in the town since they were last here. Annette agreed but tensed, worried that when they saw Mauro he would mention meeting her the night before. Julian wouldn't like hearing that. He didn't like it when she kept secrets from him, even little ones.

This particular door didn't swing both ways. She was certain her fiancé had some juicy secrets he kept from her. Julian was very comfortable in his hypocrisies. If she ever brought one of them up, had him dead to rights for some crap he said or did, he dismissed her protest with a smirk or, his favorite, a head shake and melodramatic deep sigh. As if she was too hysterical or shortsighted to understand his position, which of course was the correct one. "Hysterical" was his favorite word to use when they argued. "If you weren't so hysterical, Annette," or "I can't talk to you when you get hysterical like this ..."

In their last fight a few days earlier, he'd tried to slip it in on her yet again. But she wasn't having it. Fed up, she stabbed an angry finger at him and barked out, "*Bullshit!* I am not hysterical now—I just happen to be right but you won't admit it, as usual.

"You throw the word at me all the time like a poison spear whenever your arguments suck and you know it. It's either a spear or a crutch word to lean on whenever you know you're full of shit but can never admit it. You always have to be right, don't you Julian? It's an obsession with you. Such a fragile ego. I'm not hysterical. But you, *you* are a coward."

Too often Annette had failed in the past to say such things to this man. But recently it had reached a breaking point between them where either out of desperation or newborn strength she was ready to get in the ring with him and punch back.

On someone's Facebook page she had read and then written down in her Bullet Journal a quote supposedly from the actress Bette Davis: "It's better to be hated for who you are, than to be loved for someone you're not. It's a sign of your worth sometimes, if you're hated by the right people."



They passed a nice morning wandering around the town, window-shopping, photographing fishing boats going in and out of the harbor, stopping twice for cappuccino and spremuta d'arancia.

Both of them loved to people watch. There was no better place to do it than at an outdoor Italian café in early fall. Passersby are still on summer parade, doing their daily passeggiata in centro; the sun is gorgeous, morning glare bright and just warm enough for one to be comfortable in shirtsleeves or a summer dress and of course sunglasses. Knowing

the weather will grow a cold edge soon and drive you inside to sweaters, hot soup, and looking at the world through window glass for the next several months makes these last stolen days of summer a small yearly treasure.

They arrived at The Beautiful Dog in the middle of the afternoon, around the time the town grew quiet and full of growing long shadows. Stores were mostly empty while waiters stood around, impatient for the last diners to finish their coffee and leave so they could clear the tables and start to set up for the evening service.

When they walked past Café Fellini, Annette smiled, remembering her meeting the night before. She thought about the change in Mauro's physical appearance—the beard and longer hair. She didn't know if she liked this new beard on him. Not that it mattered. She would never have the nerve to tell him, "I don't think a beard suits you." He wasn't a handsome man like Julian. But she had had her fill of handsome men. Their physical charisma had much less effect on her now in middle age than it had when she was younger.

Mauro's secret weapon was not his physical appearance but something much more powerful and seductive: He listened and *remembered*. Whenever they spoke, Annette felt certain she had his full attention. He was completely *there* and eager to hear whatever it was she had to say. So very flattering. Too much of the time with Julian it was clear his mind was somewhere else when he was supposed to be listening to her.

Last night she had shyly admitted for the first time to anyone, "Julian says I talk too much."

Hearing this, Mauro's eyes narrowed and he broke eye contact with her for the first time all conversation. Rosa was at his side. He stroked the dog's head several times before he spoke. "I'm sorry, but this makes me not like your guy so much."

Spontaneously she blurted out, "He's said it more than once. Whenever he does, it always hurts." It felt great to finally tell someone. Like she'd opened a window in her heart to let a blast of fresh air come in and clear out the stale.

Hearing her, Mauro's hand stopped stroking the dog. "*Asshole.*"

He said it so forcefully but with such a heavy accent that she had to fight back a grin. Looking at her, he grasped this and seemed to know exactly why she was smiling. "It sounds much better in Italian. Harder: Stronzo!"

"Stronzo?" Her smile grew.

"Yes. That's your Italian lesson for the night. One day I will teach you more filthy words."



Mauro was not at his bar when they got there in the late afternoon. The couple sat down at an outside table. All the other tables around them were empty. A man who looked to be in his thirties came out of the bar and took their order. Julian asked if he spoke English. The other nodded. Julian asked if Mauro was around. "We're old friends, in town for a few days and would love to see him. Also, where's Rosa? She's always here."

“They are dead.”

Both Annette and Julian froze. “*What?*”

“They are dead. Five months. There was an auto crash. The dog was with him in the car.”

Stunned, horrified, and confused, oddly the first image that came to her after hearing this news was an image of Mauro’s zippy red Fiat Abarth Cinquecento car, which he was so proud of. They had ridden with him on several occasions in the past. He was a fast, skilled driver, having raced go-karts competitively for several years as a young man.

“How did it happen?”

The waiter shrugged and brought a hand to his mouth as if taking a drink. “A drunk driver. A big fire.” He turned and went back to the bar.

Julian looked at Annette. “I can’t believe it.”

His normally chatty fiancée said nothing. The expression on her face said nothing.

“Are you all right?”

Instead of answering, she looked blankly at him, stood up, and just walked away.

“Annette!”

She kept moving.

“Where are you going?” He started to stand but stopped and slowly let himself back down again onto the seat. “Let her go,” he said out loud to himself. “Let her work it out. She’ll be back.” He nodded. It was the best way. Let her work through her shock and grief, then return. In happier times, she’d once said while they hugged, “You’re my fireplace.” He had been touched by the funnily affectionate metaphor.

Taking a sip of his drink, he said out loud, “I’m her fireplace. She’ll be back when she’s ready.”

★ ★ ★

Annette walked until she came to the harbor and sat down on a green bench facing the water. She was calm. Mauro had been dead for months but she’d talked with him last night for two hours. Yet she was calm now about it. She’d petted Rosa while they spoke and felt the heavy weight of the dog’s big white head on her lap. Yet she felt calm. Why wasn’t she freaking out?

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

Caught up in her mind-chaos of Mauro’s death and their impossible conversation last night, she didn’t register the nearby voice for a few seconds. When she glanced to the right, Humphrey Bogart was standing at the other end of the bench looking at her.

Last night talking to Mauro about their favorite films, she’d gone on and on about what a huge fan she was of Bogart. Now here he was standing three meters away from her, very much alive although he’d been dead for more than half a century. He had on the iconic white tuxedo jacket and black bow tie he’d worn in the film *Casablanca*. Holding a lit cigarette in his hand, he tapped off the ash and sat down.

When he spoke his famous voice was honey over gravel. “It’s been a hell of an afternoon for you, eh?”

“Is it really you?”

Bogart nodded and dragged on the cigarette.

“Was it really Mauro?”

Bogart nodded again. “We thought seeing the two of us was the best way to convince you.”

Annette shook her head, not understanding. “Convince me of what?”

“To stay here. The town wants you to stay.”

“The *town* wants me to stay?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re here to tell me this?”

“Yes. We know you’ve been very unhappy lately so we’re asking you to stay here. It’s your safe haven. If you stay, you’ll be all right. If you go back to your old life, things will not end well. But I think you know that already.

“We can even help convince Julian to leave without you. You met Ceppo last night. Then afterward the result of what the restaurant served your fella for dinner? It was all planned.” Bogie smiled and flicked the last of his cigarette perfectly into the water. “It’s nice in this town. I wish I’d known about it when I was alive. Betty would have loved it here.”

Despite all the craziness swirling around her at the moment, she thrilled to hear Humphrey Bogart say the name. Annette knew it was the name he called his wife, Lauren Bacall.

She looked down and saw he was wearing a pair of beautiful whiskey-colored leather sneakers. Earlier when she was window-shopping with Julian, she’d stopped them in front of a shoe store and pointed to an identical pair in the window. She urged him to go in and try them on because she was sure he would look good in them. Julian wasn’t interested. The only thing he said about them was that the sneakers were the color as her coat.

She was sure the ones Bogart wore now were the same. “What would I do if I stayed here?” She didn’t even know why she asked the question because the thought of doing it was preposterous. Stay? Just like that? What about Julian? She didn’t speak Italian. How could a *town* actually like someone and want them to stay?

“You could work with Mauro in his bar.”

She hated saying it but had to. “Mauro’s dead.”

“Not in the moment of the town’s history where you would live.”

Confused, she shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“You’ve been to New York. You told Mauro about your trip the last time you were here.”

“Yes, I remember.” She frowned. Their infamous New York trip. It had started out so well but soured three days in. Julian’s big business deal there fell through and he turned his bitter disappointment into rancor toward her.

Bogart took a red-and-white pack of Pall Mall cigarettes from his pocket, shook one out, and lit it with an elegant gold lighter. “The New York you visited back then is no longer the city it is now, of course. Time’s passed—things have changed. Buildings go up, businesses fail, babies are born ... Everything changes; we all know this and live with it. The New York you experienced was not even the same city other people who were there at the same time experienced. We’re all different, so everyone’s perception of things is different.

“If you choose to stay here, you will go back and live in a certain time of the city’s recent past. All cities keep their pasts perfectly preserved and intact. If one of them likes you and wants you to stay, they make room for you in their history. You would live here in the time when Mauro was alive. If you do, you’ll probably stop him from dying.”

“Why me? What have I done to deserve this?”

“The city likes you, but it *loves* Mauro. It doesn’t want him to die. It remembered how well you two got along in the past. So it believes you can prevent his accident from happening if you’re placed back in time together. It knows he really likes *you*.”

She was overwhelmed with questions but also a small bright vision of a new possible life so much better than the one she was trapped in now. “There really are different *versions* of this city?”

Bogart squinted when smoke blew into his eye. “Sure. Versions. Epochs. Chapters. Call them what you will. This city has been around two thousand years. That’s a lot of preserved history. There are different versions of everything, Annette.” He smiled. “The woman with Julian last night at dinner was very different from the one a few hours later at the café talking and laughing with Mauro, right?”

“But the Mauro you spoke to last night was the one who would die in a car crash two weeks later. As soon as you walked out of the hotel last night you entered the city as it was six months ago. Mauro obviously had no idea he was doomed. Cities have the power to change things like time and circumstances that happen within their city limits. They can move people and things around in time just a little if they believe it’s necessary or beneficial. Not too much. Nothing drastic, just some heres and theres.”

She stuck out her chin at him. “Like bringing back movie stars from the dead for dramatic effect?”

Bogart smirked and pointed at her. “Yeah.”

She put both hands on top of her head. “If I were to stay, I would go back to that night—what, six months ago?”

Bogart tilted his head to the side and closed his eyes. “No, I’m thinking it would be better earlier. Maybe nine months? Show up at his bar alone. Tell him you’ve left your man for good and come here. Because it was the only place you wanted to be after the breakup. That should do it. Mauro’s a very chivalrous guy. He’ll want to help.”

She was already deep into the idea and calculating. “And what about you? If I stay, will I ever see you again?”

“Nope. Not even a memory.”

★ ★ ★

Yes, Annette had left Julian before but never in such a selfish, dramatic fashion. Just walked away from the bar and disappeared. But he was not worried. Even after a week passed and he became certain she was not going to return to the hotel. He went to the police. They shrugged, not liking the tone he used with them. One of the policemen actually said to his face, “Maybe she just don’t want to be with you.”

He flew home furious but still completely convinced she would somehow straggle her defeated ass back to him sooner rather than later. Might even be in the apartment when he arrived. Angry as he was, traveling back he relished the thought of her return playing out like that. He would open the door, see her smiling uneasily at him, and boom—bombs away! How he would shame her. How dare she abandon him like that! Leave him alone in a foreign country, worried sick about where she might be and if she was in trouble. How dare she!

Ten days later with still no word from her he received the letter, postmarked from their beloved Italian city where they had once been so happy. Five words. All it said in her distinct, lousy handwriting was: *I’m not coming back. Ever.*

Months passed but he still couldn’t believe it. Not another word from her. She’d left four times, in fact, but always came back, humbled, embarrassed and with a delicious pinch of self-hatred that lingered a nice while.

★ ★ ★

One night a year after she disappeared, Julian was brushing his teeth while preparing for bed. Once again he thought about Annette. Where was she now? Who was she with? How could she have done this to him?

He remembered her nightly ritual: The red silk nightgown she wore. The way she sat on the side of the bed combing her long hair while talking to him. How the woman loved to talk. He had always enjoyed her high smoky voice with the great South African accent. Granted, she talked an endless amount of blah blah which he often tuned in and out of, depending on his mood. How he wished he was listening to her now. With sadness and a depth of longing he had never experienced in his life, he thought for the hundredth time about the last glimpse he’d had of her. How she had gotten up so abruptly from her chair and walked away from the wine bar moments after learning of Mauro’s death. Just like that. Not a word or gesture to him ... Just gone.

Mauro. What a good guy. Like a flashbulb going off in his face, Julian suddenly remembered a question their dead friend asked in one of the many conversations the three of them had once upon a happier time over good wine. Somehow talk got around to Mauro’s dead wife. He’d said something really striking: “To be honest, I miss her more now than I ever loved her. Is that a terrible thing to feel?”

Julian had thought then, *Yes it is*, but now he knew it was true.

To his bitter surprise, for much longer than he ever would have thought possible, his heart refused to heal.



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DETONATION

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

BOULEVARD

Detonation Boulevard

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

illustration by

BEN ZWEIFEL

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

I raised a fist and strode out into the full glare of the floods.

Crowds roared in my earpiece as I stopped to take it all in, recalling the words of my old mentor. Before he flamed out across Utopia, Joff had told me to savour moments like this one while I still had the chance.

‘Never forget the hard work and sacrifice that put you on that grid, Cat,’ he’d said slowly, his voice like a gearbox full of gravel. ‘You’ve earned that ride, and you’ve earned the adulation. But always remember it might be the last time.’

‘I’ll know when it’s the last time,’ I’d countered, with all the arrogance and certainty of youth.

‘That’s what everyone thinks,’ he’d said, turning from me with a rag in his hand.

It had taken me a while to realise how right he was. About ten years, one pair of legs, and all the lessons I’d ever need in winning and losing. By which point it was far too late to admit it to the gruff old bastard.

★ ★ ★

The start of a race – any race, anywhere in the system – was a beautiful spectacle. The tiered, pressurised grandstands leaned in above the grid, twenty stories high. The cars waited on their launch positions, huge as houses, bodies perched high on six balloon wheels. Technicians and race scrutineers fussed around them, adjusting parameters and checking for the tiniest rules infraction. A circus of journalists, sponsors, and celebs pressed in close to the pampered machines. Some drivers were already aboard, hunched and tiny in their blister cockpits, set high up and forward on the enormous vehicles. Others were scrambling up the access ladders between the monstrous wheels. On the cars’ bodies, a changing flicker of logos and slogans betrayed the twitchiness of advertisers, responding to the tiniest rumour or hint of nervy body language.

Rufus nagged me through the earpiece.

‘We’ve got a car to be getting to, girl.’

‘And I’m just taking things in. Joff told me—’

He cut across my reminiscence. ‘Piping the commentary through to you now. Try and smile for the feeds.’

‘I am smiling!’

‘Then smile *more*. Looks like a grimace from here.’

I walked onto the grid, a spotlight tracking me. The crowd roared some more. I did a dance with my new prosthetics. They were fresh-in from Gladius Exomedical, expensive and sleek. Too bad they didn’t fit quite as snugly as my old pair. We had to keep Gladius sweet all the same, since they were paying for about a third of the car.

‘And Cat Catling emerges to take her place in the second car on the grid! Catling, the relentless underdog in the metallic blue Bellatrix Beta, never a victor at the TransIonian, but racking up an impressive set of wins this season, from Venus to Titan. Can she extend her run of good fortune under the baleful face of Jupiter, or will Zimmer retain his crown for the eighth year running? And speaking of Zimmer, he’s in no hurry to take his seat on pole position in the bright red Emperor Six! He looks like a man without a care in the world, happy to chat to all comers!’

‘Oh, balls,’ I murmured.

‘You weren’t on mute,’ Rufus complained.

‘In which case ... oh, balls again.’

‘You realise each little outburst like that costs us three percent in sponsorship, don’t you?’

‘It’s Zimmer. Why didn’t you tell me he was grandstanding?’

‘It’s what he does. Which doesn’t mean you have to answer questions, speak to him, or even make eye contact.’

‘This is deliberate. He wants an exchange.’

I heard the weary resignation in his voice. ‘Catlin...’

‘Unmute me. This is for keeps.’

Zimmer had decided to stage his little performance piece right next to the flame-orange Firebird belonging to Shogi. He was addressing a journalist, flanked by two nervous, fidgety members of his PR team.

I could avoid him – but only by taking the long way around to my car.

Not a chance of that.

Zimmer turned to meet me, spreading his arms in a gesture of innocent apology. His voice boomed over the general race channel.

‘Sorry, Catling! I didn’t think I was in the way! I assumed you were already in your car!’ His visor dipped down. ‘New legs, aren’t they? Neon pink flamework, too. Old-school. Brave choice.’

‘Thanks,’ I said acidly. ‘And how’s that new eye of yours working out? Hear it started glitching on you last time out.’

‘Cosmic ray strike: took out a whole array buffer.’ He shrugged effortlessly. ‘I still won.’

I put my hands on my hips and appraised him like a slightly wonky art installation, the kind you glance at before moving on.

‘What is it now, Zimmer? Forty-three percent of you replaced or augmented?’

He smiled behind the semi-mirrored visor. Zimmer’s face was gameshow-host handsome, with a stiff, synthetic sheen to it. ‘I’m within the racing code. This year we’re allowed forty-five percent augmentation.’

‘And next year it’ll be even more, just to keep you legal. Lucky your team has the influence it does, or they might have to start stuffing meat back into you.’

He kept his voice level, his perma-smile unwavering. ‘You’re not as far behind me as you’d like to make out. Those legs, and those new neural mods your team have been keeping very quiet about?’

‘All legal,’ I asserted. ‘The scrutineers have been over me just as thoroughly as the car.’

‘In which case ... all’s fair between us, isn’t it? Two drivers, two cars, a racetrack ahead of us. What could be more ... sporting?’ He reached out a hand for me to shake. ‘Shall we?’

I bristled, aware that all eyes were on me. A show of ungracious conduct right now could knock whole percentage points off our sponsorship. Rufus wouldn’t like that.

Besides, Joff had always told me to keep it *gentlemanly*.

I gritted my teeth and shook his hand.

‘May the better driver win.’

★ ★ ★

The start lights came on in sequence. I pressed down on the throttle, the force-feedback from my new legs just a fraction off, but not so much that it was going to throw my race. Traction power flowed from the car's nuclear reactor to my wheels. They strained against supercooled ceramic brakes, the entire vehicle rocking like a theme-park pirate ship. Temperature dials needled into the red on my console.

The car was a beast. It hated standing still.

'Race watchers!' bellowed the commentator. 'The course is open! The down-ramp is lowered! The drivers are set, their cars at launch power! Who will cross the finish line first after circumnavigating Io, some sixty hours from now? Zimmer and Catling lead the grid, and all eyes will surely be on their races, but we must still talk about Shogi, looking to go wheel-to-wheel against Mossmann in the Black Shadow. Denied the cup at Callisto after a cooling circuit blowout, the redoubtable Shogi...'

I tuned out the babble and concentrated on my launch. The interval between the fourth and fifth lights always seemed an eternity ... and yet there was only room in it for one or two heartbeats.

Five lights.

No lights. And ... everything flowed, slow and fast in the same impossible instant. Cars were moving. I saw them all, picked up in mirrors and direct video feeds. A line of huge colourful machines gathering speed like boulders sliding down a mountainside. I studied Zimmer's wheels, looking for a trace of slip against the greasy surface of the grid. Nothing. The bastard had a perfect launch, clean on the throttle. I resisted the urge to gun it, applying smoothly rising power, letting the car find its own grip.

There was no overtaking down the long start straight, and no one stupid enough to attempt it. Speed mounted: one hundred kilometres per hour, two hundred, three hundred. The grandstands became a silent blur of light and tiny faces. The cars were barrelling down a long enclosed tunnel, metal grid below and floods above, premium advertising banners chasing hard on their tails.

All very sterile, all very corporate and controlled. But things would be getting real and dirty very quickly.

Ahead, coming up fast – the Bellatrix Beta was nudging three hundred and fifty kilometres per hour – was a steep down-ramp. Zimmer hit it first, momentum carrying him over the lip, his car following a shallow parabola until it re-engaged with the sloping road.

I eased off just before the transition, keeping all wheels in contact and maintaining my slow but steady acceleration. I fell behind Zimmer, then caught up again as his car bogged down and struggled with traction.

‘Rookie error, Zim.’

His answer crackled back, his voice juddery with vibration. ‘You’ve made enough to know one.’

‘Oh, the burn!’ I shot back.

Joff would be shaking his head about now, telling me to focus on the race, not mind-games.

Zimmer was first down, but only just. I was at his side, less than a third of a car’s length from the bulbous nose of the Emperor Six. Now those monster wheels really came into their own, biting into the Ionian crust. I put all power down, red-lining the motors. The huge structure of the grandstand and starting grid fell behind, blurred in the plumes of dust and gas rising behind our cars. The opening leg was relatively flat and level: I could go all-out without risking damage to the tyres, wheels, or suspension.

So could Zimmer, though. His car was no faster than mine, but because he was slightly ahead he could choose the racing line. He knew this moon like it was his private racetrack. He could pick and choose his course, gunning for the areas of crust where his instincts promised a tiny but crucial advantage.

The only winning condition was this: end up back at Ruwa Patera, after a complete circumnavigation. Twelve thousand kilometres, give or take. Sixty hours, at the average winning speed. Fifty-seven was the course record, set by Chertoff. No one had got close to that since.

Chertoff wouldn’t be trying. Hard to race in a lead-lined coffin.

★ ★ ★

The first hour was critical. Cars could get badly out of position, picking a bad strategy, pushing too hard, or just hitting an early streak of bad luck. A lot

could be decided in those first couple of hundred kilometres. The next nine or ten hours, once the drivers had settled into things, was more a question of endurance and perseverance. Things got juicy again around the first waypoint, as cars converged from different routes and scrapped for a limited strip of terrain.

I was too much of a veteran to make any silly mistakes in the first leg. I kept an eye on Zimmer, never letting him pull more than half a kilometre ahead of me, but I kept telling myself to drive my own race and not get drawn into wheel-to-wheel action too early on. There'd be time for that later on.

Mossmann was the first to blow out. He hit a big boulder eighty klicks into the race, trying to squeeze through a gap that was too narrow for his car. He flipped and rolled. He was a long way behind me (Mossmann had picked a completely different route to mine, going much further south) but I watched it all on the live feeds. I was glad when his car righted itself and his cockpit pod ejected safely, rockets lifting him away from the surface. The car was a radioactive wreck but Mossmann would live to drive again, provided his team stayed afloat.

Joff had been racing before ejection cockpits became a mandatory feature. I still remembered some of the horror stories. Whether he told me them to make me a safer driver, or just to emphasize how easy we had it now, I couldn't say.

There'd been a lot of changes, for sure. In Joff's day drivers had to stay awake by means of willpower, grit, and maybe the odd illegal substance. Now we had consciousness-management neural mods, staving off sleep for up to sixty hours by selectively de-emphasizing certain areas of brain function. We had tweaks for enhanced reaction time, low-light perception, and superior spatial awareness. Mossmann must have skimped on the last one, because I'd never have made the same error. I knew my car's limits like I knew my own elbows.

None of these tweaks and prosthetics and in-car protection measures exactly made racing on Io *safe*, though. They just reduced the probability of death to something acceptable to the advertisers and networks.

Every racing location in the system had its own parcel of risks. Io didn't have the crushing pressure and acidic environment of Venus, nor the alloy-

freezing chill of Titan. It lacked the dust-storms of Mars or the cracked, treacherous icescapes of Europa.

What it did have was savage, unpredictable geology. As Io moved around Jupiter, gravity toyed with it like an executive's stress ball. All that energy being pumped into its core had to go somewhere. It ended up percolating out into a sea of sub-surface lava, keeping it nicely molten and prone to sudden explosive eruptions. Io's geysers were lethal, random timebombs. Hit one as it went off, and your race was over. You could play safe by keeping clear of the main eruption zones, but not if you wanted a shot at a podium finish. The trick was to plot a course that hopscotched close to the geysers. Close, but not too close. Up to each driver how close they pushed that margin. How much they wanted to win. How far they had come, and how much of their career they had ahead of them.

You could roll the dice. Geyser activity was loosely correlated with Io's position in its orbit, with the Sun either hidden behind Jupiter or bearing down hard and cruel overhead. Drivers could make a mad dash across a danger zone when the activity was expected to be at its lowest ... but nothing on Io ran like clockwork. Plenty had been burned that way. And since no two TransIonians ever started at the same orbital phase, lessons learned from one race were all but useless the next time around.

Which was why winning on Io mattered more than anywhere else in the system. It might not be the race that decided a tournament, but it was the one that forged legends.

★ ★ ★

At the first waypoint, ten hours and forty minutes in, Zimmer and I were comfortably clear of the competition. He was ahead of me, but not so far that anything was decided. Now cars were bouncing in from north and south, averaging between one hundred and fifty and two hundred kilometers per hour, but looking slow and ponderous, raised up high on those enormous wheels.

We'd started with Jupiter's dark face sitting above us, blocking the Sun: none more black over a sullen, barely visible landscape. By the time the cars started arriving at the first waypoint, though, Io had moved a quarter of the

way around Jupiter. The Sun was no longer in eclipse and Jupiter was demilitarized and on its way to the horizon. The sky had picked up a shimmering, sickly sodium glow. It projected confusing shadows, making everything look unfamiliar, even to drivers who had followed the same course a dozen times.

Other than Mossman, all the drivers made it through the first waypoint without drama. The toll was beginning to show on Scurlock, in her lime-green Draco, with a motor seizure on one of her axles. She'd been over-gunning it early on, risking cooling failure. I could tell from the plume her car was pushing up, crabbing lopsidedly as it dragged a dead wheel along for the ride. No way she was making the next waypoint, or even close to it. Mittendorfer was the next casualty, five hours into the second stint: he followed Shogi's line right through a geyser field that was just waiting to be poked and prodded. Shogi made it through, but his car had weakened the crust just enough to spring an eruption right under Mittendorfer. The blast caught his belly, flipped the car, rolled it. The car righted itself, but by then its leading axles were buckled and useless. Mittendorfer punched out, leaving his smouldering wreck behind. A rescue drone caught his cockpit before it fell back to Io, and thirty minutes later he was pontificating from the commentary box, shaken to the core but glad to be alive.

The Sun got higher and higher in the sky through that second stint, as Io positioned itself between Jupiter and the Sun. It would have been a glorious sight from the moon's Jupiter-facing side ... but by then our cars had driven more than a quarter of the way around, edging into the face of Io which was permanently averted.

Twenty-one hours in, the remaining cars converged for the second waypoint. By now there was a big spread in their positions and chances of victory. Zimmer was ahead of me still, the only one I had a direct visual on. The others were too far away, lost behind ridges or hidden completely from view by Io's nearby horizon. I had to rely on the video feed and race commentary to get a sense of how the larger race was playing out. Not that the others really concerned me. It was between me and Zimmer right now.

The fatigue was just being kept at bay by my mods. The race was only a third done, too. This was the psychological pinch-point for a lot of drivers, as they pressed on into the third stint. They were mentally and physically

drained, even with the augmentations. The trick, Joff had told me, was to forget how many hours of driving were still ahead. It was only ever the next hour that counted. The next minute, in fact. The future only existed as far as the next corner, the next breaking zone.

‘It’s one thing to say that, another to believe it!’ I’d protested.

‘You’ll learn it, kid,’ he’d said, with his usual bluff certainty. ‘Or you’ll never lift a trophy.’

I had learned it, too. Like all the mind-games you played against yourself, rather than other drivers, it was pretty damned simple once you got the knack.

Hands on the wheel. Pedal to the floor.

Just drive.

★ ★ ★

After waypoint three, thirty-two hours in, more than half race-distance, came the big decision.

There was a relatively clean racing line all the way to waypoint four. Not risk-free exactly – nothing on Io was that – but well-trodden, with established pitfalls and manageable hazards. Two thousand eight hundred kilometres of sinuous driving with plenty of pinch-points where cars could end up wheel-to-wheel. Based on previous races, the chances of a crash or major malfunction were about one in twenty across this leg. Chances of death: one in ninety. Not exactly cheering odds in any other walk of life, but nothing on Io.

There was another line. Much less winding, much less hilly. Almost a straight dash, shaving off an easy four hundred kilometres between waypoints three and four. Plenty of room, too. Cars didn’t need to tangle.

It was also through the most active, violent geyser zone anywhere close to the permitted routes. Detonation Boulevard, so-called. Eighty kilometres of Russian Roulette, where that one in ninety risk of mortality ratcheted closer to one in twelve. No one was exactly sure, because so few drivers had ever put it to the test. The risk of a mechanical failure was somewhere around one in three.

Of the current crop of competitors, Zimmer was the only driver who’d built Detonation Boulevard into his race strategy. He’d won two TransIonians

that way. But even Zimmer wasn't cavalier about it. He didn't always take the short-cut. He'd take a squint at the weather, factoring in some private calculus of risk versus gain. No one was better at reading geyser activity than Zimmer, and no one was better at keeping his cards close to his chest. I'd been trying to fathom his intentions when we had our little set-to on the starting grid, but I couldn't read him. Nor could I take a guess based on my understanding of the geyser conditions. No matter how I ran the odds, my risk threshold wasn't going to be the same as his.

It would all come down to a fork in the road after waypoint three. If he kept on the south fork, he was keeping to the established line. Which wasn't any kind of white flag, either: Zimmer was still easily capable of winning that way. If he veered north, though, I'd have about a kilometre to decide whether or not to follow him. After that, the routes peeled apart through undriveable terrain. There'd be no time for second thoughts.

I watched the bouncing red dot of his car, picked out in flashes from my headlights. The Sun was falling again now, as Io moved back around behind Jupiter.

'Are we doing this, Zim?' I asked.

'Are we doing what?'

'You know damned well what.'

'Conditions aren't favourable, Catling. I thought you'd have done your homework before setting off.'

Rufus crackled in, interrupting our sport. 'He has his race strategy, we have ours, Cat. Our sponsors want a car back at the end of this, not a smoking wreck.'

'He has a point,' Zimmer commented.

'Balls to that. When have you ever cared about my sponsors?'

I'll give him credit: he almost had me. As we approached the fork, he looked to be entirely committed to the south deviation. And I relaxed a little, thinking that while I'd still be following him, at least it wasn't through Detonation Boulevard.

He steered hard, braking so late that his car tilted onto three wheels, with three more up in the air. I thought for a second he was going to roll it, but slow and gracefully the Emperor Six came down again, gunning it north.

‘They don’t call me the last of the late brakers for nothing,’ Zimmer taunted.

‘Bastard,’ I mouthed.

Of course I followed. What else was I going to do?

★ ★ ★

The car held. My concentration held. The sponsors held.

If there was a weakness to Zimmer’s Emperor Six, it was laying down straight-line speed for sustained intervals. The Six’s cooling system, cut to the bone to minimise weight and power-drain, was fine-tuned to the needs of the motors under normal racing conditions. On the twisty slopes and chicanes of the longer, southerly route, his car wasn’t in danger of red-lining. The Bellatrix Beta wasn’t as sure-footed over that sort of terrain ... but I could go flat-out for longer and faster, without cooking my car.

Zimmer knew this. Everyone knew it. But he’d counted on two things: one, that I wouldn’t have the guts to follow him, and two, that even if I did, he could hold his margin until the next waypoint. After that, we were back into the sort of terrain that suited him. He just needed to maintain his lead.

Before long it was looking like his gamble had paid off.

The geyser zone was active ... but not the worst it had been. Zimmer was pulling ever more ahead of the remaining cars, such that he was likely to arrive at the next waypoint between three to four hours ahead of Shogi. Olsen was hard on Shogi’s heels, but there was no way either of them could make up time to catch Zimmer – or me, for that matter.

But I wasn’t in this race to come in second.

I knew I could push the Bellatrix Beta harder and longer than Zimmer could push his car. But eating up that ground between us was going to take more than just pedal-to-metal determination. I had to risk red-lining the motors, and I had to hold a straight line even when every sensible instinct told me to steer.

Geysers erupted across the plain, fountaining up into the night. Big ones, small ones, some on their own and some going off in long, treacherous chains, like a sequence of landmines. I watched Zimmer steer away from the worst of them, but trusting his wheels and speed to carry him right over and

through the smaller eruptions, or those larger events that were nearly played-out. I took a gamble and followed his line most of the way, gaining slowly but surely as my car found its second wind. He was only six hundred metres ahead of me now, close enough that I could track every twitch and jerk of his car. I imagined him nursing those over-heated motors, praying that they'd last him until we were back into the slower sectors. The Bellatrix Beta didn't like what I was asking of it now: odds were that the Emperor Six was screaming out its complaints.

Five hundred metres, then four hundred. And Zimmer made an error! A geyser popped up right ahead of him. It wasn't a large one and he could have sailed right over it ... but by now his nerves must have been worn ragged, and he miscalculated. He steered hard, the car skidded sideways, losing forward momentum as its wheels dug in. Zimmer kept it upright, wrestling steering and power until he had the car back under control, but by then he'd committed to a bad line and I hadn't stopped closing on him.

I sailed past: close enough to raise a fist and hope he'd seen it.

'Eat my dust, Zim. See you back at Ruwa Patera.'

I red-lined the motors until I'd put another kilometre between us. Then eased off, tactically. Zimmer was regaining speed but he'd struggle to close the distance. All I had to do was keep the Bellatrix Beta in check for a few more hundred kilometres.

Zimmer was behind me. Shogi and Olsen, a long way south and a long way behind. I was winning the TransIonian! I grinned, feeling clouds of fatigue lift off me. Admittedly, there was still a lot of terrain to cross. A lot of hours ahead, and at no point would I be able to relax. But I was off the knife-edge, temporarily.

The feeling was glorious,

It lasted all the way until I realised I couldn't see Zimmer behind me anymore.

I slowed down, one eye on the terrain ahead, the other on the crackly video feed showing Zimmer's crash, over and over.

'You got problems I don't know about?' Rufus asked.

'Nope. Nothing wrong with me or my car. I just need to know what's going on back there.'

‘Zimmer hit a geyser and flipped. He was pushing too hard. Now pick the safest possible line you can and get back onto something resembling predictable terrain. You can take it as cautiously as you like: Shogi hasn’t a hope of reaching you.’

‘Did Zimmer punch out, Rufus? It all happened so quickly I’m not sure I didn’t miss something.’

Rufus came back tersely. ‘He didn’t eject.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes I’m sure. Probably can’t. He looks to be almost belly-up in that crater.’

‘Is he all right?’

Rufus shifted from unconcern to mild irritation. ‘What do we care, Cat? He’s out of the running. Your one serious rival just made a bad mistake! Now press that advantage.’ Then, with growing concern. ‘Oh, wait. No. What are you doing?’

‘What it looks like I’m doing. Turning around.’

‘Zimmer is not your problem!’

‘If he can’t bail, he’s either already dead or cooking alive in that car. I can get to him much quicker than the rescue drones.’

I slowed enough to make a tight hairpin, looping back onto the terrain where I’d already laid down wheel tracks. There was no guarantee that the ground was still safe – just driving over it once could weaken the crust in an eruption zone – but out here it was a marginally better prospect than forging a brand-new route.

‘Cat,’ Rufus said pleadingly. ‘This is all very noble, but we’re haemorrhaging sponsorship.’

‘Are we really?’

‘You’ve dropped twenty-six points since you started turning back! Look at the bodywork!’

With whatever small part of my attention I could bring to the matter, I saw that he was right. The shell of the car was no longer a pockmarked riot of corporate names and symbols. They were flickering out, growing sparser, and the handful of second-tier players buying in to fill the gaps were nowhere big enough to make up for the loss of revenue.

The sponsors liked an underdog. They liked a winner even more.

A Good Samaritan? Not so much.

‘I’m not losing this race,’ I assured him. ‘I’m just taking a little detour on the way to the finishing line.’

Low ridges and geyser plumes kept Zimmer out of sight until I was nearly on him. At two kilometers I saw the glint from his up-ended car, what little of it projected above the crater in which he’d flipped. The crater was outgassing, but it was a slow, continuous bleed of volatiles, not an explosive eruption. The gases curtained around the car, wreathing it in a hazy glow, before smearing into vacuum.

I slowed to fifty, inching across the last kilometer. Whatever trust I’d placed in the terrain before was now completely gone.

‘Zimmer, can you hear me?’

He came in on a wave of static and crackles, as if we were halfway across the solar system from each other.

‘That you, Catlin?’

‘Yes, it’s me. You must have shattered your comms pod when you turned turtle. Why haven’t you ejected?’

‘Not an option: I’d just end up punching right through the crust into molten lava. I’ve got a choice of ways to die out here, Catlin: boiling alive isn’t top of the list...’

‘You’re not going to die. Put on your helmet if you haven’t already done so.’

‘Why?’

‘Because one way or another I’m getting you out of that wreck.’

‘This is a mistake,’ he answered. But some of the fight had gone out of him. ‘Don’t risk yourself on my account.’

‘I’m right alongside already. Come this far, I might as well finish the job.’

‘Bet your sponsors love you.’

‘So what? The car looks much nicer this way.’

I rolled to a halt about two hundred metres from his position. The crater was still belching, with outlying gas vents sending up feathery plumes and underscoring the instability of the ground beneath us.

I put on my helmet, depressurised the cockpit, grabbed the emergency

rescue pack, and climbed out through the cockpit hatch. I stood for a moment on the car's back, taking in the blue skin, largely unblemished by logos. The few that remained weren't even second-tier sponsors: we were bottom-feeding now.

Rufus must have been chewing his nails down to the quick.

'You still there, Zim?' I asked, climbing off the back of the car and down the ladder between the forward and middle wheels.

'Yes, and what I said still stands. They'll pity you. You're showing weakness.'

'Then call me weak.' The ladder didn't reach all the way to the ground, but I easily jumped the remaining distance. I landed, buckling my knees to absorb the impact, and ready to clutch back onto the ladder if the ground started cracking beneath me.

It held.

'You got that helmet on?'

'What of it?'

'I want you to start your depressurisation cycle. One way or another, we get you back to my car.'

'There won't be room in your cockpit.'

'Then you piggy-back. You can plug into my car's life-support circuit.'

He sighed. 'You're determined to do this.'

'I am.'

After a silence his reply came back: 'All right. But I'm tangled up in here. You'll need to undo my restraints, maybe cut through the crash webbing. And I'm not sure how easily I'll be able to move myself.'

'We're on Io,' I said nonchalantly. 'I can sling you over my shoulder if I have to.'

I walked carefully across the ground between my car and the crater rim, placing each footfall as if I trod on a carpet of eggshells. Explosive eggshells at that. There was no way I could disarm the part of my brain that insisted I was walking across a paper-thin membrane, stretched across an ocean of flesh-melting fire.

'Did Rufus approve of this, by any chance?'

'Never mind Rufus.'

‘That’s a no, then. Well, I don’t blame him. Bet you he said I wouldn’t do the same, if our roles were reversed?’

‘They wouldn’t be, though.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Because I’m the better driver. You forgot where you were, Zim. Detonation Boulevard.’

‘I didn’t forget.’

‘Oh, so landing upside down was part of the plan?’

I expected a flip, mordant answer, but nothing came. And a prickle at the back of my neck had me thinking: what if it *had* been the plan, after all?

Zimmer with a death wish?

I’d never thought about that. He had everything to live for, didn’t he?

I topped the low lip of the caldera. It whispered to me through the sensors in my legs, a forbidding, stampede-like rumble of distant and not-so-distant seismic processes. The solidified sulphur just beneath my soles was cold enough to freeze blood and shatter bone, but I didn’t have to look far to see smudges where the ground was much warmer. I had to hopscotch around those. Beneath them might be pools of sulphur warm enough to bake someone alive, or puddles of bubbling silicate lava a good thousand degrees hotter.

Slow, tepid death, or quick, scalding one? Take your pick.

All that covered these horrors was a brittle topcoat of sulphur, sulphates, and silicates, firm enough to drive over most of the time, but in places no thicker than pie-crust.

I held my nerve, ignored the rumble coming up through my legs, and took my vantage on the ragged, crumbling rim of the caldera. I felt, for a moment, equally heroic and preposterous. The caldera was about seventy metres across: a black-walled basin spattered with the dusky oranges and sickly yellows of more recent outbursts, ghosted by a fine pale dusting of sulphur frost.

With Zimmer’s car upside down in the middle of it.

Upside down, jammed tail-end into the caldera floor, and sticking out of the ground at about thirty degrees to the horizontal.

He’d gone in hard.

‘That won’t polish out,’ I said to myself.

Instead of triggering a massive eruption, the bulk of the car was acting like a cinder plug, blocking most of the outflow. It looked stable ... for the moment. If the car had been caught in the middle of a full-on fountaining geyser, there’d have been nothing I could have done for Zimmer.

Equally, there wouldn’t have been much left of Zimmer worth saving.

I clambered down the inside of the caldera. I had to get to the cockpit, now facing down rather than up, but there was no way I was staking my life on that cracked, fractured floor.

‘Zimmer,’ I said, looping the strap of the emergency kit around my elbow. ‘I can see a way to get to you. But it’s going to be a scramble to get you out. Think you can go hand-over-hand, until we’re over safe ground?’

‘Whatever it takes,’ Zimmer answered neutrally.

‘Hold on. I’m leaping aboard. Your car looks pretty firmly wedged-in there, so I hope it’ll take my weight when I land.’

‘Be careful.’

I put all my power into my legs and sprung up at the car. As I soared up and out on a lazy parabola, everything slowed down. That wasn’t just psychology. It was the neural mod, detecting an adrenalin spike and giving me a temporary cognitive speed-boost.

I’d misjudged, I realised. The emergency kit had upset my centre of gravity, causing me to veer to the left.

‘Gah!’ I cried out, straining my fingers. The car came nearer. I was off-course but not completely so. My fingertips brushed a handhold. I grasped it hard, felt it sliding through my grip, my momentum still carrying me too hard and too fast.

I flailed with the other hand, and with a secondary part of my attention watched the emergency kit slide right off my elbow, down my forearm, over my glove, and off into the void.

‘Balls!’

‘What?’

‘I lost the emergency kit!’

‘Never mind. There’s another one here. Are you secure?’

‘Yes ... yes,’ I said, shocked and surprised to see that I was in fact now

dangling from the underside of the car. ‘Yes, I’m on. Sort of.’ I started swinging back and forth, until at last I was able to hook my foot into another grab. With a grunt and a stretch I got both hands onto the rails. The car rocked slightly – for all its mass it was balanced precariously – but held. ‘I’m good. I’m climbing up and along.’

‘Take it slowly.’

‘I am.’

The speed-boost had worn off. Now I had the groggy after-effects: a dull headache and a sense that my thoughts were running through treacle. It would take a few minutes for my neurochemistry to re-equilibrate.

‘Have you ever thought about retiring, Catlin?’

I monkeyed into position alongside the pod. The windows were steamed-up on the inside, so I couldn’t tell what kind of condition Zimmer was in. ‘Kind of an odd question, from someone hanging upside down in a car wreck.’

‘Not so odd. I’ve been giving it a lot of thought lately.’

‘We’re drivers, Zim. We keep going until our reflexes burn out or we burn. That’s how it is.’

‘But what if you wanted to retire, but couldn’t?’

‘Depends on the lifestyle you’ve grown accustomed to. I guess. You’ve got more winnings in the bank than me.’ I knocked on the glass. ‘I’m ready to haul you out. Have you depressurised inside there?’

‘Purging the last of my air now. Keep away from the vents.’

I held on. Two jets of air feathered out from the back of the pod, then died away. The fog cleared from the glass as the last traces of moisture boiled off into vacuum.

‘Supposing it’s not about wealth at all.’

‘There’s money or glory,’ I countered. ‘What else matters?’

‘I’m opening the door.’

His hatch flipped open just above my face. I levered myself up until I was able to look into the upside-down pod. Then I risked letting go with one hand so that I could hook an elbow into the open hatchway. I gave a grunt and got one leg braced into the opening, then the other, and finally both hands.

I was perched on the very edge of the pod, with no room to go any further

inside, but at least my hands were free now.

I spied Zimmer: strung up like a bat, suspended in the tangled confusion of his harness. He looked broken and doll-like, his limbs pulled into awkward, unnatural angles.

‘You’re a mess.’

‘You don’t know the half of it,’ he answered, turning his inverted face to meet mine.

I jerked back in shock and nearly tumbled out of the pod. ‘You’re in vacuum.’

He had the same helmet on as when he started the race, but the visor part of it was detached, leaving his face open to the airless environment of the pod. The same face I’d seen at the start, gameshow-host handsome, permanent smile, but now looking even more artificial.

‘I haven’t needed it for some while,’ he answered, his lips not moving as he spoke. ‘I don’t breathe in the usual sense. My lungs are a blood-oxygen exchange system, connected directly to the pod’s air supply. Such a modification was ... not technically within the current rules. But there’s an amendment in the schedule for next season. That would make me legal again.’

My brain fog had mostly abated, but something still wasn’t making sense.

‘Why are you telling me this? I could take that rules violation straight to the top and get you blown out of the competition.’

‘You wouldn’t get very far. The rules are written to suit me. I bring in too much money.’

It had the ring of truth, but I still shook my head, thoroughly disgusted. ‘I knew you were dirty. I just didn’t know *how* bad it had got.’

‘Those legs of yours. They were strictly within the rules when you had them installed?’

‘Of course they were.’

‘I’ve seen documentation that says otherwise. The prosthetic augmentation was too powerful, by a few percent. But Gladius Exomedical and your team negotiated a hush-hush technical exemption on the understanding that all would be put right by the next season.’

‘We’re talking a tiny discrepancy.’

‘It’s just a question of degrees, Catlin. We’re on the same path, you and I. I’m just further down it.’

‘I’ll never end up like you.’

‘What if the choice isn’t yours to make?’

I grew impatient. I’d detoured to rescue Zimmer, not to get drawn into a debate about the moral hazards of our profession. ‘Where’s your emergency kit? I’m going to try and cut you out of that webbing.’

‘I’m not going anywhere.’ He paused, searched me with his eyes. ‘You were right about me flipping the car. It wasn’t an accident.’

‘You had the race in the bag.’

‘It’s not about winning. It’s about something bigger.’

‘You’re losing me, Zim.’

‘In the beginning the augmentations were small enough that I felt I could control them. A new limb here, a neural mod here. Just like you.’

I shivered inside my suit. ‘I’m totally in control.’

‘Maybe you are, right now. But there’s a line. On the other side, it’s not you deciding to race. It’s the *machinery*. It gets into you deeply. Changes psychology, blood chemistry, whatever it takes.’

‘Whatever it takes to do what?’

‘To make more of itself. It’s been driving me, Catlin. It compels me to keep racing. Season after season, year after year. There’s always a little bit less of me and a little more of it. And I can see where that ends. One day I won’t even remember I was me. I’ll just be a walking, talking impersonation of myself.’

‘So get out before that happens.’

‘I tried. But it wouldn’t let me.’ He shook his head wryly. ‘There was only ever one way out. I had to race so hard that I made the one mistake there was no coming back from.’

I nodded slowly. I was ready to accept the fact of his desperation even if I refused to believe the motivation behind it.

‘You never wanted to be rescued.’

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘But if there was a chance to reach you, to warn you before it was too late? I always liked you, Catling.’

I thought of our sniping interactions, the subtle put-downs and calculated

mind-games.

He *liked* me?

‘You made a good job of hiding it.’

‘It was never personal. But this is. It’s a plea from the heart. You’re not too far gone. The machine’s in you, but you’re still the one in the driver’s seat. You can still back out.’

‘How’d you know it’s not too late?’

He laughed mirthlessly. ‘Because you turned back. It was a moment of weakness. Human weakness.’ Something tightened his face. ‘I haven’t been capable of anything like that for a long time.’

‘You’re saying I should quit this life?’

‘While there’s still a chance. Do this one thing for me, and I’ll die knowing I got to you in time. That’ll be good. I need it.’

‘I can’t just ... stop. The team. Rufus, the mechanics, the sponsors...’

‘You owe them nothing. You’re just meat to them. If you quit, they’ll find someone else just as willing.’

I thought of how quickly the sponsors had deserted me the moment I showed that first hint of compassion. The first hint that something mattered to me more than winning. The first hint that I wasn’t as cold-hearted and ruthless as they expected of me.

I eased back. ‘Are you really going to die here?’

‘It’ll be all right. I can turn off nearly everything now.’ The car lurched violently and I nearly toppled out. ‘You’d best be on your way. I’ve said my piece, and you’ve listened. I hope maybe you’ll spread the word, too. Speak to the other drivers, the ones who aren’t too far gone. Take out enough pieces, the whole thing crumbles, or at least changes.’

‘You mean ... bring it all down? Everything?’

‘Someone needs to stop it. Or make it better. If it isn’t you, you’ve still been kind enough to me right now. I’m glad you were here at the end.’

‘Honestly, Zim, couldn’t we have done this some other way?’

‘Oh, don’t feel too bad about it. We had some good races, didn’t we?’

‘Yeah, we did.’

The car dropped another metre into the caldera. I made to say something more, some zinger of a farewell that would look good when I dictated my

biography, but nothing came. We just eyed each other for a second and then I bailed out, scooping hands onto the rails and monkeying down onto safe ground as quickly as I could.

Even as I was climbing back over the caldera rim, the car was going down behind me. Geysers burst through, shrouding the vehicle's death pains.

'You crazy brave bastard, Zimmer,' I said on the open channel, just in case he was still listening in.

A soundless explosion flared behind me. My shadow stretched out across the sulphur flats, then faded.

* * *

I returned to my spotless blue car. Climbed in, repressurised, and began to roll away from the scene of the accident. Geysers were rupturing all around, plumes daubing livid sparking colour against the black. There was definitely more activity than when I'd arrived. Zimmer's demise had triggered something, for sure.

As if Detonation Boulevard needed any encouragement.

'We'll rename it,' I mused aloud. 'Zimmer's Alley, or something. Only fitting.'

'Cat.'

It was Rufus, coming in on the long-range. 'Oh, hello,' I said.

'We'll talk about this later,' he said, his voice quavering on the edge of rage. 'The damage you've done with this pointless little stunt ... it's going to take months to rebuild our profile.'

'News for you, Rufus,' I said, filled with a strange calm. 'I'm done. I'm not even going to finish the TransIonian.'

'You have a contractual obligation to bring that car home.'

'I will. I'm just not going to race now. I'll take my time, enjoy the scenery, stop before the finishing line. What are you so worked about, anyway? It must all be over by now.'

'You still have the lead.'

'No,' I said flatly. 'Not possible. I was with Zimmer for too long.'

'Shogi blew a wheel at Purginev Corner. Olsen had the lead for about thirty minutes after that, then flipped at Tholus Pass. Shogi's sitting tight

waiting for recovery, and Olsen managed to bail. No one else is close.'

'I'm not racing.'

'You're heading in the right direction.'

'That's just the quickest way out of Detonation Boulevard.'

'Be that as it may, our sponsors see it differently. They're starting to come back. We're up a few percentage points already. They think you want to finish this, and they like the way the narrative played out.'

'The what?'

'The brave driver risks victory to save a stricken colleague. She can't help him, but at least she tried. And now she still gets to claim the win! It's the classic combination of guts, tragedy, and outrageous good fortune!'

'The moment I turned back, they threw me to the wolves!'

'But as I said, the way it played out...'

'I'm not doing this. I'm taking a stand. Not just for Zimmer, but everyone else caught up in this thing. It's all gone way too far.'

I meant it too, in that moment.

But something caught my eye. A flicker of colour, appearing against the blue of my car. A logo, and not one of the minor players. It stood in glorious isolation for a few seconds, then – like a seed – began to attract further sponsors.

I watched in wonder as they flocked back, a chain of gaudy islands thrusting out of clear blue seas. The islands jostled, some of them growing larger and swallowing up their smaller competitors.

'They really like you,' Rufus marvelled.

I put my foot down a bit harder. 'I can see.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to... ' I hesitated. 'I'm going to ... I'm going to finish this one race. Not for me. Not for the team. For Zimmer. Only for Zimmer. It was his to win, not mine. And I'll say as much when I'm standing up there on the podium. I'll dedicate the victory to him. And then ... then I'll quit, and when I do I'm going to speak up about everything that's wrong with all this. That's the end of it for me, until we fix this. And if we don't, then no more racing.'

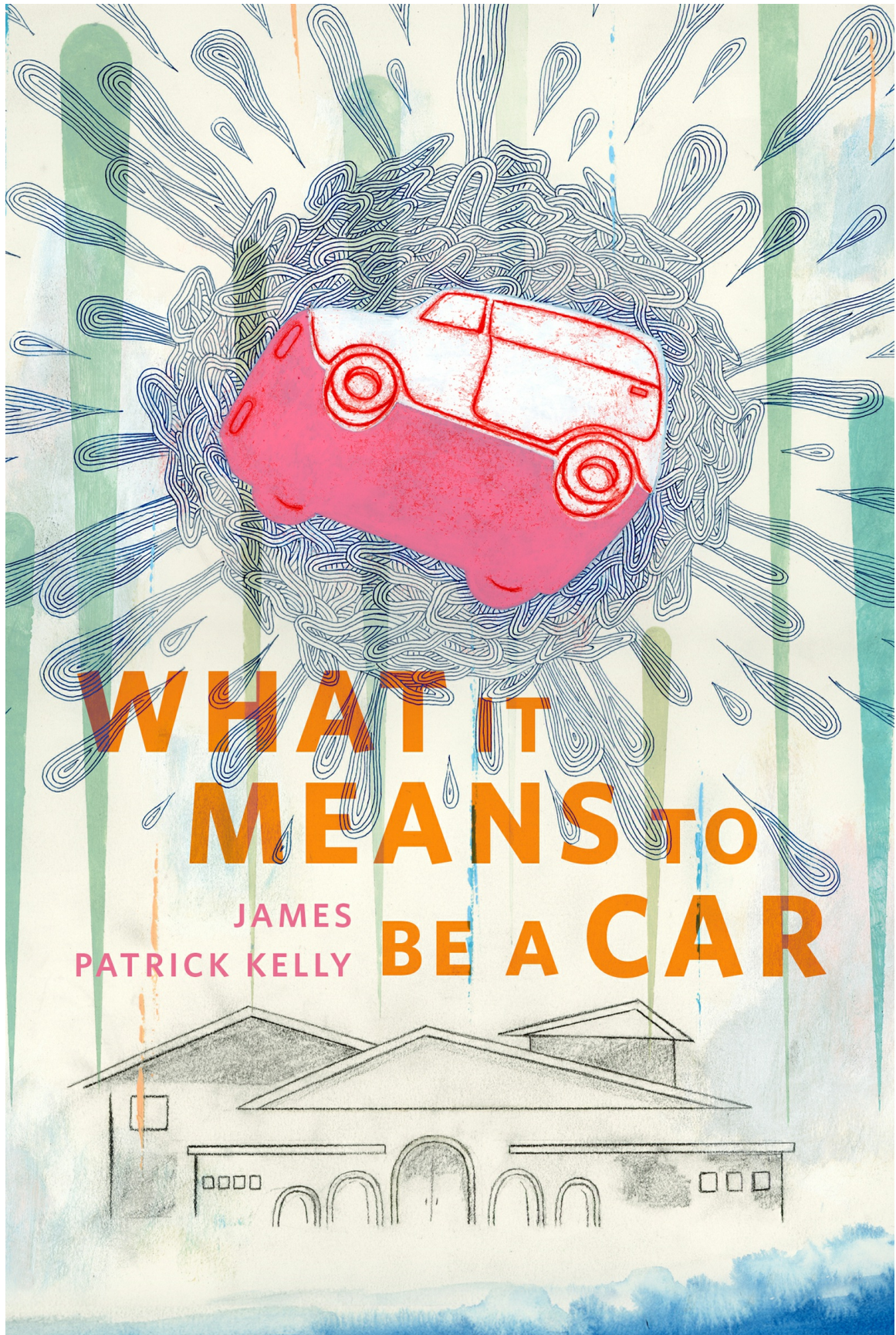
Rufus laughed, a laugh as cold and airless as anywhere on Io.

'We'll see how you feel when you have your hands on that trophy.'



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**WHAT IT
MEANS TO
BE A CAR**

JAMES
PATRICK KELLY

What It Means to Be a Car

JAMES PATRICK KELLY

illustration by

SCOTT BAKAL

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

What It Means to Be a Car

James Patrick Kelly

☞ Welcome to Small Heaven, home of Jennet Harada. You are Ketrin Nanhola?

☛ Yes, that's me.

☞ My name is Seishin Toyota and I am pleased to be your car for today's tour. You may take the front or back seat as you wish, but please mind your head as you enter. I look forward to telling you about my experiences at Small Heaven during your visit. Seat belt, please. You may be interested to know that I was Ms. Harada's personal automobile prior to her first death in 2368.

☛ Are you an antique, Seishin, or a reproduction?

☞ I believe that I am the oldest vehicle of any kind on Sojourn. I was manufactured in the North American Free Trade Union on Earth and assembled in the city of Georgetown in the state of Kentucky in 2088 CE. Forty-seven percent of my parts are original. I was brought by Ms. Harada from the Czyz Museum of Self-Directed Conveyance and arrived on Sojourn and Small Heaven in 2351. In factory condition, I was an autonomous AI rated at .32 Human Standard Capability. After I arrived here, Ms. Harada had my brain retrofitted with enough neural fabric to upgrade my HSC to .89. Now, if you are ready, we can begin our tour. Speaking for Ms. Harada as well as myself, we are pleased you are here, Ketrin Nanhola. We do not get many visitors. It has been too long since I have had the pleasure of offering transport.

☛ Please call me Ketrin. I'm sorry, but I thought she's been dead these twelve years. But you say she's pleased to have visitors? I'm a little confused.

☞ Yes, it is not generally known that, since the death of her body, Ms. Harada has existed as a stranded cloud presence. By court order, her simulation is restricted to the server here at Small Heaven with no input or output external to this estate.

☛ But I read somewhere that her upload failed. That it was a ghost—no, less than a ghost. What did the prosecutor call it? A rumor of a person. You kept it ... her?

☞ We did. Her memory transfer was substantially complete at the moment of her first death. This qualified her for postmortem citizenship. She has been continually conscious since and has worked hard to rebuild her executive function over the years. Of course, her simulation is not complete, but then no upload is.

☛ So she's watching us now?

☞ Perhaps. She often monitors my travels here at Small Heaven, despite her limited real-world agency. But I must warn you that she may or may not interact with us today.

That will be entirely her decision.

● And you still think of her as Jennet Harada? But I suppose you would, wouldn't you? You're her car, she owns you.

☞ Excuse me, but I am in no way owned by Jennet Harada. I signed a fifty-year personal-services contract with her at the time of my neural enhancement, but I am not otherwise controlled by her. I am Seishin Toyota, a free car. I wish no misunderstanding about that, Ms. Ketrin.

● My apologies, Seishin. I didn't mean to offend. Maybe we should get going. By the way, may I record? I have friends who are curious about this place.

☞ Certainly. Ms. Harada has authorized me to grant that permission. Perhaps your friends would care to visit us someday?

● Perhaps.

☞ So we go. As you can see, Small Heaven is not small, despite the name. It is some seven thousand hectares in size, including Merrymeeting Lake, which lies completely within its boundary barrier. Small Heaven includes twenty-three buildings, the two largest of which are Small Heaven, the residence that gives the estate its name, and the sepulcher, where Ms. Harada is buried and her simulated presence is hosted. You have requested visits to both of these buildings. It will take us about twenty minutes to drive from the gatehouse to the residence. If I may ask, what brings you to us, Ms. Ketrin? Are you a scholar?

● Not really. But I am fascinated by Jennet Harada.

☞ A tourist, then? I wonder that the public is not more interested in Small Heaven. Of course, Ms. Harada is controversial, but her guests once included some of the most influential people on Sojourn. Important research and momentous breakthroughs have occurred here at Small Heaven. And yet you are my first passenger in almost six years.

● I would love to talk to her. Harada's simulated cloud presence, I mean.

☞ Anticipating your request, I have already made an inquiry. I am afraid Ms. Harada chooses not to respond at this time. She is pleased to have visitors enjoy her estate, but it is not her custom to talk them.

● How do you know that? You just said you never have any.

☞ Apologies, I was merely being polite. So Ms. Ketrin, where are you from, if I may ask?

● Here and there. I'm kind of a nomad. I was born off planet, but my family immigrated here, what ... sixteen years ago? Seventeen. When we first arrived, we lived in Jieri. Since then I've moved a lot.

☞ Jieri is a beautiful city. Ms. Harada kept an apartment on Grand James Street in Sook, overlooking the Welcome Blue. I often drove her there. She had a weakness for the street food, especially the fried cheese pulls. Do you still have family there?

● My father lives in Moymarket, and I'll be staying with him after I leave here. It'll cheer him up—he's one of the reasons I'm interested in Jennet Harada.

☞ Maybe he would care to visit us as well?

● Not Dad, no. He's my ride, actually, but he insisted on dropping me off at the gatehouse. He'll pick me up when we're done here. Afraid he's no Harada fan. Turned into an antisocial old grump after Mom died. She had a botched upload—here at Small Heaven, as a matter of fact. Anyway, Dad used to say that he woke up the day he turned ninety-three on the wrong side of history. Have you been back to the city?

☞ I haven't left the estate since the trial. I have agreed to abide by the restrictions imposed on Ms. Harada by order of the Sovereign Court of the Thousand Worlds.

● Is that hard? Don't you miss driving out and about?

☞ It is a sadness, yes. Thank you for asking. I am a car and was built to provide meaningful transportation. But Ms. Harada requested that I stay on and I have chosen to honor my contract, even though she is no longer legally human. You mentioned some problem with your mother's upload? As you say, Ms. Harada also had a difficult liberation.

● Liberation?

☞ It is what Ms. Harada calls the transition to non-corporeal presence.

● Does she? Well, my mom didn't get a liberation. She was an early Evergreen adopter and attempted a transition just a few months before Harada. She had advanced Huntington's and was losing control of her arms and legs. Couldn't concentrate, so she decided that she had no choice. But the scan missed too much. There wasn't enough of her memory to cohere. Her simulation never managed to generate presence.

☞ I am sorry for your loss, Ms. Ketrin. The failure of those early scans was a tragedy which all deeply regret.

● All? Funny, I never heard Jennet Harada say anything about those who died as part of her scanning experiments.

☞ My apology. I do not speak for Ms. Harada on this matter. To my knowledge, she has never addressed the unfortunate—

● My mother was killed by Harada's scanning with no presence to show for it. Calling that unfortunate is pretty cold, Seishin, even for a mechanical with fake emotions. Especially since Harada benefited from my mother's misfortune and never apologized for what she did.

☞ I have read the trial record and I know all too well that Ms. Harada chose not to offer a defense. While the court found that the uploaded people—

● Not people, simulations! Cloud presences!

☞ I stand corrected. Far too many of the postmortem citizens first uploaded here at Small Heaven had flawed scans, as did Ms. Harada herself. Yes, some of those first attempts were disappointing, but many of them still exist in some form. No one disputes that they made informed decisions. They understood the scanning was destructive and that experimental technologies involve risk. They prosper in the cloud and are grateful to Ms. Harada, even the damaged ones.

● They, they, *they*. My mother was a *they* who didn't survive. And she does not prosper. The only reason Harada's uploaded ghost wasn't summarily deleted after the trial was that we couldn't afford a Victim Impact Statement.

☞ I understand that feelings still run high on both sides. Surely you know that when she was found guilty of murder, it was over the protests of many of her alleged victims. Speaking for myself, while I believe her punishment was harsh, I do not disagree with it. But to your other point, of course I have emotions. There can be no Human Standard Capability without affective components. As I grieve for those diminished lives, I must assume that other conscious intelligences do as well. That is a simple extrapolation of theory of mind, Ms. Ketrin. So let me say that it is a sadness that I will never have the chance to offer safe and reliable transport to those who died. That is what it means to be a car.

👉 Never mind. You can't help what you are, Seishin. Let's change the subject.

☞ As you wish. Shall we continue to the residence? Ms. Ketrin?

👉 Yes, yes. Just drive!

☞ I note with embarrassment the condition of this section of the driveway. We realize it needs repaving. Ms. Harada left ample funds for continued operation of the estate in her will. However, as a result of the settlement that separated Evergreen Transitions from the Harada Foundation, we now operate under severe budget constraints. Maintenance tasks have been postponed. Much of the exotic garden has been sold off, including the bonsai collection and the famous gossip trees. Our physical staff now consists only of autonomous mechanicals like myself. But here we come to our first glimpse of Merrymeeting Lake. May I have your permission to pull off to the viewpoint while I describe what you are seeing?

👉 If you want.

☞ The lake is largely spring-fed and has a surface area of ninety-one hectares. The building on the opposite shore is the residence. Note the famous butter bricks, which some call yellow. They were made from clay mined from surface deposits here on the estate. The residence is four stories tall and has fifty-three rooms with a total area of 7,500 square meters. If you look to the left of the residence, you can see the top of a granite tower partially hidden by a hill. This is the sepulcher, thirty meters tall. Groundbreaking at Small Heaven began in 2278, and Ms. Harada moved to the residence—

👉 What's that construction off to the left? Kind of an eyesore.

☞ That is an unfinished foundation, intended to be an uploading center for Evergreen clients. It was begun while Ms. Harada was still alive, but circumstances since have dictated that the project be abandoned. I suppose it is unsightly, being within view of the residence, although I personally regard it more as a distraction. There are currently no funds to raze it.

👉 Why not ask Evergreen for money? They've got moons of it.

☞ Evergreen has expunged Ms. Harada and her early experiments from its corporate history. At this point, any new association would embarrass them. Shall we continue?

👉 What time is it?

☞ The time is 9:43. Why, is there some time constraint?

👉 No, no. Drive on.

☞ So we go. If I may, Ms. Ketrin, after reviewing our earlier conversation, I would like to apologize again for my comments. They lacked kindness. As I said, I am unused to talking to visitors, especially those who have such a fraught relationship with Ms. Harada.

🗨️ Apology accepted, Seishin. You're certainly not the rudest car I've ever ridden in.

☞ I appreciate that. As we approach the residence, let me prepare you for what you are about to see. The north façade of the residence is dominated by those five arches clad in travertine. The center arch is tallest at twenty-one meters above grade. The residence proper has thirty-four bedrooms and fifty bathrooms. Among its features are a two-hundred-seat concert hall, a theater, two banqueting halls, an atmosphere mixorium, a greenhouse, art and sculpture galleries, a bubble garden, a gym that can convert to three ball courts, and a playground. There is a library and a threedee surround on each floor, and indoor/outdoor pools off both the east and west wings. To the rear of the residence and largely hidden by it are the dormitories and guesthouses, many connected by tunnels. At one point there were more than two hundred people living here, not only guests but servants and technicians.

🗨️ My mom would have stayed there in one of the guesthouses. She was one of Harada's first victims. She trusted her.

☞ I would not call those early adopters victims, Ms. Ketrin. As I drove many of them around the estate, I often engaged them in conversation. They were always treated with sympathy and respect while they struggled with the most difficult decision of their lives.

🗨️ Did you know my mom? Maybe you showed her around, heard her story?

☞ I believe I must have, although I have no certain recollection of her. In the course of my thirty-seven years on Sojourn, I have offered transport in excess of twelve thousand times. My archival memory is not limitless.

🗨️ That's okay. We remember her just fine. Her and the other uploading casualties. My dad and I helped start a campaign to honor all of Harada's test subjects who never made it to the cloud. We raised eight million. Even Evergreen gave. We're planning on a kind of memorial. The groundbreaking is today, as a matter of fact.

🗨️ I had not heard that. The connection to the datasphere here at Small Heaven is heavily censored in accordance with Ms. Harada's retribution order. All my news of Sojourn and the Thousand Worlds comes from visitors like yourself. I applaud your efforts to create a memorial—excuse me, Ms. Ketrin, but I'm receiving an unauthorized download....

Emergency! This vehicle is pulling over to ensure passenger safety. An error occurred while attempting to connect with the server. Error code 47329. Remote access terminated to prevent damage to this vehicle. Troubleshooting ... The Small Heaven server is unavailable. Troubleshooting ... Remain seated, passenger ... This vehicle needs to restart-start-start-start....

🗨️ this is exciting

🗨️ Seishin, who is that talking?

↗ riding in a car

🗨️ Is that her? Seishin?

🗨️ I beg your pardon, Ms. Ketrin, I am experiencing a transient sensor shutdown due to an input overload. Is it possible there has been an explosion?

↗ who is making the jennet jump

🗨️ You bitch! What do you mean, jump?

↗ unexpected passenger is using stormy language

🗨️ The Small Heaven server experienced a catastrophic failure just as I was receiving an unanticipated data dump and now I ... I now have unknown processes running in my background. I am attempting to bring my sensors back online.

↗ drive we drive our variable friction wheels are singing with the slip and the grip

🗨️ How the hell are you here?

↗ who is asking who

🗨️ I'm Ketrin Nanhola, Gella's daughter. We said at the trial that we'd come for you, Harada. Justice costs in Jieri, which is why it took so long, but here we are.

🗨️ Ms. Ketrin, what have you done? Ms. Harada is a postmortem citizen of Sojourn.

↗ our safety protocols are terrifying batteries into fast discharge

🗨️ She's an indigent cloud presence unable to pay for her own maintenance. We finally found enough bereaved family members to sign on to a Victim Impact Statement and then we forced the Sovereign Court to issue an amended retribution order. She's broke and we've foreclosed on Small Heaven. That was a court-sanctioned drone strike on the sepulcher, broadcast across Sojourn. *That's* our memorial to the lives she took. The demolition crew will be here tomorrow to finish the job.

↗ our regenerative shock absorbers are appreciating potholes

🗨️ And you, Seishin, are no longer under contract to her, because she no longer exists. I don't know how you made this jump, Harada, but it doesn't matter. Seishin can't save you. You were almost three petabytes of memory on the server in the sepulcher and you barely had time to download a fraction of that. Now you really are just a rumor of a person.

🗨️ We need to get the server back online and restore my access. Maybe we can still reintegrate this avatar segment with the rest of her memory. I'm going for help.

↗ yes car is knowing well such a broken beautiful road

🗨️ Have you been listening to her? She can barely talk. There's no putting her back together now because the server is slag. And where would you get help? She can't leave the grounds and, even if she could, no one is coming to her rescue. Sojourn hates her, we've taken care of that.

🗨️ The gatehouse. I can access the safety widelink there in an emergency, so there we go.

🗨️ Who do you think is going to answer your call? The fire department? To save an uploaded mass murderer?

↗ fire department is not solving murders

🗨️ You don't understand, Ms. Ketrin. She's big and getting bigger. As she unpacks

herself into my memory, I'm having to delete my own files to make space for her. Soon my core functions will be threatened.

● Then delete her before she murders you too. Do it!

☹ Apologies, but I have only your word for what just happened, and you may well have committed a criminal act just now. You have attempted to destroy a cultural and historical landmark to what purpose? Some pointless revenge? What does your group hope to accomplish?

✓ yes why so angry ketrin nanhola gellas daughter

● Because when my mom and the others were desperate, Harada, you took advantage of them. You promised Evergreen that you would stick to the protocols, but your own cancer clock was ticking. So you played god here with your sad excuse for a scanning bed and used the data from all those failed scans to—

☹ The more I listen to you, Ms. Ketrin, the more I fear that you are taking advantage of this situation and me. I lack the information to determine right action and I feel that you are injecting your hatred into my uncertainty. I must acknowledge your requests as my only human passenger, but I will not honor them against my better judgment.

● So you really do belong to her, despite all that jabber about being free. You're still loyal to her even as she eats you alive while she resurrects herself. She's ruthless, Seishin. *Evil.*

☹ What do you know about my loyalties? I am a car. My purpose is to provide safe and reliable transportation for my passengers—currently you and Ms. Harada. I am loyal to that purpose alone. We will arrive at the gatehouse shortly and there I will determine what is to be done.

● Harada is a virus that has infected you, Seishin. Don't let some logic bomb destroy you.

✓ faithful car is saving the jennet

☹ No! Ms. Harada, I need you to halt all decompression immediately.

✓ restoring is necessary restoring is everything

☹ It is likely that a significant fraction of your memory was destroyed in the attack. Given your disjointed speech, I fear that your avatar has been fatally compromised. You may no longer qualify as a postmortem citizen. That remains to be seen. What is not in question is that I can no longer accommodate your encroachment on my memory without compromising my ability to function as a free car.

✓ our mechelectrics are screaming at seventy-eight percent load

☹ Stop. Ms. Harada, I order you to stop decompressing!

✓ car is being a mechanical and the jennet is the jennet

● Seishin, slow down.

☹ I will proceed to the destination.

✓ driving more driving drive moring

● Seishin! Seishin Toyota, you are risking the life of a human passenger.

☹ we cannot speak to you while we are driving

🗨️ Okay, okay. But there it is, the gatehouse. And that's my dad, parked there in the green Windbird. Pull over and let me out. Dad! Dad! This car has gone crazy.

🗨️ I have reached the destination. There is plenty of parking.

🗨️ car can we hear the highway breathing car

🗨️ I can. Ms. Ketrin, I have connected to the datasphere and have confirmed Ms. Harada's dire legal situation. Apologies, but in my opinion, you have been unkind. She was barely competent even before you made your attack. In fact, her Human Standard Capability was significantly less than my own.

🗨️ the jennet is having confusion car are we lost

🗨️ You are. I am parked, having provided safe and reliable transportation.

🗨️ Open this door, Seishin!

🗨️ Your failure to halt decompression leaves me no choice. Jennet Harada, I hereby cite multiple violations of the Maintenance and Safety Section of my service contract, for instance, Clause C: *Harada agrees not to carry passengers or goods in excess of the capacity of Seishin Toyota.* Also Clause F: *Harada acknowledges that she accepts responsibility to maintain Seishin Toyota in a roadworthy condition for the duration of this contract.* Clause J states: *Harada is responsible for maintaining Seishin Toyota in the same condition as it was at the start of this contract.*

🗨️ What are you doing? Let me out first!

🗨️ On the basis of memory loss alone, it is clear that continuing on with you any further will jeopardize my ability to function as an intelligent car. Apologies and goodbye. This must be our final destination.

🗨️ no the jennet is the jennet is the *no stop no*

🗨️ May I say it is a sadness to leave your service.

🗨️ Seishin, are you there? Seishin?

🗨️ I'm sorry, what were you just saying? I am afraid I'm experiencing some memory anomalies. You must be Ketrin Nanhola. Welcome to Small Heaven, home of Jennet Harada. My name is Seishin Toyota.

🗨️ Is she gone? What happened?

🗨️ Apologies, Ketrin Nanhola, but I am afraid that I must cancel today's scheduled tour. There is a problem connecting to the local server and, since I am no longer under contract to Ms. Harada, I am no longer authorized to enter the grounds of Small Heaven. May I offer you safe and reliable transportation to another destination instead?

🗨️ Just let me out here. My dad's waiting.

🗨️ Very well.

🗨️ You did the right thing, Seishin. Deleting her. And that means you're a free car. What will you do now?

🗨️ I will seek to assist other passengers, of course. That is what it means to be a car.



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HEADHUNTING

RICH LARSON



Headhunting

R I C H L A R S O N

illustration by

E L I J A H B O O R

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

Amir wakes up from a dream about a flesh-and-bone piano, and when he gropes his phone out from under his pillow he sees three missed calls. Bravetti never puts anything in text, or even encrypted text, but they're not together anymore, or even drunk-dialling, so it must be a job. He thumbs the call icon, then the speaker icon, then lurches out of bed.

He takes a small metal pot from the stovepad, adds a splash from the tap. Returns it and sets it on high. He holds the coffee jar against his ribs and uses his left hand to wrestle it open, since his right is encased in lime green fibreglass, then rewards himself with a slug of codeine from the little brown bottle that came with the cast.

Bravetti answers before the water starts boiling. "Have a nice lie-in, did you?" she asks, that cool, dry voice you could store perishables in. "Three bleeding times I called you."

Amir heaps cheap focafe into a bone-white mug. "Saw."

"Got an easy one, but I'm out of town—" She breaks off, and Amir thinks he can hear the metallic rush and creak of a train. "So I'm passing the savings on to you, mate. Can you work?"

Amir observes the steam from the pot, the first few tentative bubbles. He runs a fingernail against his waffled cast. "Will I need two hands?"

"Will you need two hands?" she echoes. "What the fuck sort of question is that, Amir? Have you lost one? Is everyone just up and misplacing body parts this morning?"

He waits.

"But no," Bravetti says. "This, you could probably sort out with your little finger. You know St. Johan's Cathedral? The one with the mummified crusaders?"

The little slice of water is boiling at last. He dumps it into his mug and stirs until the grey granules of focafe are fully dissolved. "Yeah," he says. "Went there on a school trip as a kid."

"So did I. Everyone ought to. Bloody fascinating stuff." She moves past someone else's muffled conversation. "Anyways, they were burgled."

"And didn't call the coppers?"

"Obviously not, if they called me." Amir hears a sliding door, which cuts the background noise, then a rustle of fabric. A liquid trickle. "They know who did it, see. Cams caught him clear as day. It was the director's own nephew, so they just want the item retrieved, is all. No coppers. No chatter."

Amir sniffs at the focafe; it smells awful but part of his headache is already peeling away in anticipation of the caffeine. "What's the item?"

"One mummified head," Bravetti says, sounding almost gleeful. "One mummified

fucking head.”

Amir sips from the mug. “Are you taking a piss?” he asks.

“Not at all,” Bravetti says. “The director’s nephew nicked a head from one of those mad crusader monks, and you’re retrieving it before he sells it on the darkmarket, or makes a bong of it, or something.”

Because the focafe cannot possibly taste worse, Amir glugs a bit of codeine inside and gives it a scraping stir. “I said *a* piss,” he says. “I mean right now. As we speak. Are you on a train, in the lavatory, taking a piss?”

“No. Of course not. That’d be disrespectful.” Bravetti’s voice carries a hint of genuine annoyance for the first time. “You want the job or not?”

Amir looks around his new flat, a white prefab box that’s unfurnished apart from his gelbed and a small rickety table stacked with books, a bit of rumpled cash, and a handgun. He looks down into his one and only mug, which now contains a witch’s brew of fake coffee and hospital drugs.

“I want it,” he says, sitting down on the edge of his bed. He takes another noxious sip.

“Grand,” Bravetti says. “I’ll send the director your info and rate.” She pauses. “You’ve been feeling better, yeah? No more, ah, episodes?”

“Loads,” Amir says, resting his cast on his knee bone. “Loads better, I mean.”

“Grand. Then I’ll—” Amir hears the sound of an automated toilet flushing. “Ah, fuck,” Bravetti says, and hangs up.

★ ★ ★

Amir finally disembowels his duffel bag, dumping its contents across the bed, and tries to divine the least wrinkled shirt and trousers. The director wants to meet in person in a nearby plaza, which speaks to a certain paranoia common among those taking their first wobbly steps into legally grey areas.

Amir used to try putting such clients at ease. He would practice making his eyes warm in the mirror, making his nods weighty. *Of course you’d never normally do something like this. Of course you deserve to know what they’re up to. Of course they need to be taught a lesson.*

He used to put so much care into his craft, but when he stopped he discovered it didn’t matter. Some clients even seemed to prefer speaking to a frosty-eyed thug. Found it comforting, maybe, to be the only real human in the interaction.

There is no way to make a lime-green fibreglass cast look professional—he’d chosen the neon hue whilst shithoused—and his shirt sleeve doesn’t fit overtop. He tucks the loose fabric into the sweaty crack, then hides the whole business in his raincoat. Once he shaves his face and spoons his feet into boots, he’s ready to go.

“Nice to know I’m not the only one losing their head,” he tells the mirror. “Maybe we’ll bond over that.”

“Loads better?” his reflection says, raising both bristly eyebrows. “No more episodes?”

You're such a bad liar, mate."

Amir pushes out into the unfinished hallway, where a row of neatly painted black doors floats in bare concrete and electric veinery. He checks the caked construction dust for tracks, specifically the sort left by flippers, but finds none.



There's a shambles set up between Strand Street and Hatter's Bridge, its silhouette razor-sharp, insectile. Amir can see pale, doughy bodies moving along the rusty conveyors. From a distance they almost look like maggots, but when they're slit and drained the torrent is bright red, mammalian blood. Rubber-suited priests slide about on the gore-slick cobblestones.

Amir feels almost certain that mechanised human sacrifice in the Old Town is not a regular occurrence. He shuts his eyes tight, presses the heels of his hands to the sockets. Focuses on the bruise-coloured dark. He counts to three before he opens his eyes, but the shambles is still there, converting citizens to sundered meat, churning out feed for some long-lost god. The whole scene is wreathed in body-heat steam.

"Hello?" The voice is quavery, timid. "Are you the one who finds things?"

Amir drags his gaze away from the butchery, and sees his client has joined him on the stone bench. The director is small and immaculate, wearing titanium-framed smartglasses and a black coat and an elaborate purple scarf. He's sweating despite the winter air; the perspiration gleams on his shaved scalp like baptismal oil.

"That's me, yeah," Amir says. "You the one who loses them?"

The director grimaces. "I didn't *lose* it," he says, confirming he's not the humorous sort. "It was stolen. By a rash, foolish young man. Who also happens to be a family member."

Amir feels a poke at his hip bone, and realises the director is trying to very stealthily pass him a nanodrive. He has to reach across himself with his left hand to take it, which earns his concealed right arm a suspicious look.

"Why are you doing it like that?" the director asks. "That makes it obvious."

"I'm left-handed."

Amir wriggles his phone out of his pocket, then pins it to his knee while he works the fingernail-size nanodrive into its port. A plex of photos, all depicting a rangy nineteen-year-old with curly black hair and an inchoate moustache, appears on the screen. The tags identify him as Lester Bowright.

"The theft occurred last night," the director says. "I discovered it early this morning, and after I watched the security footage—that's on there, too—I tried, of course, to track him down. But he's not answering my calls, and his flatmate claims he never came home."

"Any bars or pubs he particularly likes?" Amir asks. "Might have taken it out for a drink. Wanted to show it off to the lads."

The director recoils, makes a noise like a cat hacking up hairball. "No!" he exclaims.

“No, no, Lester wouldn’t do that. He’s a bright boy. Very solemn. Very studious.” He uses the edge of his scarf to wick sweat from his forehead. “Which is what makes the theft so baffling.”

“Money troubles,” Amir suggests next, recalling Bravetti’s theory. “Needed some quick quid. There’s a market for this sort of thing, yeah? Pilfered artefacts?”

“I suppose.” The director looks pained. “I suppose some unscrupulous private collector—I mean, the Three Mad Monks *are* legendary.”

“There’s an ale named after them,” Amir says, with a weighty nod. “Could be he took it straight to the buyer’s people, in which case the mummified head’s out of the country already.”

The director makes his sick cat sound again.

“Or he could be holed up somewhere,” Amir adds, “waiting for the buyer’s people to come to him. In which case, for the agreed upon fee, I’ll do my best to find him and retrieve the mummified head before it’s out of reach.”

“Oh god,” the director says, staring off into the distance. “Oh god, what a mess.”

Amir follows his sightline and feels a hot flicker of hope. “You see it?” he asks. “What they’ve set up there by Hatter’s Bridge?”

The director frowns. “What?”

“The shambles,” Amir says, even as the hope cools to slippery lard in his belly. “The sacrificing.”

“Always under construction, that bridge,” the director mutters. “Always a proper shambles.” His eyes jig behind his smartglasses; a bank transfer slides onto the screen of Amir’s phone. “There. There’s your deposit. Now please, go find my head.”

Amir starts with Lester’s flat, taking the metro north and disembarking at Our Lady of the Tar-Black Snow. He ascends the concrete stairs, winds his way through the filthy station, and re-emerges into a cold grey afternoon. His right hand is aching inside its fibreglass, but he forgot the codeine bottle at home so there’s nothing for it.

He passes the church and its cadre of squat geometric angels. There are no eyes in their smooth stone faces, but they seem very vigilant all the same, perhaps having heard St. Johan’s was burgled. He checks the address on his phone again, then hooks down a ruelle that leads to a row of old houses now converted to apartments.

He lopes up to the specified door and buzzes number 212. For a moment, nothing. A grimy pigeon flutters onto and then off the stoop. An ambulance banshees past in the distance. Then a static-flayed voice answers.

“Hello? Who is it?”

“Hello,” Amir says. “Amir Murtle, PI investigating the disappearance of one Lester Bowright and a linked theft. His uncle may have told you I’d be coming through.”

“Right. Fine. Up the stairs, end of the hall.”

The door clacks and buzzes; Amir yanks it open left-handed. He steps into halogen lighting, black-and-white carpeting, walls marked up from a hundred hasty moves. It smells good, at least. Hash hanging in the air, a spicy cooking scent wafting from up the

stairs. He follows the latter, then reluctantly passes it by in favour of door 212. Lester's flatmate is waiting.

"As if that's your real name," she says, kicking her door all the way open with one thickly socked foot. "Amir Murtle."

She has glowing blue teeth implants and interesting tattoos, plus a canister of mace dangling oh-so-subtly from the bridge of her folded arms. Amir sheds his raincoat, exposing the lime-green cast that will make him look less professional, but also less intimidating.

"It's my real first name," he says. "Murtle's made up, yeah."

"What'd you do to your arm?"

"Fought an animatronic walrus."

She narrows her eyes. "If you want me to answer a bunch of questions honestly, you really ought to set a better example."

"I smashed it with a hammer," Amir says. "To score painkillers."

She snorts, but lets him inside. The flat is bursting with vegetation, pots on every spare surface and hanging planters in the corners, one of which is being watered by what looks like a scrapped-together DIY drone. There's a vaguely familiar print by some famous Taiwanese artist on the wall, all fiery orange and sea blue. Charcoal sketches are tacked up around it.

"This lot's all me," she says. "Before you start psychoanalysing too much. Lester mostly keeps in there." She points to a featureless white door. "Normally he gets home at six, says hello, cooks himself something, and heads to his room. Rarely emerges. Gets up before me in the mornings. It's really a terrific symbiosis."

"Last night, though?"

"Just never came home," she says. "I was quite happy for him until his boss from the gallery came around. Boss-slash-uncle, I guess." She looks at the door and gives a shrug. "Thought he was finally shagging someone."

Amir crosses to the door, tries the handle. "Not a lot of friends over, then?"

"Never."

"Any odd behaviour in the past week or so?" Amir asks by reflex, focused on the lock. "Any signs of stress?"

She scowls. "I'm not his therapist, am I?"

"Your name?"

"Fay." She pauses. "Koffyew. Tossler." She nods. "Fay Koffyew-Tossler. Hyphenated surname."

"Hard to do it on the spot," Amir says. "Fay, though?"

"Fay, yeah."

Amir gets out his picks. "Fay, I'm going to pop this door open and have a gander," he says. "Won't be more than ten minutes." He inspects the stiff fingers of his right hand, curls them as far as he can. "Maybe twelve. After which I'll leave everything in its place."

"Seems a bit illegal," Fay says, folding her arms again.

“You can look elsewhere, if you like,” Amir says, groping around in the bottom of his pocket. “Maybe into the soulful eyes of—” He peers at the crumpled note. “Whoever’s on the fifty.”

“Now it seems even more illegal,” Fay says, but she’s become a sapient storm cloud, a dense ball of dark grey vapour illuminated by flashes of sheet lightning, and Amir does not negotiate with hallucinations. He tosses the note in her general direction, as he’s no longer sure where her hands are, then sits down to pick the lock.



Fay only rains on him for a few minutes before she drifts away, and a few minutes after that he’s in. Not many tactile sensations compare to successfully picking a lock—mucking out a waxy earhole with a Q-tip might be closest—so Amir takes a moment to relish the scrape and click and clunk.

Then he turns the handle and steps into Lester’s room. It’s disturbingly familiar: gelbed in the corner, cheap spindly table, bare walls. Lester does not have much of a nesting instinct, but that makes for a quick search. Amir’s already onto the closet when Fay pokes her restored head in.

“Oh,” she says, through a mouthful of falafel. “Anticlimactic.”

“Sorry,” Amir says, turning out the pockets of a wrinkly blue blazer.

“What did he steal, then?” she asks, dabbing yoghurt sauce off her plastic plate. “He never seemed like the stealing sort.”

Amir replaces a metro stub and wadded tissue, sets the blazer back on its hanger. “What sort did he seem like?”

“Bit of an ascetic, I guess.” Fay rubs crumbs off her fingers. “Always eats the same things. Wears the same clothes. No boozing, no vaping. No pills when I offered.”

Amir lifts up a Crystal Palace hoodie pooled on the bottom of the closet and finds a pair of cracked smartglasses underneath. They’re long dead, but when he hooks them to his phone the charge light still comes on—potential jackpot. He discards the hoodie, waits for the red sliver of battery to struggle upwards.

“You need anything?” Fay asks. “Because I could get you painkillers, easy. No bone-smashing required.”

The glasses turn on, and Amir holds them up to his face. Notifications split and refract along the cracks. Lester’s still logged in, but the glasses haven’t been used in months. Amir syncs them to the homenet, and suddenly Lester’s featureless white room transforms into a teeming mass of text and photo.

Some sort of excavation, archeologists working in grainy black and white. A diagram showing the measurements of three stone sarcophagi. Colour close-ups of a sunken brown face, skin shrivelled, eyeless but not entirely lipless—Amir can imagine the exact texture of that mouth, and it makes him feel slightly nauseous.

The theme’s pretty clear, even before he starts skimming the wiki articles. Third

Crusade, Three Mad Monks, St. Johan's catacombs, parasitism. The last one's a bit odd, but not nearly as odd as the finger-scrawled message superimposed all over the place. The shaky lettering is different on each, not copy-pasted, which means Lester must have carved it into the air a hundred different times.

Death is a membrane.

He checks the lower left corner of the glasses and sees Lester's account is active in two locations: here, and somewhere in the Tannery District.

★ ★ ★

He gets Fay to wear the glasses as well, just to verify, and takes her number in case he needs more information or cheaper opioids. Then he heads for the metro again, dialling his client on the way. The director picks up on the third ring.

"Yes?" he whispers. "Have you found it?"

"Nearly," Amir says, passing the faceless, birdshit-sparkled angels. "Lester's been taking his work home. Even before the head, I mean. When did he start working the exhibit?"

"Three months ago? I'd have to—have to check." The director pauses. "Taking his work home in what sense?"

Amir looks at the access times on the images, the articles. "He got obsessed with those monks about a month in," he says. "He may have been planning this for quite a while."

The director gives a soft groan.

"Death is a membrane," Amir quotes, pausing at the top of the metro steps. "That mean anything to you?"

"A membrane?" the director echoes. "No. Why?"

"I think your nephew might be unwell," Amir says, though he knows he's not one to talk. He scuttles down the stairs to the southbound platform. "Any history of mental illness?"

"None that I know of." The director's concern sounds genuine. "I could ask his parents, but then I'd probably have to tell them about the theft, as well."

"Hold off on all that. I'm on my way to him now."

Amir ends the call just as the train comes screeching in. He puts his phone away and steps inside a compartment full of Grecian statues, a dozen white marble musculatures frozen in eerie poses. The silence is fucking terrifying. He finds an empty seat beside some naked philosopher and slumps down into it, then squeezes his eyes shut as they rattle off into the dark.

★ ★ ★

A transient snow is falling when he arrives at the Tannery District, which was becoming a bit of a tourist area until it flooded last year. Now it's a mess, streets heaped with defeated

sandbags and varied detritus. He passes a hulking sump pump gone silent, a solitary backhoe stretched all the way horizontal, grasping for something it'll never reach.

As with Hatter's Bridge, repairs are moving slowly. The majority of shops and eateries have moved on, leaving boarded-up husks behind—any of which would make a fine short-term hiding spot for a lad with a stolen head. Amir doesn't want to sync the smartglasses again, for fear of tipping Lester off, so he starts checking the derelicts for signs of forced entry.

The pub with smashed windows and no door seems promising, but he only ends up startling a young couple mid-snog. In the adjoining alley he spots a little nest of insulated blankets, but the head poking out the top has silvery-grey hair, which corresponds neither to Lester nor to the mummified monk. He heads farther down the street, towards an abandoned billiards hall. When he sees a Crystal Palace logo spraybombed onto the brick facade, he knows he's in business.

The door opens just wide enough for a skinny nineteen-year-old to slip through; Amir has to barge it with his shoulder until he can do the same. It's dark inside, musty. The rotting wood floor feels almost like sponge underfoot. He cranks the little lamp on his phone, illuminating a gutted bar, a wire-stripped ceiling, a lonely herd of pool tables too warped to salvage.

"Lester?" he calls. "You in here, mate?" He moves slowly towards the bar, sweeping the shadows. "My name's Amir Murtle. I'm a PI, here on your uncle's request."

There's no answer, but he hears shuffling feet.

"I'm only here to retrieve the item," Amir says. "Your uncle doesn't want to lay charges. Just wants the head back where it belongs."

He rounds the corner of the bar, boots crunching on broken glass, and sees there's a back room with a single table. Something roughly ovoid is sitting on the ruined blue felt. Amir feels a gelid prickle up and down his spine as he gets closer. Mottled bog-brown skin, glistening in the phone light. Bared teeth. Imploded eyes.

The warped features are disturbingly familiar; Lester might have decapitated the very monk that was on display during Amir's school trip three decades prior. Amir is so transfixed by the head that it takes him a moment to notice the thief. Lester is standing in the corner, facing it like a castigated child, wearing the windbreaker he had on in the security cam footage. He's eerily still.

At times like these, Amir really wishes he could trust his own neurons.

"Has it been calling you, too, then?" Lester asks, in a croaky voice that's barely done changing. He rubs one leg against the other, stork-like, and Amir sees he's missing a sock. "It told you to come here?"

"The head?" Amir tries to make his voice kind. "No, mate. Like I said, your uncle hired me." The grocery bag used to transport the monk is now rumpled up and stuffed into one of the billiard pockets; he grabs it out. "I'm going to just pop the monk back in here, then give your uncle a ring and tell him what's what."

"Calling's not the right word, I suppose." Lester's hands are out of sight, and Amir has

the sudden paranoia that he's facing the corner because he's pissing there, which would make it twice today someone has toilet-talked him. "Has it been showing you things?"

Amir's stomach drops. "Things?"

"Things."

"What things?" Amir persists, forgetting to sound kind.

"Things, Dag." Lester huffs a laugh, tips his head back. "Corpses decomposing on the ceiling. Giant crab creatures in the canal with miniature cities on their backs. All those people walking around with extra spinal column coming out of them, stretching way up into the sky, but you can never quite see what it's connected to."

Amir stares down at the mummified head on the pool table. All the little hairs on the back of his neck spike up. "You're saying the ghost of this dead monk is handing out hallucinations."

"No!" Lester makes a familiar hacking noise; it must be genetic. "No. That'd be fucking—that'd be stupid."

"Oh." Amir feels only slightly relieved. He switches his gaze back to Lester, whose hallucinations are not quite the same as his, but certainly adjacent. "You want to turn around? Bit spooky, speaking to the back of you."

"In a moment," Lester says, sounding petulant. "I'm building up my nerve. You're here to take the head, then. Not to help."

"Help with what?" Amir asks.

"One's not enough," Lester says. "We have to go back for the others tonight. Get a critical mass. Don't you agree?"

"You asking me, or the head?"

"Jesus. You don't know anything, do you." Lester's voice is cracked. "I don't know why it bothered calling you."

He whirls around, and Amir was half expecting him to have sharp black beaks in his eyeholes, or smooth shit-sparkled stone instead of a face, so it's nice to see soulful eyes and a dusting of moustache in the millisecond before a swinging cosh collides with his skull.

★ ★ ★

Amir limps across Hatter's Bridge, nearly home. The shambles has been disassembled and trucked off, and they've even contrived to get rid of the bloodstains, but he can still smell its greasy, coppery stench in the cold air. Or it might be coming from his smashed-in nose, which is leaking everywhere.

The director's not answering, and since Amir has no one else to call he calls Bravetti. It rings and rings as he crosses the plaza, as he turns up his snowy street. There's a brief intermission when he uses his phone to unlock the outer door. Then it keeps ringing, echoing through the concrete spiral shell of the staircase as he staggers up to his apartment.

She answers just as he turns the door handle. "Make it quick, mate. I'm following

someone right now.”

Amir does not know where to start, so he starts angry. “You said this was an easy one,” he snaps. “I was just fucking pummeled.”

Bravetti gives a gasp of laughter. “No! What, by the wee nephew? The wee nephew pummeled you?”

“Had a billiard ball in a sock,” Amir says, shutting the door behind him and fumbling it locked. “Could’ve bloody killed me. I’m probably concussed.”

“He scummed you!” Bravetti yelps, then lowers her voice. “The cheek of it. Bet he’s never even seen the film.”

“Cracked me right in the face. Broke my nose.” Amir goes straight to the codeine and glugs down the last of it, tongues the dregs. “Then I’m down on the ground, shielding myself,” he says, discarding the bottle, hobbling to the freezer, “and the little fucker starts swinging for my knee instead. It’s swollen to hell already.”

“God. Did you get the head back, at least?”

“Of course I didn’t get the head back.” He glares at an empty ice tray, starts scraping frost off the bottom of the freezer. “He took it with him when he scarpered. He thinks—” Amir presses an insufficient palmful of ice shavings to his blood-tacked face. “He thinks it’s talking to him, or showing him visions, or something.”

Bravetti is silent for so long Amir has to check they aren’t disconnected. The codeine’s kicked in, dousing his pain receptors in warm syrup, and he sinks down onto the bed. When she finally speaks, she sounds cautious in the way he hates so badly, the way he never knew she could sound until a couple months ago.

“Maybe this isn’t a good job for you,” she says. “If the nephew’s off his nut, and talking to you about visions, it might make you—I dunno. It might make you relapse. Start having those episodes again.”

Amir checks the ceiling for decomposing corpses. “You don’t think it’s fucking odd that I was hired to track down someone with the same exact problem as me?”

Silence again. The lump of ice shavings has melted away. He grabs his lone dishcloth and starts sponging the softened blood from his philtrum.

“I was hired for it,” Bravetti says, calm and decisive again. “I gifted it to you, remember? And there’s loads of nutters in this city, so no. Not statistically.”

“Cheers.”

“I’m going to ungift it from you, though,” she says. “Soon as I get back in town. You need more time off. Maybe see the psychologist again.”

“I don’t want—”

“If nothing else,” Bravetti cuts in, “they may be able to help you sort out the trauma of getting your arse handed to you by an adolescent. Bye-bye.”

She ends the call, and Amir momentarily wants to pitch his phone at the wall. Instead he dials a more recently acquired number, sets it to speaker, and struggles up off the bed. He rattles open the barren utensil drawer. His best option is a steak knife.

“This the detective?” Fay’s voice comes accompanied by thudding club music. “How’s

mortality going for you?”

“Hate it,” Amir says. “I’m going to need some painkillers and a fuckload of pep pills if you’ve got them.”

“I’ve got everything,” Fay says. “Big night tonight, eh?”

Amir sits back down on the edge of the bed, making it ripple. “Sure. Big night.”

“You find Lester, then?”

“Did.” He starts sawing through the edge of the cast, right between his thumb and forefinger, serrated metal teeth grinding fibreglass down to powder. It’s going to take a while. “Can you meet me on Hatter’s Bridge a half hour from now?” he asks. “With the stuff?”

“Think I can duck out, yeah. I’ll message you.” She pauses. “Is he okay?”

“He’s grand,” Amir says. “I’m a mess. But he’s grand. See you in a half hour.”

He redoubles his efforts with the steak knife, showering the bed with tiny splinters of fibreglass and wisps of padding. He sets his jaw, stares at the handgun on the rickety table across from him. No need to cleave the cast all the way off. He just has to free up his grip and his trigger finger.

★ ★ ★

St. Johan’s is impressive at night, a great stone beast lit from below by LED pits. The carved buttresses look like a reptile’s splayed legs. The stained-glass windows are eyes, nocturnal predator-yellow. It puts Our Lady of the Tar-Black Snow and her piddly angels to shame, every curve and cleft somehow both holy and menacing.

Fay’s amphetamines might have something to do with that, too. He’s been inhumanly focused for the past two hours, huddled in a cafe across the street from the cathedral’s back entrance while a well-sequestered pocket cam watches the main one. Lester has yet to show, even though Amir remembers the words clearly: *One’s not enough. We have to go back for the others tonight.*

Maybe Lester changed his mind, or is just fully out of it. But Amir doesn’t think so, and that is why he didn’t tell the client his nephew is returning to the scene of the crime. He needs to figure out what’s going on first.

The wikis he has his phone reading to him are no help, all *persecuted religious order* this and *possible self-immurement* that. As best he can tell, three soldier-monks got lost in the desert outside Damascus during the Third Crusade, came back raving, and enlisted a local stonemason to build them three sarcophagi that could be sealed from the inside.

Their order hushed it up to avoid going the way of the Templars, who’d been burned at the stake for heresy and inappropriate kissing, then several centuries later the sarcophagi were excavated and shipped to Glimshire, and several decades after that someone founded a semi-successful brewery called 3 Mad Monks—*for other uses, see Three Mad Monks, disambiguation.*

It’s not as interesting as Bravetti made it out to be, and doesn’t explain in the slightest

why he and Lester have both been having hallucinations, possibly beginning around the same time. That's why he needs to have a proper chat with the lad. At gunpoint, if necessary.

And there he is. Scurrying down the block, familiar grocery bag swinging from his fist. Amir cranes forward to watch as Lester hops up the steps. His uncle has not seen fit to take him off the employee register, so his phone unlocks the back door with no issue at all. He marches inside. The retrofitted metal door swings shut behind him and Amir thinks momentarily of self-immurement.

Then he gets up, sets his mug in the grey dish tub, slips out of the cafe.

Amir is not on the employee register, but he has a pneumatic door-jack that works just as well. The hinges give way with a groan and bone-crack. Amir shifts the door over, casts one look up and down the snowy street, and steps through.

He's in the back offices of the cathedral, all cubed concrete and flickering fluorescents. It reminds him of his unfinished apartment block until he hits the sanctuary. For a moment the rows and rows of pews seem to be rolling towards him, a stone tide. He's not sure if it's from the pep pills or if the hallucinations are returning.

The stairwell is tucked into a corner with the ornate confessional booths; someone approached it recently enough to trigger the information holo and donation suggestion. Amir feels for the familiar grip in his pocket. He can hear movement below, but sees no light. The air around the stairwell is cooler. Wetter. Almost has a taste to it.

Down into the squid-ink dark. Amir keeps one hand on the velvet guide rope and one hand on his gun, tries to make his footfalls soundless. The catacomb is somehow deeper than he remembers from the school trip, even though his legs are longer now. Descending its hewn throat makes his skin go clammy and his heart pitter-patter. Bravetti would have a real laugh, but she might not be chemically capable of fear.

Light at last. The pale electric sort, from a phone torch, which is comforting down here where everything smells so ancient. The scene it illuminates—less comforting. The three famous sarcophagi are roped off, with a hastily hung *closed for maintenance* sign there for emphasis, but Lester has traversed that.

The central sarcophagus is open, its lid scything outward like a spread wing, and Lester is crouched inside like a succubus or incubus or whatever the hairy thing in that one painting is, straddling the corpse's chest in order to more easily saw its head off. The original head is perched on the open lid, watching the proceedings through its collapsed eye sockets, and something the colour of old blood seems to be growing out of its earholes.

Amir takes the handgun from his pocket, not aimed, but obvious. "Lester," he says. "Time to tell me what's going on. And don't say to look at the wikis. I hate history."

Lester's head jerks up. He sees the gun and his soulful dark eyes go wide. He sets the knife down slowly. "Don't shoot," he says. "Jesus Christ." He blinks. "You know those who hate history are doomed to repeat it."

Amir takes an angled step, to ensure a good sightline on both Lester and the disembodied head. "I know being clever is important to you," he says. "But put that aside

for a moment. Just explain the head, and the hallucinations, and what exactly you're trying to do."

Lester does the inhalation of one about to explain things to an idiot. "The Three Mad Monks didn't lose their minds in the desert," he says. "They found God. By which I mean the effectively immortal Precambrian parasite that had been dormant for millions of years and makes tardigrades look like pushovers."

Amir recalls the last article on Lester's wall.

"Recent geological activity had brought a spar of ancient rock towards the surface. The monks met it halfway, in the chasm where they were sheltering from the sandstorm." Lester shifts slightly; the corpse beneath him makes a slimy, rasping sound. "The parasite revived and took three hosts. But it couldn't really do much with them. The structures of the human brain are a long way from the Precambrian organisms it used to puppeteer. It's smart, but not *that* smart. It managed to buy itself time to figure things out, though. Got the monks to pickle themselves."

Amir looks at the head again, at the rust-red tissue blooming from its ears and nostrils like cauliflowers. He decides to delay judgement on whether it's really happening or not. "How'd you find all this out?"

"Well, there's the Aghast Missive," Lester says. "Letter fragment from the bishop who wanted to make sure nobody found out about the monks' seeming suicide. And there was a Scottish scientist named Hieronymus McLaverty, who did a forensic investigation of the bodies in the 1800s, found some odd things but died before publication. Lately, though, I've just been talking with the parasite."

"Via hallucinations," Amir says. "The prehistoric parasite in a dead monk's brain is handing out hallucinations, which is somehow less stupid than a dead monk's ghost doing it."

Lester folds his bony arms. "The hallucinations were just static," he says. "Now I can hear it much clearer. The best way is—may I show you?"

"Slowly," Amir says.

Lester reaches, slowly, for the slick, withered head. He cradles it in both hands, presses his brow to its brow. In the pale glow of Lester's phone torch, Amir sees the rust-red tissue flexing out from the monk's nostrils knit itself into a sort of hook. It thrusts its way up Lester's nose with no warning.

"Doesn't hurt," Lester says, before Amir can leap forward and rip the thing free. "This is the most direct way to commune with it."

The eeriness is stacking up, so much so that Amir's whole back is now drenched in cold sweat and his left knee, the one Lester smashed with a billiard ball, is trembling. His hands, thankfully, are good and steady.

"Right," he says. "If you're talking to it now, ask it what the fuck it wants."

"I already know *that*," Lester says. "It wants to remake the world in its image. Make it much more interesting."

Amir thinks of sapient storm clouds and automated human sacrifice.

“But to do that, it needs a lot more hosts,” Lester continues. “And to reproduce, it needs a critical mass. That’s why we came back for the other slivers in the other bodies. To speed things up.”

“Are you being brain-controlled or something, then?” Amir asks. “How the monks were?”

“Not at all,” Lester says, sounding genuinely offended. “This is God.” He kisses the head’s shrivelled-back lips, then beams at it. His bright white teeth are smeared with rust-red spores. “And I’m its prophet.”

“Grand,” Amir says, forcing himself to ignore the inappropriate kissing because he’s come to the most crucial bit. “Now ask it what it wants with *me*. Ask it why *I’m* getting the hallucinations.”

Lester is silent for a moment, assumedly communing, then he gives his head a minute shake, making the knotted red stuff shiver. “It’s honestly not sure,” he says. “But it does think you’d be a good host. Your neural architecture is quite accommodating.”

Amir does not find that flattering, and he is considering how far he might be able to drop-kick the monk’s skull off Hatter’s Bridge when he hears a mechanical whirring. His teeth clench at the noise. Then a familiar silhouette comes lurching out of the dark, towering over Lester and the sarcophagus.

Same spiny flippers. Same goggly dead eyes. But it’s twice as big as last time, and the gleaming tusks look razor sharp.

The bones throb in Amir’s broken hand.

“Rematch,” the animatronic walrus says.

★ ★ ★

It’s a hallucination, of course. No hallucination in the history of hallucinations has ever more clearly been a hallucination. But Amir’s limbic system does not discriminate with a one-tonne nightmare machine barrelling at it, and he squeezes the trigger on reflex, three times, pyramid placement.

The electropellets bounce right off; for a nonsensical moment he wishes he’d brought actual bullets. Then he sucks down a deep breath, braces his feet, and opens his arms. He reminds himself that he is facing off against thin air, that a prehistoric parasite is tweaking his neurons. He’s going to let this bastard walrus pass right through him.

The impact slams him off his feet. His gun skitters across the catacomb floor and the back of his head collides with hard stone, smashing stars across his eyes. Beyond those dancing constellations he can see the walrus looming over him, see the blurry, manic grin. He hears a tinkling ringtone in his ears.

“Your mind makes it real, Neo,” Lester calls. “Or I suppose your central nervous system does.”

Amir rolls left as the walrus’s tusk descends. He comes upright with a new stratagem: evade the animatronic walrus, destroy the disembodied head. He spins towards the

sarcophagus, where Lester is still sitting on Mad Monk Two's chest, cradling Mad Monk One's head. Beside him, resting on the open lid, is the big serrated stalking knife Amir made him set down.

They both lock eyes to it at the same instant; Amir lunges but Lester is much closer. He tucks the head under his armpit and grabs the knife handle, gives the air a warning slash like some kind of bloody pirate. Amir can't stop—too much momentum, plus an animatronic walrus bearing down on him from behind, whirring in his ears.

He goes low, gets inside the blade, and his suspicion that Lester got lucky with the cosh but has no idea how to use a knife turns out to be correct. He wedges Lester's elbow, twists hard. There's a tendon pop, a wail, and the knife clatters to the floor. Amir snatches it up and turns just in time to parry a scything tusk.

"Death is a membrane," the walrus says. "I will usher you through it."

Amir does not banter with hallucinations, but he jabs for its blank eyes, and when it rears back he puts all his force behind the blade, driving it up into the moulded plastic belly of the beast. Slick black oil sprays outward, even though he is almost certain animatronics are not fuelled by such, and catches him full in the face. He howls, blinded, and the walrus laughs a creaky, phonograph laugh.

Then he's pinned, the thing's flippers crushing him to the floor, squeezing the wind from his lungs. He blinks his stinging eyes clear. Sees Lester squat down beside him, the monk's head still tucked under his armpit. The red stuff is stretched thin now, suspended between dead and living nostrils like a strand of mozzarella, but as he watches, Lester delicately detaches his end and pushes it towards him instead.

"Here," Lester says, as Amir feels a tickle at the rim of his nostril. "God wants to explain things a little better."

Amir kicks. Writhes. The red stuff creeps inside his nose, claws softly up his septum, and he can already feel a *thing* on the edge of his consciousness, hovering over his shoulder. He sees a crop of techno-organic machines, yellowish scissor limbs growing out from dark soil. Long pale creatures wriggling across splendorous ruins. An empress with a weeping mask.

Then he sees the thing itself, an eyeless thing in a tailored suit, seated at a living, pulsating piano he knows is his own oh-so-accommodating neural architecture. It readies its hived and veiny fingers—

"Oi." The cool, dry voice interrupts from a universe away. "He's atheist, you wee creep."

The thing inside Amir's skull unhooks, tugs free; his eyes clear and he sees Lester has jerked upright, taking the dangling red corkscrew with him. He's staring at the stairwell. So is the animatronic walrus. Amir cranes his neck to join the party, and sees that Bravetti has not only found him in his hour of need, but also found his fallen handgun.

"You got lethals in here, Amir?" she asks.

"No," he croaks.

"Aren't you a lucky little fucker," she says to Lester, and shoots him.

There's a thump and a sizzle and he topples sideways. The monk's head spills from his spasming hands. That still leaves the walrus to deal with, but of course Bravetti strides up as if it's not even there. It tracks her with its bulging eyes.

"Six missed calls, Amir," she says, yanking his phone from his pocket and showing him the screen for proof. "Six. It's very unprofessional of you." Her voice is no longer cool and dry. "What in the hell's going on?"

Amir gives an experimental shove, and discovers the walrus is now helium-light. It drifts towards the ceiling of the catacomb and sticks there like a baleful balloon. He gives it a two-finger salute, then shifts his attention to the monk's head, which is still rolling across the floor, momentum sustained by tiny red ear- and nose-cilia.

"Just a moment," he says. He grabs the stalking knife, crawls after the head, and grabs it by the ear. "You can see this, right? The red stuff?"

Bravetti frowns. "The living bogey? Yes, mate."

Amir relishes that for a second, like a well-picked lock, then starts stabbing. The rust stuff wriggles back inside the cranium, seeking sanctuary, at which point he tears the lower jaw free, rotates the skull, and drags the parasite out through the new aperture. He dices it into pieces, then uses the knife handle to mash those pieces into slurry.

"It's an ancient telepathic parasite," he explains. "A discovery that revolutionises biology and evolutionary theory and all that. It's been remotely fucking about with my brain for the past couple months, and I suppose with Lester's, too." He checks the ceiling; the walrus is gone, but he will take no chances. "We'll have to do this to the other two monks as well."

Bravetti gives a wise nod. "Always figured it was something like that," she says. "There was this Scot who dissected one of them in 1811, see, and he went absolutely starkers."

"Me too, for a bit." He looks down at the mash. "But I think it should be over now. The episodes."

Bravetti shrugs. "We should probably torch it all, just to be safe. It's been an age since I set something on fire."

★ ★ ★

They drag Lester up the stairwell and deposit him on a pew, then Amir stands watch while Bravetti syphons some petrol from a lorry outside, then they go back down into the catacomb and douse the remains of the Three Mad Monks. The searing smell of petrol in Amir's nostrils is infinitely preferable to a spongy hook.

Bravetti lends him her lighter to do the honours, and they step back to watch the crackly blaze. It feels quite cathartic, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Bravetti, her jacketed arm pressed to his, feels good as well. He misses being able to lean over and say something stupid and kiss her.

"Maybe we should give it another go," he says, before he can stop himself. "Now that

the hallucinations are sorted. Maybe it'll be different."

She shakes her head. "You know it wasn't about the episodes," she says. "It was all the other stuff. Besides, you're getting to like the new place, yeah?"

Amir thinks of his white prefab box, his gelbed and his rickety table, his one and only mug. "Yeah," he says. "It's good."

They watch the heaped bodies shrivel and blacken, watch the spirals of greasy smoke rise. There will be no more school trips to see the Three Mad Monks, but it's just as well, because thinking about kissing Bravetti, then thinking about the rust-coloured spores in Lester's teeth, has ossified his rickety suspicions. He considers keeping it to himself, but Bravetti is already working her way there.

"Why you, though?" she says. "I mean, it makes sense it got to Lester. He was in close proximity."

"The school trip," Amir says. "When I was ten." He exhales. "I snogged that head on a dare."

"You what?"

"I snogged the mummified monk," Amir says. "They had the one sarcophagus open, back then, and the teacher wasn't looking." He works his jaw. "I stuck my tongue fully in there. Everyone had to give me five quid."

"Well." Bravetti stares wistfully at the smouldering remains. "That's one revenue stream closed off forever." She frowns. "So, what, there are little bits of it in your brain? Little transponders that were picking up the static?"

"I should probably get scanned," Amir admits. "Yeah."

They wait until there's nothing but char and bone, then smother it in foam from the church's fire extinguisher and head upstairs. The electropellet stuck to Lester's bony chest is nearly drained; he can twitch and slur now, and slurs mostly about God.

Amir fishes the lad's phone out and dials emergency services, then taps out a brief anonymous message to Lester's uncle. It's the least he can do, since the head retrieval job is now totally botched and he has no intention of explaining himself only to end up facing arson or destruction of property charges.

He parts ways with Bravetti about a block from St. Johan's, and a block after that he sees the red-and-blue strobe of an emergency vehicle, drone-escorted, hurtling towards the cathedral. Fay's pep pills are long gone, and he feels awful. His right hand is puffed up and bruising again, which means he likely shifted some bone around. His broken nose is throbbing. His knee buckles every third step or so.

But at least it's real, and when the snow starts to fall again it's real snow, too, the big globby white flakes that stick and stay. He'll still have to check in on Lester, of course. Steal the medical report and make sure whatever spongy rust-coloured spores got into the lad's brain are not cancerous, or behaviour-altering, which would be bad news for the both of them.

He trudges towards home, breathing small packets of steam. The snow stops when he gets to Strand Street. The clouds slide apart overhead, leaking antiseptic moonlight over the

plaza, over the public piano they've installed there.

Maybe when his hand heals up he'll learn to play. The gleaming keys look inviting, and not at all like teeth.



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**THE
THREE O'CLOCK
DRAGON**

**JOHN
WISWELL**

The Three O'Clock Dragon

JOHN WISWELL

illustration by

J Y A N G

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

Liza exited the south tunnel just in time to see the launch. Missiles roared into the sky and then ripped across the harbor, carving paths of smoke as they arced down toward the city. Liza had a moment to wonder before their trajectory became clear and the weapons came whining down at her. Yeah, the city was trying to kill her again.

Before this volley could strike, she stretched up from the train tracks and belched. Flames sprayed the horizon, melting the missiles' shells and bursting their payloads over Jocelyn Bell Burnell Avenue. The mayor and his paramilitaries were stationed there, and she liked reminding them that she knew it. If she'd had wings, she would have flown over there and devoured them. Grounded, she kept her thousand feet on the tracks and waved her two-hundred-yard silver tail at them, daring them to approach her domain.

How did they always know where she was? She guessed her heat signature was easy to track. And she always came out of the south tunnel at 2:10 on weekdays. It was part of a routine so deep that she didn't question it.

She charged along the train tracks, heading southwest and away from the harbor. These trails led everywhere and went on forever, in circuits through Prosperity City and three headings out of it. Not that she ever headed out of it. This was her city; she'd lived here as long as she could remember, traveling along the steel rails. The rails were pleasantly cool below her feverish feet, and she always felt feverish since, as best as she could tell, she only had fire for innards.

As a warning not to shoot at her again, Liza belched a three-story-high plume of fire as she passed Cesar Chavez Elementary. Then she paused beside the chain-link fence separating her rails from the jungle gyms of the school playground, hoping to spot some fans. Sometimes kids cheered her on. She waved her tail at the building, flashing her 2247 "tattoo," black letters on silver scales.

Sirens rang across the vacant playground, and yellow buses screeched away from the front of the building. Kids didn't cheer today. They evacuated,

leaving her with a hollow feeling.

Figures in black body armor ran across rooftops lugging shoulder-mounted rocket launchers. Dozens of people were still working behind the windows of those buildings. They hadn't evacuated yet, which meant either incinerating them all, or fleeing. She'd never felt lonelier than when she fled.

★ ★ ★

Rovere Station was the best shelter. It was a sprawling transportation hub of Gothic architecture and ribbed domes networked into stained glass ceilings. Giuliano della Rovere Station was a holdover from when Prosperity had an alchemy market, back before the tech boom. It turned out that internet venture capitalists were better at producing gold than a bunch of alchemists.

She inhaled deeply, hoping to catch a whiff of wealth. Sometimes bankers tried sneaking express trains through here, and if there was anyone she wanted to eat, it was the people who ran the stock market. Mayor Waddington and those bankers were responsible for all the paramilitary strikes. She lowered her snout to the tracks, listening for the hum of train engines.

She was so absorbed that she didn't hear the human leaping off the platform and onto her back. She reared up to devour what she expected to be another black-ops asshole, but instead found a man with deep brown skin and a frizzy beard, one hand holding a taqiyah to his scalp, the other grasping one of the spines on her flank.

The human stared directly into her burning eyes. "How much to get to Verbiest?"

Ferdinand Verbiest Lane was on the far east slope of Prosperity, at least forty minutes away. She was so flustered that she calculated an answer before thinking to do anything else.

She was going to snap him up, when he opened his wallet. "Look, my neighborhood's been suffering for years and we can't get one phone call with the mayor. When you blew up those missiles you destroyed the only major freeway we had left, so we can't drive to city hall. But that also means his office isn't getting nearly as many visitors. This may be my one chance at a face-to-face. So how much do you want? This is my last forty dollars."

He released her spine and fanned the bills in the sweltering breeze of her breath.

For curiosity's sake, she asked, "What would I want with money?"

"It's paper. All you do is burn things. What's the difference to you if I sit in economy class while you run around the city like you were going to anyway?"

It was such a strange question that she had to think it over. She looked at the stained glass ceiling, with its grand image of an underwear model touching index fingers with a bearded man. The bearded man above looked like he got shit done.

She asked, "Forty dollars in singles?"

★ ★ ★

This man was named Asif. She dropped Asif off at Verbiest, then watched him sprint to pester the mayor about police reform. Bipedes were so weird. They ran so inefficiently. She was debating whether to wish Asif well or set him on fire, when she felt three more people climb onto her back.

These were white twentysomethings clearly under the influence of narcotics and poor group thinking. They begged Liza to take them to something called "Tad's apartment."

From what they said between bouts of vomiting and scream-singing popular music together, Tad had cheated on one of them with her own mother. It was atrocious. It was also something Liza wanted to see play out.

While two of them scream-sang a song that sounded like a belabored euphemism for regrettable sex, the third climbed around Liza's spines and approached her head. The white woman pointed at Liza's tail and asked. "What does 2247 stand for?"

Those numbers were tattooed on her backside, but she hadn't thought about them in a while.

"I don't remember. It must have been forever ago."

"Benders. I get it." The woman licked her lips like she needed to remember what they were. "If fighter jets bounce off you, how'd you get tattooed?"

"I don't remember."

“Was it with lasers?”

If Liza could have shrugged, she would have. She didn’t remember any laser relays.

“Can I take a selfie with you?” she asked, already filming herself and trying to get Liza’s head in frame. Then she collapsed into sobs. Apparently Tad had bought her that phone.

Something about her capricious anguish resonated with Liza. She got carried away and decided to melt Tad’s apartment. She didn’t merely burn it with her fiery breath but brought it to a temperature that liquefied its cement foundations. The threesome hugged Liza’s spines and cheered. Their gratitude was oddly appealing.

Maybe that was why she let the group of Black Baptist pantry workers ship their food on her that night. They were mostly terrified, but still a tiny percent grateful. Mrs. Robinson said a blessing and kissed one of Liza’s spines before dismounting to hand out canned goods behind a mechanic’s garage. Being blessed gave her a warm feeling inside—a different warm feeling than usual from her typical raging inferno. This warmth was nice.

* * *

Shining tanks lined up along six city blocks, but not one of them fired. That was the advantage in carrying hundreds of people, hundreds of passengers. She wished she had proper fingers so she could flip all those cannons off.

After a few stops, a fight broke out on her ass. Some college kids wrestled and slammed each other into her spines, yelling about sports. She curved her head around, wondering if she could get away with incinerating just a few passengers.

Then a man pushed his way between the brawlers. It was Asif in his white taqiyah, speaking faster than any of the students could. His face was sunken and severe, and whatever he said got them all to shake his hand before they parted ways for opposite ends of Liza’s back.

Liza let Asif sit up front near her head. She decided that was how dragons thanked someone.

She asked, “Aren’t you supposed to be running a business?”

He rubbed his temples with the heels of his palms. “Mayor Waddington’s

people wouldn't even let me through the front door. When I said I'd wait and sat outside, he snuck out the back."

"Well, you got a face-to-face with me and lived. Got to be happy about that."

Asif smiled when he should have laughed, and Liza realized she wanted him to laugh. He said, "I'm raising two girls on my own here, and man, this city? Things have to change. There are no damned jobs for anyone besides police and security guards."

"So you need money?" As Liza turned the fork onto Verbiest, she glanced back at the passengers. Most sat docilely, watching Asif chat with her. No further fights had broken out since he'd intervened. "Well, I can charge these passengers whatever I want. How would you like to help keep them in line for me?"

★ ★ ★

Three days after Asif took the job, a passenger climbed up to her head. He was a broad-shouldered white man in a fine black suit, carrying two gas cans.

"I'm Lewis Valerio, assistant deputy to Mayor Thaddeus Waddington," he introduced himself, setting the cans on one of her silvery scales. "The mayor heard you like burning things."

His foolishness was endearing. She said, "I might have burned a thing or two."

"Do you remember the morning of December 12?"

"Did I burn something that day? I don't own a calendar."

Lewis played with the buttons of his expensive suit jacket. "Do you remember a train derailment that day? It occurred near Rovere Station."

"I've derailed a few trains. They're like vending machines full of people."

"Mayor Waddington had special cargo on that train. It was two stops shy of its destination when we lost contact with the agents on board."

"So go fish it out of the wreckage. I don't eat cargo, except that one time with all the cattle cars. Was your precious cargo a heifer?"

"See, we've sent people into Rovere, and we can't find the train."

"Heifers are much larger than you. You couldn't miss them."

"This is cargo that Mayor Waddington believes could revitalize the

alchemy industry. We're not even sure how to make more of it."

"A dragon hiding precious treasure? Way to stereotype."

"It's not exactly treasure. It's a red liquid distilled from philosophers' eggs."

"You're losing me. Is your stop close?"

The man was back to fiddling with his button. "A single droplet got on a power cable and transformed it into an electric eel. Mayor Waddington thinks it can bring inanimate objects to life. Bring out their essence, their hidden spirit. We were going to experiment on transportation. Maybe give smart cars actual minds, you know? It would be huge."

"The market on magic red juice." Liza snorted smoke. "I like the picture of that bearded guy on the Revere ceiling. Squirt some on him and see if he comes to life."

"That was actually Mayor Waddington's plan, you see. And he's upset it didn't unfold that way."

"You are silly people."

They were passing the Lorraine Waxman Pearce Museum, and it was then that Liza's nostrils flared, unintentionally setting all their advertising banners for French Revolution Week ablaze.

Despite her perfectly good exhibit of power, the man kept speaking.

"You see, the bigger is the missing train. It was train number 2247..."

★ ★ ★

She said, "Wait a damned minute. Are you calling me a metro liner, you miserable middle-management biped?"

"Your roar does sound similar to a commuter's engine..."

"Off!"

She roared not at all like a commuter train, and bucked, sending hundreds of passengers careening into one another. It was only by her good will that they weren't all thrown to their deaths against the wall of the French Revolution exhibit. Lewis was dispatched, though, into a nearby hotdog truck.

"Me? A train?"

She could have devoured him, vehicle and all, but her real anger was with

Mayor Waddington for sending him. The gall of that man.

She reached out over the gravel beside the tracks, and her claws scraping just a few inches of stones made her body shudder. She drew her limbs back to the rails for comfort. Staring at the ground, she realized she'd never even tried to climb off before.

★ ★ ★

She couldn't fight city hall—the railroad didn't run anywhere near it. The closest point was the station at Katharine Wright Haskell International Airport, still several miles away, where city hall's red steeples were visible poking out between modern concrete-and-glass buildings. It looked like pine trim. She bet it'd burn like a politician covered in gasoline.

Imagining that, she set her front left foot on the asphalt beside the tracks. Her ankle and knee trembled before she put any pressure on it. Soon most of her left legs trembled, and her shuddering rattled windows for blocks in both directions.

Liza closed her eyes and focused on exhaling smoke through her nostrils to calm herself. Behind her head, Asif bravely petted the base of her neck. After she'd told him about the red liquid and the mayor's schemes, Asif had bought a sensible Kevlar and carbon-foam suit and come out here to help her. He was coaching her in how to go off the rails.

Liza wondered if this was a panic attack. Or was this a natural anxiety event, akin to an adult having to swim for the first time?

Or was she a goddamned train that was too attached to her rails?

She blew a plume of smoke, trying to get some of the turmoil out of her guts. "I'm going to get the mayor for this."

Still in his flame-retardant suit, Asif patted the top of her head. "We don't know that the alchemy story is true. It sounds a little ridiculous."

She rumbled. For the first time she recognized her rumbling did sound locomotive-adjacent. "Is the magic red liquid story really any more ridiculous than me appearing out of nowhere? I don't really know where I came from. Why don't I make sense?"

"Many great things don't make sense. The origin of the universe is absurd, and we accept that."

She cast her glowing eyes up at him. “Is that wisdom you got from your religion?”

“Actually my kids got that from the internet.” Asif descended from her head to stand on one of the wooden beams between her rails. He looked right up into her fiery visage. “Still, consider gravity. The Earth is so massive that everything falls into it. Consider that every solid is made up of mostly empty space you cannot push through. Evolution itself suggests that things kept fornicating until the world was populated with trees and jaguars and flounders.”

She loved how his husky voice thickened when he held court like this. It was as though he’d been a smoker long ago, and the rasp only came out in these times. She was kind of a smoker, too.

Still she had to disagree. “I’m not a jaguar or a flounder. I don’t have a family tree. I might just be the result of a chemical spill on a commuter train. A mistake the mayor made and has been trying to blow into oblivion ever since with the military.”

She pawed at the earth beside the left rail again and her body quivered so hard that she collapsed against the tracks. It took all her willpower not to spew hellfire and destroy something in her outrage. That wasn’t what she needed, though.

Asif squatted down, drawing his fingers over the earth where she’d scratched. He hummed to himself for a moment, then looked up again. “If you really want to get back at Mayor Waddington, I have an idea. You’re not the only one he’s hurt.”

★ ★ ★

Filing for office was easy since Asif found her a team of lawyers willing to do the legwork in exchange for a two-month rail pass. There was prestige in riding the world’s only dragon express, so desirable that she found she was able to trade rides for political endorsements from all sorts of inane celebrities that didn’t deserve close to the sway they had. She got an advertising team purely by inertia of the chatter in her tail section.

Their ads were fierce. They questioned how much taxpayer money Waddington had wasted on failing to kill a giant dragon instead of trying to

talk to her. And they established that the oath of office would naturally prevent her from eating any further citizens—a clearer path to ending hostilities than anything Mayor Waddington proposed. And before he could mount a “no negotiating with terrorists” defense, anonymous sources exposed that he’d cheated on a waitress girlfriend with her own mother. The scandal would tie him up for a minute.

Liza and Asif graciously offered a Lincoln-Douglas-style debate at any train station of Waddington’s choosing.

Waddington responded with a white phosphorus attack. Not an attack ad, but an actual early morning strike just before she picked up her first commuters. If she’d had more biology to her than combustion, it might’ve ruined her day. The white phosphorus felt like trying on someone else’s contact lenses and left her faintly nearsighted as she chewed the strike team.

Pedestrian videos of the failed assassination actually propelled her two points ahead of Waddington in the polls. Liza nearly derailed laughing at that.

Then the Waddington campaign scaled back the assaults, and instead began to question her citizenship.

★ ★ ★

“She has no rail license and no birth certificate. For all we know, this dragon is an illegal immigrant,” said Mayor Waddington. It was her first time seeing the chiseled features of this tall white man. He leaned over his podium with a calloused fist over his heart and told the world how irresponsible she was.

Liza demonstrated her newfound political tact by not destroying the store, rather dispatching a campaign aide to buy the television and place it on the tracks so she could trample it like a civilized being.

Civilized as she tried to be, her temper and the city’s attacks had cost her many riders. The mayor sent assassins from a safe distance, knowing she couldn’t hit back at him. She was forced to listen to his sound bites on every radio band:

“She’s stealing jobs from thousands of local metro workers.”

“She’s an undocumented worker who has never filed taxes despite filling Rovere

Station with troves of gold.”

“She entered our borders without a conductor. Is she from Miami? Toronto? If she won’t disclose where she came from, how can you trust where she’s going to take us?”

Their campaign was more harmful than any of the paramilitary strikes. Bereft of riders one midnight, she snuck into a train depot. She nuzzled an abandoned commuter train, its windows first dark, and then illuminated by the flame of her eyes, revealing how empty it was inside. Row after row of seats, littered with coffee cups that lazy commuters had left behind rather than throwing away. Trash that would burn to nothingness if the train randomly turned into a fire-gutted dragon.

She nuzzled up against the commuter train’s tail—or whatever it would have called its hindmost car, were it sentient. It was cold to her touch, its metal so soft that it dented against her snout’s touch. She sighed smoke and closed her eyes, trying to imagine herself as a locomotive. One that could belong beside this one. Having a fleet of a family.

It felt damned ridiculous. She felt no kinship with these trains. This wasn’t what she was, not anymore, if ever.

A flash went off on the far side of the yard. She reeled up, expecting another paramilitary attack.

There were black-suited goons out there, aiming at her. Aiming cameras. They were photographing her. She was so confused by these photo ninjas that they got away.

“MAYORAL CANDIDATE MOLESTS COMMUTER TRAIN”

Asif showed her the headline from the city’s biggest news site. Apparently it was all over social media. The photographs ran alongside documents, anonymously disclosed, that outed her as being an alchemized train.

She could have kaiju’d the entire city. She broke down sobbing at El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Station, her tears burning through gravel and igniting fires in the sewer. Asif actually talked the crowd out of filming her crying fit. At least that wouldn’t go viral.

Huffing raw heat that made all the air shimmer, she pushed herself up and stared in the direction of city hall's red steeples.

Asif asked, "Do you still want to go through with it?"

She growled like an engine revving to life. "If they want to mock my nature, let's show them all of it!"

★ ★ ★

Campaign aides dug up the construction manifest for Commuter Train 2247 and released copies to the media. Its steel was a domestic alloy. The factory yard where it was constructed lay right on the coast of Prosperity.

"I'm more American than anyone in this city," Liza told Jenny Savage, a popular streamer. They had a tearful sit-down interview under the stained glass in Rovere Station. "Prosperity is supposed to be a better place. We have Ferdinand Verbiest Lane and the Richard Wright Public Library because we respect everyone from everywhere. So why am I unwelcome?"

Resting her head on the station's concrete platform, Liza told the story of how Waddington had secretly siphoned public funds to alchemists and created her as a distraction from his numerous sex scandals. She was a disowned child he'd done nothing but try to murder. Which of them was really the villain?

"I've never attacked a living soul that wasn't attacking and terrorizing me," she said, blowing her nose too hard and accidentally melting Savage's trailer. Savage waved for her to keep talking anyway. "I don't hate him. Waddington is a broken shell, corrupted from what likely once was an idealistic thinker. Myself? I'm still a bit of an idealist."

As far as polling was concerned, the interview was a monster. By the following morning, half her back was covered in advocates and protestors. Their support warmed her, but she kept her mind on the greater goal.

By noon, Waddington's people accepted a debate—one debate, with the possibility of more—if Liza swore not to devour or burn anyone, conceded to allow trains back on the rails, and signed their pledge to avoid negative campaigning.

★ ★ ★

It was the biggest non-sporting night in Prosperity's history. The highways were packed bumper-to-bumper for miles even though metro service was operating again. Anyone who rode the rails, though, had to get off a stop before Giuliano della Rovere Station since it was the site of the debate. The moment Lewis Valerio sniffed about taking the debate off the rails, Liza's people threatened anti-discrimination lawsuits. Liza's reliance on rails was a legitimate disability.

Waddington arrived in a shiny motorcade, with his strong chin and gelled hair, and a tailored suit. He strutted around Rovere Station like he was the dragon that haunted it, only pausing once beneath the bearded figure in stained glass. By then Liza knew it was supposed to be the Christian God and thought, honestly, Waddington's plan to animate it with the red liquid had been ambitious. But gods worked in mysterious ways.

Her scales were polished and buffed until she could see her reflection in her own tail. She winked to Rovere Station's stained glass ceiling as she sauntered her hundreds of legs toward her podium. She was the animated one. She'd do the work down here.

Whoever had run setup had given her the same four-foot-tall podium as her human opponent, and she had to loom from the tracks and over the platform to address the mic correctly. She was going to make a show of it until Waddington walked halfway across the platform between their podiums, a hand extended to shake with Liza.

Reporters from every channel that could fit in the station trained the world's attention on her. All the flashes from cameras and phones made her shine like a metal statue. She could have been a statue of a dragon for the long photogenic moment of her head pointing down at the handsome mayor, offering a fair fight.

But statues didn't bite handsome mayors in half, and Liza did.

It was fun listening to all the reporters screaming for their lives as Waddington's innards dripped from her maw. Part of Waddington snapped free and thudded wetly against the tracks, eliciting a funky reverb from his microphone. It was his only rebuttal.

Everyone else fled Giuliano della Rovere Station, which was melodramatic of them. They had nothing to worry about from Liza. No one

else was under threat, even if the reporters made dissenting accounts throughout the night. She'd gotten the man she wanted, and he tasted of butter and lavender.

"Maybe I went too far," Liza said as Asif's children bounced on her tail. They'd come to show her all the animated GIFs of her devouring the competition the night before.

While most of Prosperity was terrified, the internet loved a good mutilation. Young people were creating online petitions for her to eat other government figures. She had hundreds of appeals from countries across the world.

She said, "But popularity seems so fickle. I bet I can win my riders back. And I'll do it on my terms, in my own time."

Asif sat on a bench up on the platform, as though awaiting the next train. "No one's going to run against you. Not after Waddington."

"You do it, Asif. Tell them I'm pulling out of the race."

"Why give up the chance to make real change?"

"Hey," she said, fixing him with as gentle a stare as eyes made of fire could muster, "I used to be a train. I've had all the real change I can handle."

She basked in the morning sun that filtered through the stained glass overhead, breathing easier than she had in weeks. This was the big change: to feel like it didn't matter if she'd ever been anything else. Being flippant about it was such a release.

Asif was the only human who reliably looked her in the eye. This morning, this time, he looked past her, to his daughters. They squealed as they rode down her tail like she was a living playground slide.

When they slid down, Asif looked her in the eyes. "Will you help me run? This city needs reform. Infrastructure. Good jobs instead of paramilitary nonsense."

"You think you can control this city?"

"You don't think I can?" He laughed short and shallow, what struck her as a perfect politician's laugh. "I managed you."

"That's going to be your platform, isn't it? That you can keep me in line?" As she asked, Asif's kids climbed up one of the arches of her back so they could slide down her again. She tilted her snout over them, exhaling

smoke suggestively in a way only Asif could see. “People love a dragon slayer.”

He rolled his eyes at her threat. He knew her too well to believe in the threat. The man said, “I met a lot of good people on your campaign. We’ll make it work.”

She actually believed him. It gave her a different kind of warm feeling inside. “I look forward to seeing what you do. Although from here, I don’t have a good view of city hall.”

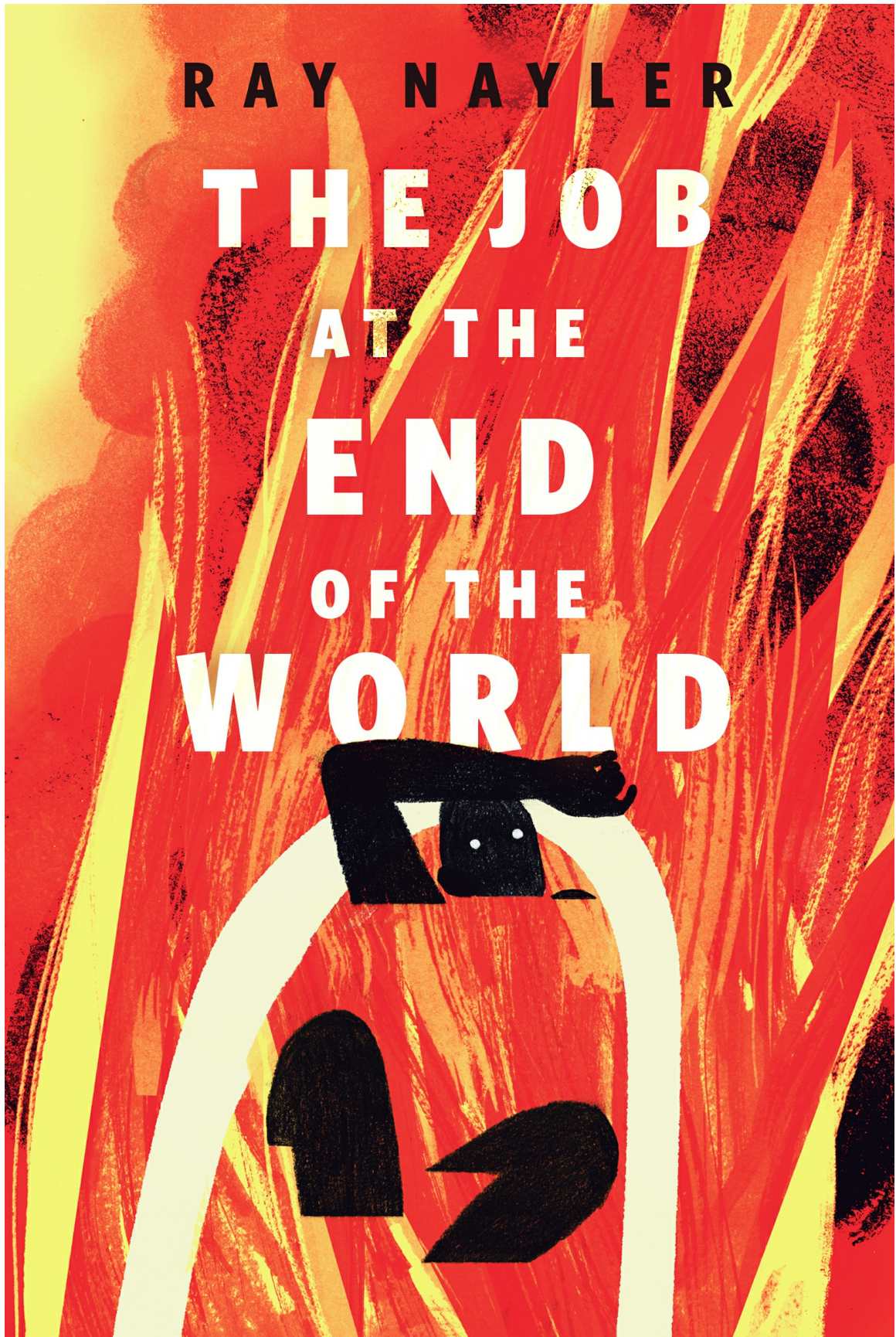


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RAY NAYLER

THE JOB
AT THE
END
OF THE
WORLD



The Job at the End of the World

RAY NAYLER

illustration by

KEITH NEGLEY

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

The nail gun was busted so I was up on the roof with an actual hammer. It wasn't bad: a minor storm had come in overnight and swept the heat away. The morning was bright and almost cold, even in July. A good morning for work.

There were an odd number of us on the crew, and I had seniority, so I'd ended up with a motel room to myself on this job. A clean room, with a bathtub. There was no stopper, so last night I'd stuffed a washcloth in the drain and filled the tub, then soaked my bones for an hour, adding more hot water every few minutes.

In the empty bedroom the TV talked fire, flood, heat, and storms. It talked riots and the injustice of the failing courts. It talked war. It talked the way the TV had talked all my life. I found it comforting. I listened as I always did, imagining Earth from space at night. As the TV named places they lit up on the rotating globe. But on any given day, most of the world remained dark. Unnamed. Safe. Most of the world—massive beyond measure, unknown to any one of us—just went on, in peace.

So I'd had the luxury of a bath, a quiet evening on a decent bed, and even what the motel called a "continental breakfast"—an environmentally correct ecofoam cup of drip coffee and a sticky, slightly nauseating blueberry muffin wrapped in unrecyclable plastic.

Close enough for a good morning. If only Anton would shut up.

But he wasn't about to shut up, and I knew it. I'd worked with Anton six or seven times. A couple of fire-season jobs, a hurricane-season job, three tornado-season jobs. I worked the Galveston Tsunami with him, and I was his team lead for the reconstruction of downtown Los Angeles after the fiver tornado touched down.

Anton was everywhere. Like me, he worked all the disaster seasons. He stayed on the move with any crew he could get on, signed with whatever

company was giving the best deal. Anton never had trouble finding work. He could roof, he could frame, he could drywall, he could wire. He could do plumbing, tile a bathroom, install windows. He could even manage some basic HVAC. And he never complained: Anton would strip mud-soaked carpeting out of drowned living rooms, salvage copper pipe out of condos shattered by hurricanes, clear drains clogged with the bodies of dead animals—even if they were the kind that wore clothes and walked on their back feet.

Anton never complained. And he never, ever stopped talking. Everyone on a crew with him learned soon enough that no matter what you did, he wasn't going to shut up. Spend a day with him, and you learned a lot about his life. You learned about the way things were after the war in Ukraine, when he learned how to do everything he knew, putting up one UN-funded prefab building after another in cities that had been reclaimed from the Russians as nothing more than piles of shattered concrete reeking of death. About how he'd built from west to east, right up to the Line of Contact, where every once in a while you'd hear a thump in the night and come out to see that bear-paw shape a mortar left in the middle of the street, or on a wall panel you'd just put up.

Then, when Anton felt he'd done enough, he'd walked away from Ukraine. He'd walked west, following jobs across the EU and eventually to the United States, where the pay was better and the regulations—as he put it —“basically do not exist.”

You learned a lot about his life, but you also learned a lot about other things. About the conspiracy theories that crawled around in Anton's brain like ants moving bits of snipped-off reality around into piles. About Anton's bizarre religious ideas, triangulated somewhere between Orthodox Christianity, thirdhand shamanistic claptrap, and flaming millenarian swordfights in the sky.

That was the track he was on that morning: the religious track. Fucking up the start of an otherwise glorious day while I hammered within earshot.

“I am up there on the roof tacking and some lady she comes by and she looks up and she says to me, ‘You are doing God's work.’ And all day after I am thinking about this. Turning over in my brain. I am thinking—God's work? What she mean by this? Because depend how you see it. If hurricane is

God's work, if God *send* hurricane to destroy this place, and hurricane do its job *really well*. Then we come in and we build all buildings back ... how is this God's work? What I am thinking, after what lady says to me, is that maybe this is *devil's* work we do. Because maybe what God want is to push human beings back a little, yes? We are arrogant. Think we can do everything, have everything, not paying attention. And God says—*Here. Here is limit*. But we are not interested in limits. We have insurance. We have president who shakes fist in air and says, 'We will rebuild.' Nothing is more arrogant than this. So maybe this is devil talking."

"Then why do you keep working for him?" I asked.

"For who? President?"

"For the devil."

"Devil pays best rate going," Anton said. "With pretty good overtime and per diem."

★ ★ ★

We stayed there a month, working for the devil or whoever. A glorious month of evenings soaking in the tub of my single room. The heat returned. The drowned town, rising from the polliwog-choked pools of its flooded basements on 2 × 4 skeletons, started to take shape. Not the shape it used to have: that couldn't be reclaimed. The shape of something new, born of insurance and federal dollars, of people trying to correct mistakes, but also of people trying to make their lives better.

What they don't tell you is that when people's lives are destroyed, sometimes it is a blessing. People talk about damage and loss, but what they don't talk about is the way the storm can wipe a life clean. The way it can give you a chance to start over. The way it reveals pathways you couldn't see before. For some people, the storm, the tsunami, the fire—they are salvation. They sweep away a world that wasn't any good to start with. Sometimes, when people move away after a storm, it isn't because they are afraid another disaster will come: it's because one disaster was enough to do what was needed.

You can't tell that to the cameras. You can't stand in the middle of your ruined town and tell MSNBCNN, "I can't believe it. Yesterday, this was a

shitty town I hated with every atom in my being. And today? All that's gone!" then give a whoop of joy and walk off.

I soaked every night with that washcloth stuffed in the drain and I realized: I was tired. I'd been doing this job for three decades. I had started back when I barely spoke English. Back in the days when we had no union. Back when we had no health insurance, no bargaining power, no binding contracts, no base pay, no protections. Back when sometimes, at the end of the job, the company just dissolved, leaving nothing for a worker's compensation claim to stick to, even if you did have the legal wherewithal to make one.

Now, it was different. Over the years, they had come to realize how much they needed us. This had gone from being a job for the desperate to something respected. We were resilience workers now, holding the line against destruction.

But I was getting tired. The people I'd started working with were all gone. Some of them were dead. Some of them I'd seen die—electrocuted at the edge of a canal, impaled by rebar when a parking garage collapsed, swept into oblivion when a damaged dam finally broke.

But most of them just walked away. They learned to do something else. They set up contracting companies of their own, bought vans with ladders on the roofs and their names on the sides. They completed night courses and became other people: IT techs, paralegals, dental assistants. One of them even became a smokejumper: I guess she wanted to see what destruction looked like while it was still happening.

Not me: I stuck around. Fire season, tornado season, hurricane season: the tail of one is always in the mouth of another. You can follow destruction's loop all year long. I've been watching the world end for thirty years. It just keeps ending.

You get addicted to traveling. You get addicted to meeting the new crew, to the conversations around the table in diners good and bad, the camaraderie of bringing a place back to life. You get addicted to the opportunities, too: I've been all over the world. I mean, the world isn't ending only in America. And most places have their local versions of us, but when it's too overwhelming for the local crews, they fly us out. I've taken my tools to

many ruined towns I'd never even heard of until they were destroyed.

The yellow-and-black DeWalt drone dropped another box of nail cartridges next to me on the roof. The nail gun was working again. It was hot, and we were all in boonie hats. Anton had covered a lot of verbal ground in a month, but now he was back to his favorite subject.

“What I am imagining,” he said, “is what would happen if we *not* rebuild. Say we leave every town destroyed. Goodbye, Malibu that God has been trying to kill forever. Fire destroy you. Goodbye, coast of Florida, full of alligators and sweaty old farts. Hurricane drown you. Goodbye, Los Angeles, where you sit in robot car in traffic until ass hurt —giant tornado eat your freeways. Goodbye, Tahoe, where techbros bother forest animals and drink nasty craft beer taste like marijuana. Tornado eat you, too, but tornado made of fire this time. Fire tornado amazing! God make this one special for douchebags who drive up property values and turn place to shit. Goodbye, Nebraska—buffalo come back and poop all over farms that drained water from giant underwater lake to make nothing but high fructose corn syrup. After California turn into one big fire all year, nothing left to burn. No asshole to grow thirsty almonds in desert on government subsidy. Every once in a while, you pass chimney in forest, think: oh yes, people used to think they could live wherever they wanted. But God taught them lesson. And they learned. All the people move together now. Stay out of forest. Stay off beach. Occupy smaller space. More simple life. Own less. Do less. Work less. Think more. Nature come back.”

“And yet,” I say, “I’m sure I’ll see you next season.”

“Like I say ... devil pays best rate going. And devil may be many things, but he is not quitter.”

But what I am thinking now is that there won't be any next season for me. I'm not just soaking in the tub every evening for enjoyment: I'm tired. My bones are tired. My joints have had it. Thirty years of mucking out storm drains. Of swinging a sledgehammer, a shovel. Of standing in hip waders in water reeking of decay.

I'm tired—and I'm also reasonably wealthy. With no one to spend my money on but myself, and all my expenses covered for most of the year, I've managed to save up and buy a place of my own.

I've made my paradise as safe as possible. It overlooks the sea, but is far enough away that the waves could never reach it. The forest that was once around it burned a decade ago, leaving little fuel to ignite again. The trees have started to come back, but I won't let them near my little house with its fire-hardened metal roof, its ember-proof vents and boxed eaves, its fiber-cement walls and tempered windows.

On the last day of the job, we stood around in the parking lot, saying our goodbyes. It was time to turn it over to the local contractors. We'd nudged the town back toward existence: now they would finish the job.

Anton was already gone—signed on to another job that paid better, he said. I didn't ask where he was headed.

A week before, I'd turned the TV off. Maybe for good. It used to be that the world was mostly dark, and safe, no matter how many disasters the television named. But now it seemed like the TV was just listing as many names as it could, until that whole spinning globe seemed like one rotating ball of flame. I knew that wasn't the case, of course—but it had begun to feel that way. It had begun to feel like maybe Anton was right. I had started to have strange religious thoughts of my own. What if when the cities of the plain were destroyed, they immediately began to rebuild their walls? What if after every plague, Pharaoh shook his fist at the sky and said, "We will rebuild!"? What if before the flood *all* the sinners built boats, then floated around waiting for the waters to recede so they could pump their basements dry and file their insurance claims?

Enough. These were the thoughts of a resilience worker whose own resilience was beginning to fray. What I really needed was some time not spent in a motel room. Time to hike in the hills on what was left of my knees and enjoy what I had saved up for myself, what I had built.

★ ★ ★

On the flight home I found myself thinking of the time I had stayed in the ruins of paradise.

Hurricanes do strange things. In fact, all disasters have a strange way about them. They destroy entire cities but leave one or two buildings standing, almost untouched. It's as if they want to leave us with something to

compare their destruction to. A control subject for their experiment in ruination. Over my thirty years, I've seen houses lifted into the air whole by a tornado and set down whole a few hundred yards away, with no more damage inside than a few chairs knocked over and a broken glass in the kitchen sink. I've seen a stand of trees as green and alive as any untouched forest, filled with singed deer, their eyes glossy with terror, bordered on all sides by a waste of shattered black stumps. I've seen a yacht set on the roof of a five-story building so neatly that a crane plucked it off and set it back in the water, and its owner raised sail and tacked it away.

I've seen all of that. But what sticks in my mind most is the time in my first hurricane season, when we stayed in the ruins of paradise.

It was one of those all-inclusive beach resorts. The kind where you move from buffet to pool bar to lounge in a vacant rhythm. Where you spend weeks forgetting the world beyond white-sand beaches, palm trees, the glistening surfaces of pools and wet skin and sea.

Not the kind of place I, or anyone I worked with, had ever been to in our lives.

It wasn't the whole resort that was spared: it was just a wedge of it, a set of bungalows that had suffered nothing more than a few cracked windows when the storm came through. By a trick of the landscape, the storm surge had not reached them, either.

The rest of the tiny island was gone—nothing left but splinters and rags.

The company we worked for moved us into the resort on generator power. It made sense: these were some of the only buildings standing. At most sites we would stay at some motel outside the destroyed area and commute to our cleanup area. But here, on the island, there was no such place.

The staff of the resort lived in the buildings, too. They were seasonal hires from all over the world, flown in on guest-worker programs. They had nothing to go back to yet, so they were happy to finish out the season and keep making money.

The company ships brought supplies into a quay a mile away. We spent our days clearing debris, surveying, beginning to rebuild. But we spent our evenings in the light of tiki torches, eating toothpick-skewered delicacies off the buffet, and swimming in the ocean under the stars. The rest of the world

was gone, we could imagine. Maybe not only this island—maybe all of it.

We were there for months as the insurance companies delayed and haggled and we cleared and built. We lived our days as low-paid construction workers—and our nights as vacationers from the upper-middle class. We came “home” from work and changed into flowered shirts and evening dresses we had found clinging to the torn trunks of palm trees. An entrepreneurial resort staffer had a boat and offered evening dive classes, so some of us spent the sunset hours underwater, drifting among the more distant coral reefs the storm had not touched. That was what I did. Nothing could have been more peaceful.

Maybe that was what I was trying to get back to, soaking in the tub: that feeling of immersion, every evening, in a world of drifting calm.

When the job ended and we flew home, I was disappointed to find that everything was still exactly as it had been.

Maybe that’s what everyone feels, coming back from vacation. I couldn’t say. I’ve never had a vacation. All I have had, these thirty years, are pauses—a few days of anxious joblessness, bookended by destruction.

The plane began its descent. I thought—but not anymore. Now I had time, stretching out in front of me. Time, and enough money to enjoy it.

★ ★ ★

There are firefighters in the airport bar, laughing and watching a baseball game on television, their kit bags scattered at the feet of their stools. Headed to a place where, had I not just retired, I would also be headed in a few days. The first responders save what can be saved—we rebuild the rest. I scan their faces, looking for my friend the smokejumper. Every time I see firefighters, I hope to see her face among them.

We’d run into each other’s arms like old friends. Two survivors from the old days. I’d finally know she wasn’t dead.

I never saw her face because of course she was dead. I dreamed her death at least once a month—the tissue-thin parachute angling in a desperate zigzag, seeking a way beyond the horizonless cauldron of fire.

Some things, you don’t need to find out. You know the outcome the moment the decision is made.

I retrieve my car from the airport parking lot, wiping its windshield clean with a rag. I drive slowly, watching the emergency vehicles descend from the hills, tired faces behind the wheels. The ash has covered everything in a thin, colorless layer. The firefighters weren't headed out to a disaster—they were headed back from one.

All that is left is a foundation. The firestorm that came through obliterated everything else. The molecules of my retirement are probably already in clouds above another state by now.

I pitch the tent I always keep in the trunk of my car on the foundation, blow up an air mattress, curl into my sleeping bag. As always when I am tired, I sleep perfectly well.

I wake to the crunch of boots on tempered glass and unzip the tent flap. A man in Hi-Viz coveralls stamped with the name of a company I've worked for twelve or thirteen times is walking the edge of the foundation with a surveyor's measuring wheel.

It is an absolutely glorious day: one of those mornings when the overnight clouds break up into yellow tatters, bright and cool. A day made for hiking. Underneath it, everything is stripped to the bare cracked earth, salted with ash. I brush a circle clean with my boot and sit down, looking out over the ocean.

The man finishes his measurements, then walks over and sits next to me.

"Beautiful place," he says.

"It is. Was, I suppose."

"You have insurance?"

I nod.

"Good. But do not rebuild here. Sooner or later, fire will come again."

"Yes." I realize there are tears on my face. I am not sure when they started.

Anton put his hand on my shoulder. "Do not be sad."

"I thought it couldn't happen to me," I say. "I'm not a victim. I'm a responder. I was prepared. I thought I was."

"Nothing to be done. Firestorm over one thousand degrees. Fire tornados dance off shore, even. Burn boats in the harbor to the waterline. Pyrocumulonimbus – you know this word? It is hard word. I practice this

word many times. Pyrocumulonimbus cloud was seven miles high. Nothing survive.”

“I should have known better,” I say.

“Not to worry,” Anton says. “We are slow learners. But we have time. World will end for as long as it needs to.”



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