

ARCHIPELAGO^{*}

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2180 AD – EASTERN USA

She was a medley of perceptions: an enclosure of plump white arms, a weight on his back, laughter in his ear and the tell-tale scent of lavender.

“Connie! They told me you were dead!” shouted Tommy, grabbing hold of her as if he’d never let go.

It was as if a phantom limb had come awake, craving touch, demanding acknowledgement. Tommy’s caresses became rough enough to cause Connie to push him away with a laugh.

“You look exactly the same, Connie.”

“That means you’ve begun to forget, Tommy.”

“I’m so sorry I never asked Mira about the Sphinx. I forgot all about it. If I’d only known–”

“What a silly you are,” interrupted Connie, laying her cheek against his.

“As if it matters. Don’t I know all that you know?”

She raised her head to look at him. Her teasing smile showed that she didn’t expect an answer.

“Dear God, Connie. . .”

“Yes, darling Tommy. Come, you’re still too far away.”

He entwined his fingers in her hair and drew her closer, so close that she began to blend into him. She was saying something, but he couldn’t focus on her words; there was a weight on his chest, and it grew heavier and heavier–

I’m dreaming, he thought. But how was that possible?

He awoke to darkness. There was a cold sweet taste in his mouth, as if all of Connie were now part of the tongue’s pointillist arcana. His wife Mira’s arm lay across his naked chest, her fingers at the base of his throat;

She was snoring. Thomas readjusted her arm. He clicked softly and gestured: a clock’s display materialized: 5:30 AM EST. After a few seconds,

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the display disappeared. Which meant, he calculated reflexively, that it'd be about 9:30 PM on Meditation 17. The artificial island in the South Pacific seemed impossibly far away.

He lay quietly, listening to the gentle rhythm of Mira's snores; they bound him to this world, night after night. He placed his palm over Mira's small hand and turned his head to gaze at her.

How peaceful she looked. She'd gestured up her usual sleep set: 65% delta/35% theta, layered NREM.

"That's a proto-sensorium," he'd teased, when she'd finally decided to get the reticular implant. "Next you'll be getting nictitating membranes, synesthesia implants, and the rest of the phenomenology."

"No, it isn't! And I won't. The implant is basically an embedded sleeping pill. It's nothing like a sensorium."

Like most mainlanders, she hated sensoriums, those fabulous byproducts of late-21st-century phenomenology. Partly it was the strangeness of a device that could tweak qualia, transmogrify perceptions, and turn brains into devices. But it was more than the fact that it was a hermeneutic device, designed to interpret rather than slavishly obey. Phenomenology was no longer the harmless quarrel of bilious German philosophers; it was now a young desert God that effected miracles like the sensorium and divided the world into the Chosen and the Obsolete.

Thomas needed to pee. As he sat up, Mira's arm slid off his chest. She mumbled something and snuggled deeper into the silk. Later, he padded about the house. He checked up on Kristen; his three-year-old's face was a pigtailed moon. He stroked her hair very gently with a crooked finger and resisted the impulse to kiss her. Today would be a busy one for her. It would be her first day at school; she'd already laid out her clothes, and her new knapsack bulged with must-haves.

He circled the kitchen; its stone tiles were deliciously cold on his bare feet. Then the floor began to warm as it sensed him. His motion also woke up the serfbot and he had to gesture it back to quietude. Thomas made a sandwich using the smelly Bierkase that Mira's parents had sent from Germany. Carrying the sandwich on a plate, he went into the living room with its mix of Kandinsky, earth tones, and Jamaican furniture. Mira's presence was everywhere: scattered anime flexscripts, kicked-off shoes, books, tasseled lemon-yellow silk scarf. Kristen's toys had crawled into a corner and arranged themselves into regimented rows; the net effect was a highlighting of the general disorder. Still, as long as the space was a place, and the place was a home, Thomas didn't care what the space contained. He sat down and reached for the plate.

It's a pretty good life, he thought, staring at nothing in particular as he munched on the smelly cheese sandwich.

Thomas wondered if he should kill himself.

2160 A.D. – MEDITATION 17, SOUTH PACIFIC

Hector, Tommy, Prudence, Connie, and Raphael. The posse was at play. Tommy had Prudence's arms pinned down, and Hector was tickling her taut white stomach.

Raphael was strolling his zootar; its melancholy whale-like timbre was an odd accompaniment to Prudence's laugh-screams.

Prudence's delight/fear/anticipation had her aura roiling in a chaos of violet, black, and deep peacock greens. Because she was aroused, there were also rapidly deepening shades of red.

"Stop-ogod-no-stop-stopitstop." Prudence squirmed and thrashed, her bare legs firmly locked around Connie's ample waist. Connie, who was lost in scoping out the newscape, absentmindedly tickled her feet, oblivious to Prudence's heightened squeals.

"Listen to this," said Connie. "Meditation 17 has just been made a special administrative region of the United States. The first ever SAR! That's huge! We're on our way to full autonomy, guys."

Though the content was ignored, Connie's enthusiasm was not wasted. At the moment, Prudence's sensorium was exquisitely sensitive; Connie's intellectual excitement mixed in with the myriad other sensations being transmogrified.

Prudence's aura was beginning to get very red; Hector glanced at Tommy, who shrugged. The whale song got more, well, throbbing, as Raphael chipped away at the subharmonics. They all joined Prudence at the tipping point of her shuddering climax, and for a handbreadth of time, each identity reclaimed itself.

It took a few seconds for a dazed Tommy to notice that his mother, Kyoko, was standing in the doorway. Her graceful face with its faux-Maori tracery was wreathed in an indulgent smile. Prudence sat up, her face flushed and her aura a riot of colors and tastes. Tommy high-fived Hector.

"Under five minutes," grinned Hector.

"There's always next time," replied Prudence, nonchalantly adjusting her hair and smoothing her skort.

Kyoko was waiting for them to sort themselves out. When they'd done so, she entered the room, followed by a girl.

“This is Miranda,” said Kyoko. “Her parents, Fred and Jennifer, are my friends. They’re here for a couple of months; we’re collaborating on an ethnology project. We’re looking at communication practices on Meditation 17. Anyway, Miranda’s never been on an artificial island before, so it’s all very new and strange for her. I don’t want her to get lonely.”

The posse stared at the entity called Miranda. She didn’t look very lonely. Truth was, they could pick up nothing from her. What you saw was what you got.

“Hi, everyone,” said Miranda with a wave of her hand. A pair of dimples punctuated her confident smile.

Tommy switched to sotto-voce and addressed his mother.

<Tommy: I like her.>

<Kyoko: That’s obvious, kiddo.>

“So you guys got names or what?” asked Miranda.

They all looked at her. Kyoko broke the silence.

“Oh! Sorry. Our sensoriums make introductions a bit redundant. We all walk around with name tags, so to speak.”

She introduced the posse. Tommy watched Miranda’s dimpled smile with increasing fascination.

“Well,” said Kyoko with that bright smile unique to mothers. “Now that you’ve all been introduced, I’ll get back to Fred and Jennifer. Miranda, if you need anything just ask me or Tommy. Or anyone else, for that matter. We’re all one here.”

Miranda smiled. Kyoko squeezed her shoulder and left. The room was quiet for a few seconds, then Raphael started up his instrument; across the island, other players entered the game and the winds evoked by the shifting gamescape rippled over the music. Playing the zootar was not unlike flying a kite: tug, flutter, drop and rise.

Prudence leaned against Hector, and together they inspected Miranda, who stared right back at them. Tommy walked over to her.

“Did Kyoko give you a tour of the island?” he asked.

<Connie: Ask her if she’s ever been to Egypt, Tommy. Ask her if she’s seen the Sphinx. Please.>

Connie’s sotto-voce whisper was light as a snowflake. She had the oddest concerns, thought Tommy.

<Tommy: Later, Connie. Why not ask her yourself? >

But Connie was too shy. Miranda was saying something.

“Kyoko told us about John Donne and his seventeenth meditation. No man is an island, and all that. I didn’t know the island was named after his sermon. That’s pretty cool. Is that why it’s shaped like a cross? The island is huge!”

“Yes, it’s the biggest,” agreed Tommy.

<Hector: C’mon Tommy, be realistic. Raphael’s the champ in that department.>

<Raphael: It’s a gift and a curse.>

<Prudence: Arise, Sir Lancelot, and serve your queen.>

<Connie: Comparisons are odious, like our Donne said.>

“It’s tough to take it in all at once,” said Miranda, quite innocently.

<Prudence: Sure is, princess.>

Hector laughed.

“What’s so funny?” asked Miranda, staring at them.

Tommy realized that they all had grins on their faces. Miranda was probably unaware that the room was filled with sub-vocalized chatter. Without a sensorium, she couldn’t sotto-voce, mind-direct machinery, or transmoglify sensory data. The jerry-rigged, Rube-Goldberg brain that Nature had evolved over eons of trial and error was all that she had. Nothing she felt or sensed could truly be shared, other than through thin little streams of colorless words. He pitied her.

“Just a private joke, Miranda,” explained Tommy. “I’d be glad to show you around. Of course, without a sensorium, some things will be– inexplicable. Like some of our artwork. But there’s still lots to see. How about tomorrow?”

Prudence sniffed the air.

<Prudence: Aww, our Tommy’s in love.>

<Hector: Never mind all that. Guys, we’re setting up a hunt this weekend. You’re all in, right? >

<Prudence: ‘course I’m in. What’s the stim? >

“Miranda?” Someone was shouting in the corridor. “Miranda?”

“I’m here, father.”

She turned to them, but they’d already learned via their sensoriums that it was her father, Hiram Mather. Her enthusiasm waned in the face of their obvious indifference.

<Connie: I wonder if he’s a descendent of Cotton Mather.>

<Prudence (yawning): Who cares? They’re all deadheads.>

“Wear something light, Miranda,” Tommy warned. “It gets pretty hot out here.”

<Prudence: Yes, do wear nothing, dahling. So much more convenient.>

Hector laughed.

“Mira,” said Miranda, rewarding Tommy with more dimples. “And I will.”

Before leaving, she gave Prudence and Hector a hard glance, with a tentative half-smile for Connie. The posse noted the spike in Tommy’s aura, the surge in the sex hormones and other bodily betrayals, with amusement. On Meditation 17, there were very few secrets, and physical attraction was the worst kept secret of all. If Tommy had a hard-on for deadheads, then so be it. They could always hook in and voyeur if they wanted to; a posse shared everything.

“So what about the hunt, guys?” demanded Hector. “I’ve already got forty signups for the archipelago. Tommy?”

Archipelagos were known by a variety of names. Pelago. Sync. Hunt. Mindfuck. They were the latest rage. An illegal rage. Even on Meditation 17. The idea was to get a group of people to hook up their sensoriums in a certain way and then use a data feed– the ‘stim’ – to trigger a synchronization of minds; a firefly swarm as it were, of minds all blinking, signaling, and responding in unison to a strong emotional stimulus. An archipelago was a sort of mob-on-demand, a way to experience events without restraint. Therein lay the danger. An archipelago put an enormous stress on neural systems. Which, of course, made it really attractive.

“Like I said, I’m in,” said Prudence. “But what’s the stim?”

“If it’s a car crash, count me out,” said Connie. “That stuff makes me sick for days.”

“Why can’t we do something musical? We never do anything *I* want,” Raphael complained.

Prudence put her arms around Raphael and whispered something in his ear.

“This is top-grade stuff,” said Hector. “The stim’s a video feed from 1997: Tank Abbot versus Vitor Belfort. Fifty-three minutes of bare knuckled, no-holds barred, bruising mayhem. It’s raw, life beef.”

Tommy whistled. The extreme-sport stims were the best. “Count me in.”

“Yeah!” cried Prudence, and leaning forward, kissed him on the mouth. She bit his lip. It was her thing these days and Tommy wished she’d stop doing it. Prudence frowned.

“Fine, then,” she said and returned to Hector’s side.

Raphael and Connie's participation was taken for granted.

The posse began to debate whether it would make any difference that the island was now a special administrative region of the United States.

Tommy drifted off in the middle of it all. He wondered whether Miranda's dimples were gene-tweaked or natural. He had his sensorium replay her voice several times: *I'm heyah, father. I'm heyah. Heyah.*

Probably from Boston, his sensorium concluded, after a thorough analysis of the Formant spaces. But it wanted more data.

So did Tommy.

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"What's wrong with Thomas?" demanded Mira, staring at him.

She had paused in the midst of rummaging through her knapsack: sun-block, notebook, pen, a hat, couple of apples, a bag of dates, three bottles of water, a spare shirt and shorts. The girl was nothing if not prepared. A thin chain of freckles stretched from her face and across her shoulders before disappearing between her breasts.

He had given her a tour of the cruciform island, shown her the cables that tethered the artificial island to the sea floor, and then sprung the surprise on her: the underside of the island had been commandeered by the sea into a coral reef. Her oohs and aahs had been very gratifying. She'd been most impressed by the ancient Pelamis generator farm that powered the island. Connie kept him fed with details. Each tethered, semi-submerged, 500-foot-long generator was made up of cylindrical livematter sections linked together by hinged joints. On the whole, each generator looked a lot like a long thin snake, flexing sinuously as it sucked the energy off the waves. Mira got obsessed about the livematter. Why do you call it that? Is it artificial life if it can't reproduce? It eats krill, doesn't it? Does it have rights? Can it fall sick? It was like explaining how a matchstick worked.

They were now at the northernmost tip of the island, on a little abandoned platform that had once been a helipad. It was late in the day, and things were cooling off. Around them, as far as the eye could see, lay the Pacific Ocean, looking like something a child might draw.

They were sitting bare shoulder to bare shoulder with only the Planck Length as chaperone. Every touch sent a wet little tongue down Tommy's spine.

"My posse likes to call me Tommy, that's all."

"Well, I think Tommy is a child's name. Would you mind if I called you

Thomas?”

She sounded quite definite. What’s in a name, thought Tommy/Thomas. “Sure, I don’t care.”

“You keep drifting off,” she commented, looking at him with a strangely intent expression. He couldn’t decipher the meaning of half her expressions. “Are they eavesdropping?”

“Who? The posse? No.”

That wasn’t the whole truth. Connie was listening in. He nictitated and located the others. Hector was busy setting up the hunt, Prudence was doing some classwork, and Raphael was fast asleep. He should have left them alone; Hector and Prudence began to sample his qualia.

“Ooh, that eye thing is so creepy,” Mira shuddered. “You look like a lizard when you do that.”

He felt embarrassed. “Well, you should give it a try before you knock it. That’s the trouble with mainlanders; bunch of quakebottoms. They even exiled our founders rather than try something new.”

“You’re not exiles!”

“Why not?”

“Do you want to know what Brooke-Rose said about exiles?”

<Connie: Say yes.>

<Prudence: No.>

“Yeah, I guess,” said Tommy, wondering who Brooke-Rose was.

“She said that exiles are people who aren’t somewhere else. You guys don’t want to be anywhere else. Besides, you’re on an isle, so how can you be ex-iled? Apple?”

She held out an apple and a smile. He wanted to kiss her. He ached to kiss her. But without a sensorium, it was impossible to know what she would think of the idea.

“Can you read each other’s thoughts?” she asked.

He sighed. “No. We’re not telepathic. We can access each other’s qualia but not each other’s interpretations. You get impressions— emotions are very difficult to hide, but thoughts, well, it’s all mixed up, isn’t it? After a while, it’s like living in many brains. You’re expanded. . .”

“Like a hive mind?”

“No, nothing like a group mind. There’s no such thing. We have strong individualities, and we don’t necessarily share everything.”

“My father says sensoriums have made you all into a bunch of narcissistic voyeurs.”

“Oh really? Well, your father’s wrong. You can’t be a voyeur if someone lets you look.”

“Yes, you can; it’s the need to look that matters. Jeffrey Reiman said that without privacy, there cannot be any sense of personhood. And you need other people to affirm your personhood. They do that by respecting your privacy.”

<Prudence: Jeez, what an intolerable smarty-pants.>

“Who’s Jeffrey Reiman?”

“An early 21st-century philosopher. I’ve read all the greats. I’m going to be a philosopher one day. Do you want to know what Sartre thought about intimacy?”

“No. Who cares? We have plenty of privacy. We share experiences, not secrets. And I have plenty of secrets.”

He tried to think of one, but couldn’t, and that pissed him off even more. Goddamn deadheads. Prudence was right.

Mira was looking at him with that same intent expression. A curious half-smile played about her face.

“Would you like a secret, Thomas? Just yours?”

<Hector: Looks like she’s randy, Tommy. She’s oozing andro.>

<Prudence: What do you see in the titless wonder? >

<Connie: Leave them alone. Ask her if she’s read Donne’s “Exstasie,” Tommy? >

“Are you angry with me, Thomas?” Mira asked him, very solicitously. “Really very angry?”

But they were too close; too close for questions, too close for clocks, and too close to prevent the clumsy entanglement of arms, tongues, and wetness. The sensory strangeness of her was so overwhelming that he had to pull away.

<Hector: Holy shit! Did you guys get that? >

<Prudence: Really? I felt nothing. Connie, you? >

<Connie: Kiss her again, Tommy.>

He shook his head. He was in too many places. Mira put her arm around him. He touched her face, caressing her dimples. It really was a perfect day.

Tommy died and was revived and then he died again. He died once for every jerking body trapped in the archipelago. He died so many times that his brain stopped trying to be one. Visions:

- Connie sprawled on the floor. Blood-filled mouth.
- Raphael's screams piped through the zootar.
- Prudence ripping the skullcap off Hector's head.
- Lavender sky.

Then Tommy slipped into a coma as his super-stimulated brain tried to heal itself. It was a million-year old technology after all, and survivors excel in surviving mistakes.

He woke to a gentle click-clink sound; he didn't realize that it was the sound of knitting needles. He reached out and there was— nothing. Panic. He reached out to the blank-faced clock. Queried it. Nothing.

"Mom," he croaked. He didn't recognize the woman who rushed to his side.

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The archipelago had failed because the stim had been infected with a Trojan, disguised as a simple booster utility. Boosters tweaked the emotional highs, flattened lows, and in general, acted as Helpful Hannahs. Just about when Belfort delivered the final bone shattering blow, Hannah had shed her disguise and done what she'd been really designed to do: scramble brains, overload neuralware, wreck havoc.

The medics reconstructed Tommy, but slowly. He would never again have a sensorium, never again be part of any posse, never again be a participatory citizen of Meditation 17 in any meaningful sense. His reticular nets had also been damaged; his sleep would be that of dolphins, half-awake, half-asleep, suspended in the deep blue sea. As for dreams, well, one could always hope. It was, the medics said repeatedly, a miracle they'd been able to salvage this much at all.

Hector had escaped without even a scratch; Prudence had been badly injured but was expected to make a complete recovery. Raphael had died. Connie had died.

His mother had been forced to drop everything and rush to his bedside. Kyoko's posse had tried to help out in the beginning, but their blank expressionless faces and private sotto-voce conversations made him very uncomfortable. Finally, he told Kyoko that he'd rather be left alone than in their care.

“They love you, you know,” Kyoko had said, very hurt. “They’re very worried about you.”

She must have told them something, for he was left alone after that. The worst part was that she never yelled at him, never gave him hell for his stupidity, never blamed him for wrecking his life. And hers. His medical treatment would be paid out of her life-extension fund. The coins of her life. It was a wretched thought and it tormented him. He cried a lot. He couldn’t help it. He would be sitting around, in perfect control of himself, and then it would start to rain. It was disgusting, alarming, and very comforting.

One day, Hector came to see him, accompanied by an armed guard. They stared at each other, Hector reaching out with his sensorium as if he’d rewire Tommy’s brain through sheer force of will. The guard, moved to compassion (he had a son of his own), conferred with Kyoko and Hector’s guardian. They were granted the mercy of one night. Hector had come to give comfort but ended up seeking it.

“It’s my fault,” said Hector, his face eerily calm. “I got the posse involved. The data feed was infected. I should have been more thorough.”

Hector sounded inconsolable even if he didn’t look it. With the ability of Meditation 17’s residents to grok emotions directly, facial expressions were becoming highly stylized, muted and unnecessary.

He placed his fingers on Hector’s face, scrunching it to make the mask reflect the inner grief. The grasp become a futile, incomplete embrace; two lines cannot, after all, achieve a triangle’s enclosure. They leaned against each other.

“I’ve decided to leave,” said Tommy. “I don’t belong here anymore.”

“Leave! Why? They’ll find a cure. They always do. You can’t leave the posse. We’ll manage. We must. How can you leave when you’re part of me? Part of Prude?”

“There’s no posse anymore, Hector. Only the memory of one.”

They argued, but guilt and despair have no grounds for compromise.

Whether Kyoko had asked Miranda’s help or she had offered it on her own, Tommy would never know. But one day, she was simply there. She had a great faith in books– he was re-learning to read– and when he tired of everything, she would read to him. If his attention wandered away from the strange and difficult books she picked (London, Hugo, Camus), it could always be found focusing on the curve of that smile, the occasional caress and the consoling armature of secrets.

They were parked just outside the hedgerow of the Montessori school, or as the Montessorians called it, Casa dei Bambini. The car used the halt to retrieve a scoopful of corn kernels and snarf it down. A few seconds later, it belched, startling its unhappy clients: Mira, Thomas, and a scowling, recalcitrant Kristen.

"We talked about this, Kristen. Remember?" said Mira, almost as if she were trying to reassure herself.

Kristen had a death clasp on the arms of her seat, preventing it from opening out. She shook her head and looked to her father for support. He opened the door.

"Might as well get it over with, honey," he advised.

The seat took advantage of the distraction to reconfigure itself. Thomas offered his hand, and Kristen reluctantly got out. Father, mother, and child gazed at the scene in front of them.

The school was not an unattractive place. It wouldn't have been easy to tell it was a school; it looked more like a series of thatched cottages. There were dozens of children playing in the yard. A few adults were scattered among them, helping a kid here, settling a quarrel there. There was an understated aesthetic to the scene, something very warm, mindful, and yet quite unsentimental.

"There's Martha," said Mira.

A gaunt, serious-looking woman had emerged through the slatted wooden gate and was coming towards them. She was accompanied by a child.

"Thomas! Miranda! So good to see you." Martha kneeled to Kristen's level. "And how are you, Kristen?"

Kristen stuffed her hands into her pockets, but granted a small nod. They'd already been introduced. It was the school's policy to have a teacher visit the child at home; supposedly, it brought the teacher inside the circle of trust. Mira had been captivated by the school's thoughtfulness. Thomas had figured it was best not to remind her that Bronte's Brocklehurst and Dickens' Squeers had also visited their charges in their homes.

"Kristen, this is Bharati," said Martha with an I-want-you-to-be-friends smile. "She'll show you around. It's your first day and so things will be a little strange. But there is nothing to be afraid of. All of us have had our first days, so we know what it's like. OK?"

Kristen looked down at the ground. "I want to go home," she said in a low voice.

Thomas sighed. He glanced at Mira; her panicked expression seemed to

indicate that she was ready to acquiesce. How strange, he thought. He had expected her to be the tough one. She'd been the one who'd done the research, she'd been the one who'd tried to tempt Kristen with the wonders of school, and she'd been the one who'd decided against home-schooling, or even work-schooling.

"Social birth, Thomas," she'd said, very firmly. "Kristen needs to cut the cord at some point. Do you want to know what Vygotsky said?"

But now Mira was a tearful mess of indulgence that no amount of theory or Martha's thorough prep could contain. Thomas bent down and gently placed Kristen's fingers around the endearingly small knapsack.

He hadn't noticed it before: against the blue background of the knapsack, a school of dolphins cavorted, improbably happy. The tickle of an unbidden memory. Beloved faces trapped in grief's amber. School, play, dolphins, islands: it had all been so very long ago.

"It's not a choice, honey. It's just the way it has to be. It won't be easy for you, but it's not impossible either. And one day, it'll even be fun."

"Why can't I study at home?"

"Because we have to do other things. Because you need to be around other children. We can't teach you everything. Like Mommy explained last night, OK? You'll make lots of new friends."

"No, I won't," said Kristen.

"I dunno," muttered Mira. "Maybe it is a bit premature."

He glared at his wife. Thanks, honey. Great help.

Bharati came over. "I'll be your friend, Kristen. Come on."

"Can't Mommy stay with me? Just for today?" asked Kristen, piteously.

Mira looked at Martha. Yes, can't I? asked her expression. Thomas shook his head.

"No, Kristen. Mommy has to go to work. So do I. This, you'll have to do by yourself. But that doesn't mean you have to do it alone. Martha will help you. Bharati will help you. You'll make lots of new friends, have lots of fun, learn lots of new things. Trust me on this, OK?"

He hadn't thought it would be this hard. Kristen's shoulders drooped, but she nodded. Something shifted in his chest as if a restless weight were trying to find a more comfortable resting place.

Kristen reluctantly followed Bharati through the gate. Just before entering, she turned and gave them a forlorn wave. He heard Mira choking back something. Martha had a very pleased look; she beamed at Thomas.

“Very sensible, Thomas. Independence precedes freedom, as Maria Montessori said. Kristen will be fine. We’ll keep a close eye on her, I promise.”

Inside the car, Mira pressed a napkin to her eyes. He grinned at her and caressed her cheek.

“Not a word,” she threatened, in a waterlogged voice. “Oh my God, Thomas, she’s so small and so damn brave. Did you see her marching off?”

“More like a condemned plank-walker,” said Thomas.

“True,” said Mira, with a sigh and a smile. “But there was courage too.”

He gestured, and the car, after stuffing down a last scoop, began to move. Mira’s face had acquired a faraway expression.

“Do you still—”

“—miss the posse?” he asked.

“Yeah. Do you miss the closeness? The variety?”

“Variety? Why do mainlanders always focus on the sex?”

“Who’s talking about sex? And who are you to call me a mainlander?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t miss it.”

“Liar.”

“Sure.”

“The thought of Prudence slithering all over you used to give me the creeps,” she admitted.

“So don’t think about it.”

Sense, memory: the moist enclosure of Prude’s kiss, the taste of those needing lips, the nip of that bite.

They glanced at each other. He wondered whether he should tell her.

“Just tell me, Thomas,” she said.

He hesitated. “I had a dream last night.”

For a second, she didn’t quite register his words, but then he had her full attention. An exuberance of smiles, dimples, and bright-eyed excitement. She punched him on the shoulder.

“Oh my God! Finally! That’s major! Why didn’t you tell me this morning? You secretive bastard! You really are something, you know that? All this time and not a peep. I knew your brain would figure it out. I knew it! It took twenty years, but that’s Nature for you: slow and steady. OK, we need to tell Doctor—”

“Relax, honey,” he interrupted. The ancient superstition against prema-

ture celebration refused to let him join in her excitement. “It could be a fluke. A one-time thing. Let’s see if it happens a few more times before calling in the quacks.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. But still! How about a small smile, Thomas? Just a tiny one? Let’s take a chance.”

He smiled at her, and they both laughed.

She looked at him searchingly. “You know, at first I thought you were going to say something else entirely.”

He had been. I sometimes think of killing myself, he had been on the verge of saying. But he hadn’t. He feared it might unravel more than mere secrets.

She leaned over to kiss him. “At last,” she whispered, “the return of the exile. You are where you should be. Welcome to the land of dreamers.” She looked very happy, even teary.

“It’ll be all right,” he thought, willing himself to believe.

“We’ll be all right.” She sounded confident.

Farewell, beloved Prudence, thought Thomas. May you find the peace that your kisses sought. Farewell, beloved Hector, brother and protector.

Farewell, beloved Raphael. The whales sing your songs. Farewell, beloved Constance, memory, mother, Sophia. I will reclaim you all in my dreams.

He was suspended in the golden moment: the belching car, the love of a good woman, the memory of his daughter’s wave, the indifferent sky, the one archipelago, the one life lived.

– The End –