

"INSANITY"

by Wagner Truppel

[2634 words]

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"One hour! One hour!", she kept repeating, not at all sure of whether she was actually producing the sounds or merely thinking the words.

In the ship's unbelievable vastness, amidst the daunting darkness that surrounded all her senses and the ever-present feeling of her captors' minds inside her own, she struggled to turn her thoughts to the problem.

"The Sun!" - she muttered - "Where is the Sun?"

With a brusque motion, Monique pulled her sweater's right-arm sleeve a few inches up and, for the third time in the past two minutes, looked at her delicate watch, mumbling when the class would finally be over. She didn't have to wait much longer.

"For those of you who haven't yet turned it in, please remember that the homework assignment is due in my mailbox no later than next Wednesday," the teaching assistant was saying. Unintentionally, his eyes focused on Monique.

She moved her head up, looking straight into his light brown, almond-shaped, shy eyes. "Yeah, that stupid assignment," she thought. "I've spent three whole evenings on that thing already, and am no closer to the end than when I started. Damn this Physics class! Damn you too, Mr. Physics TA, for forcing me to waste my time on it!"

William felt his neck turning hot and stiff with a sudden extra flow of blood and realized that his face was blushing. Shifting his gaze to a point beyond the audience, he added: "And please remember that the test date has been

changed to November 20th.” With nothing more to say, Will dusted off the chalk from his sweatshirt and pants, which was his standard sign that the class was over. People begun to get up and leave the room.

Monique Marie-Vignon Torelli had been born in the city of Bonifacio, in the extreme south of the Mediterranean island of Corsica. As with many other families of that region, which is geographically closer to Italy than to France but is politically part of the latter, her last name was Italian rather than French. She spoke very little French, or Italian, or the more common local dialect, however, the result of her parents having emigrated to the US soon after her birth. Used to living in Los Angeles, she was now a pre-Med freshman at Cornell University’s comparatively much smaller town of Ithaca, in upstate New York.

Considered by the male fraction of her college friends as one of the prettiest girls around, and secretly envied, for that very same reason, by most of the remaining fraction, Monique was a healthy, tall, well-proportioned, slender young woman, in her late teens. Yet, she wasn’t very popular among her peers, mostly because of her constant cocky, almost arrogant, attitude. Even more so now that she was dating Garret Davenport, the captain of the Cornell’s intramural football team, a pile of muscle that was the dream of every freshman girl on campus.

Neither was she very popular among her instructors, for she constantly missed classes and failed to turn in assignments and papers. She was much smarter than the average, they all agreed, but her overall attitude in relation to her responsibilities as a student lacked much to be desired. Particularly in Physics; she had this "thing", as she often called it, against Physics. For one thing, being a biological-sciences oriented student, she considered a waste of her time to have to take Physics 101 and 102. But the most important reason why she had so much difficulty with Physics, she thought, was that she couldn’t see a single inch beyond all those equations; she had no trouble plugging in numbers and getting results out, but she always felt she was constantly missing something. Eventually, she decided that it wasn’t her fault and that she shouldn’t blame herself for it. The fault existed, nevertheless, and if it wasn’t hers then it had to be someone else’s. That someone, in her mind, had to be her teaching assistant, William Faherty.

Getting up from her seat, she turned her thoughts to him. “Well, yeah, he’s kinda cute and all, but... but... he’s a Physics TA; he must be the most

boring, dull piece of man around. Just listen at the way he talks!” Will was explaining some fine point about the physics of gravity to one of her classmates - something about how tides form, something she didn’t care to pay the slightest attention to during the lecture. “He’s all excited when he’s talking about this stuff, as if it had any importance whatsoever, as if it was the most beautiful thing in the universe. What a waste of time!”

Monique had disappeared through the door into the long corridor of Rockefeller Hall’s first floor for about half a minute when she heard his call. She stopped and waited for him to catch up with her. “From the way he blushed back there, I bet he’s now summoning whatever little guts he’s got to ask me out for a date,” she mused. She entertained the thought a while longer, then concluded: “Not in your lifetime, pal!”

“Miss Torelli,” Will paused to give his lungs a break after he’d sprinted towards her, “Miss Torelli, I’ve been very much concerned about your lack of interest and poor results in our class. I wonder if there’s anything I can do to help you. I hate to see someone like you, who’s got no problems with doing the math, fail in this class. If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know. I mean it.”

“Well, thanks a lot, Will. That’s very thoughtful of you, but I don’t think so... really, I’m OK; I’ll do fine,” she said, while thinking to herself, “Gee, that’s the weirdest approach I’ve ever seen. Go get a life, man!”

Walking her way back home, down the steep slope of Buffalo Street, Monique let her mind drift peacefully amidst the beautiful late-Fall scenery surrounding her: the clear blue sky, the slightly cold wind, the line of trees on each side of the street dropping their leaves, and the leaves themselves, mostly yellow and red, covering the sidewalks. Slowly, she let herself focus on, and then be embraced by, the delicate warmth of the Sun’s light. As if wrapped in a blanket, she gradually felt safe, in tune, one with nature, her constant inner fears finally far, far away.

“Howdy!” - it was Karin, her roommate. “You’re kinda early, aren’t you?”

“I cut some classes today, OK?” Monique said briskly; she didn’t like when Karin, or anyone else for that matter, brought to her attention the fact that she was acting irresponsibly.

“Again?” Karin said, inquisitively. Before Monique could reply, however, she quickly added: “There’s a message for you in the machine.”

It was Monique’s boyfriend, Garret, inviting her again for a party at his place. She didn’t want to go, and decided to call him to discuss the matter.

“Honey, forget about this homework of yours. It’s a party! You know... fun! All the guys are coming, and some other girls are coming too. You’re not gonna let me down now, are you? I already set everything up!”

“Well, all right, you win,” Monique said, finally giving up to his arguments. She knew that if she wanted to continue being his girl, she had to give in to his will. Besides, he was right, she thought, in that it was a lot more fun to party then to bury herself on that stupid assignment.

“Why do you let him do this to you?” It was Karin again. “You know Garret doesn’t love you; I know you certainly doesn’t love him. Besides, he hurts you!”

“What? Where did you get that idea from?” Monique was infuriated, ready to jump on her roommate’s neck as a hungry lioness on her prey.

“You sometimes talk in your sleep, you know...”

“You have no right... you... you... just leave me alone!” Monique was trying to regain her control, desperately trying to conceal the truth. She wondered how much Karin knew. How much of the pain, of the shame, of the fear that lived inside her, eating her alive day after day.

As the days went by, Monique’s remaining sense of responsibility started nagging her more and more about the upcoming Physics test, particularly after she’d missed another homework assignment’s deadline. Hardly an hour would go by without her thinking that she’d certainly fail the test, that she didn’t understand anything. While taking a shower one morning, she entertained the idea of dropping the course altogether. Slowly, she felt very comfortable with it and finally decided that that’s the only way out, the only

alternative. Relaxed, she let herself drift in the hot steam surrounding her naked figure. As if wrapped in a blanket, she gradually felt safe, in tune, one with nature, her constant inner fears finally far, far away.

Exhausted, without any bearings on how much time remained, and drenched in perspiration she wasn't sure was real, her mind slowly begun to give up, drifting back and forth between the recent shocking events she had just witnessed, and the nagging, almost pounding, question.

Flashes of friends and places raced before her eyes, quickly fading as if memories of a distant past. Yet, somehow she knew they belonged to her present. Images of her bedroom, still decorated for her birthday, her wristwatch standing on the mahogany desk, an unwrapped gift-box. Was it all real? She wondered.

Often times, particularly at moments like this, when her mind begun dozing off, the ships' keepers, her captors, would once more rape her privacy, imposing on her brain images of her past or her present, images she hated, images she wanted to forget. And, above all, the dust, always the dust. She hated the dust.

They showed her images of an abandoned Earth, years into her future. Images of how humanity would be forced to move on to space or to die on a planet depleted beyond exhaustion, beyond hope. And then images of the ship, a huge - bigger than the Earth -, perfectly round sphere, adamantly holding its position at rest with respect to the Sun, as it had been doing for several thousand years now. A hollow sphere. Hollow... except for the dust.

In those few moments when she believed she was conscious, she could feel nothing. No weight, no smell, no touching sensation, no motion. No nothing. It reminded her of an experiment inside a sensory deprivation chamber that she thought she had read about.

Still, somehow she knew the ship was dark inside and filled with dust; dust so thick she thought she could feel it between her fingers. Yet, she couldn't; not the dust, nor even her fingers.

"The dust... what's its purpose?", she thought.

Did she think that question or had they implanted it on her mind? She didn't know. She couldn't tell. Had she turned insane? She wasn't sure; she begun to doubt her very existence.

Without even as little as a flicker in between them, images of beings, sentient beings, of many different species, billions of them, all suffering just like her, came into focus on her mind. Their minds invaded, just like hers. Their wills weakened, broken, as was hers.

The briefest of moments of independent consciousness swept her. Then, with no warning whatsoever, she witnessed the most gruesome act of murder unfold before her very mind. All those beings, sentient, incinerated. Indescribable, terrifying beyond anything imaginable. She screamed. Or maybe she thought she did.

Then, the dust. Always the dust. She understood now. But why? For what purpose? Silence. Was it cold? Or was it the profound loneliness she felt that made her cold?

For a moment she thought it was all a bad dream, a nightmare. She wished it were. She felt tired, and sleepy. An image of the Earth surfaced into the realms of her consciousness. A beautiful, round, serene, blue planet, suspended in the fabric of space.

Then, again, without a warning, the planet exploded, disappearing, vaporized. She could hear every person's cry, see every person's burning face, and feel their despair. All gone; all dead. She tried to cover her face with her hands, but she didn't know how.

She begun to cry, or so she thought, but no sensation of tears rolling down her face ever reached her brain. She couldn't bear it anymore. She wanted to escape. Or to die; it didn't matter which anymore.

The images of the sentient beings being incinerated returned, followed by the Earth's destruction. Again and again. She lost track of her own being; her life was slipping away from her; she was a dying soul without a body. Or a dying body without a soul.

Then, the question. They wanted her to answer a question. Her salvation; humankind's salvation. "The Sun, where is the Sun?". She thought they had given her some fixed amount of time to find an answer. Suddenly, she remembered her wristwatch and thought she couldn't tell the time because she had left it on her desk. Was it really on the desk? She couldn't remember anymore.

She understood now. It was all a test, a game. She was being tested, and all humankind's future hinged on her; all she had to do was to determine where the Sun was.

"One hour! One hour!", she kept repeating, almost as if chanting.
"The Sun! Where is the Sun?"

She tried hard to remain conscious and focus on the question. Time was running short, she knew it. She just knew it. If only she had more time. If only she could remember...

It felt to her as if eternity had come and gone, before she came up with an idea. "Maybe... The dust... Theoretically... Yes, yes! It had to be it!"; she grew excited, her face reddening, her heartbeat pounding on her ears. Or were they? It didn't matter. All that mattered was that she knew the answer; she knew where the Sun was.

"The dust must accumulate on the side closer to the Sun more than on the opposite side, since gravity is more intense the closer to the source. It's almost like the tides."

She begun to feel dizzy, as if she was going to faint, to disappear, to die, to be incinerated, to become part of the dust, like all the others before her; she, the Earth, and everyone else on it, incinerated, condemned. She had failed the test.

Her first reaction to the blinding light was to shut her eyes. She then felt surprised with the sensation of her own body, its welcome warmth and its weight. Slowly, she opened her eyes and scanned the room. It felt familiar, the birthday decoration, the gift-box.

"Was it all a dream?", she asked out loud. Her own voice startled her.

"Was it all a dream?", she asked again. She wasn't sure, until she looked at the mahogany desk...

"Monique, there's a message for you on the machine," Karin yelled from the living room. "It's that boyfriend of yours again."

"I'll give him what he needs," Monique replied, "but I need to make a few calls first."

Intrigued by her friend's unusually decisive tone of voice, Karin watched, surprised, as Monique first deleted Garret's message, without even listening to it, then called William. She asked him if his offer of helping her out was still standing, then set a date for them to meet.

She then made another call, but Karin had left to the kitchen and didn't hear what it was about. On her way back to the living room, Karin stopped, flabbergasted; Monique had made a third call, and her only words were: "Garret, your days of gang-raping me are over."

The story behind the story

In 1994, while teaching Physics in Portugal, I wanted to create tests that would entice more interest among my students. One morning, while in the shower, I came up with the idea of an astronaut lost inside the hollow sphere of the story, as a means to ask the students to explain how tides form. The question on the test was something along the lines of:

You're an astronaut just graduated from the Academy. Your first mission is to explore a huge hollow sphere, which has been standing still near the Sun for many thousands of years. Once you're inside, you get imprisoned and your captors will only let you live and return to Earth if you find a way to tell where the Sun is. There are no windows and you have no instruments. However, the sphere is filled with a large amount of very thick "dust". Remember, the sphere has been standing still for a very long time. How can you tell which direction the Sun is? Explain your answer. Hint: Think tides.

Of course, not all students got the answer correctly, but almost all of them tried to answer it, which was a significant improvement compared to earlier tests. After the test, many students told me that they loved the format of the question, and one student in particular told me that I should make that into a full-blown story.

About a year and a half later, I was in California waiting for my graduate program to start and I decided to try writing some short stories. I wrote a shorter version of this story, essentially merely expanding on the idea I had used for the test, but I felt that there was room for a much more interesting and more dramatic plot. The story, as it appears above, is the final result.

The theme of college gang-raping was motivated by a report I had read on that subject several years earlier, in which it was concluded that gang-raping was far more prevalent in American colleges than previously known. It seemed to me that the despair and the feelings of being trapped felt by the heroine in the story were very much like what I would expect victims of rape to feel, so it made sense to me to compose the story along those lines. I also felt that the ordeal Monique goes through in the hollow sphere, and her subsequent success in facing her fears, would be good metaphors for her real-life ordeal and her courage to take action in resolving it.