



MASTERCLASS

# Anthology

A MASTERCLASS STUDENT COMMUNITY PROJECT

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# SHIMMER

by JJ Ashton

---

I finished typing with a flourish and hovered my index finger over the print button sending a light surge of energy to it. The printer whined to life and I rubbed my hands together like the villain in a melodrama. I grinned like a madwoman, oblivious to my impending fate. "It's a bad idea, CK," Theo said, closing the door behind him. He reached out and placed his large hand on my shoulder. "Miranda could get fired for this." His copper eyes probed me from beneath thick eyebrows.

"It's fiiiine, Theo. You worry too much." I spun away from him in my chair and planted myself in front of the printer.

Memories of Sir Sparkles tugged my lips into a semblance of a smile. Ever vigilant, he'd stand watch in front of the printer, waiting for paper to appear in the tray and eager to slap any that offended with one gray paw. I missed him, all the more knowing that being stuck in this testing facility probably meant I'd never see him again.

Sometimes I wished things had been different. Coming here was the right decision for my family, but I wish I could have brought Sir Sparkles. I could use a good laugh watching him attack the printer, or receive a rumbling, purr-filled hug on bad days, or shove my face into his sweet-smelling fur, and I missed his head-butt "kisses".

Theo's long arm snaked past me and grabbed the printed sheet of paper. I twisted around to peer back at my tall friend.

"Charlie, what the hell's this?"

CK was the pet name Theo had given me when he found out I could kill computers. But he never called me Charlie unless upset. He was usually too leery of pissing me off. The weaponized version of my ability to control the static in the air had that effect on people. He must have been really mad.

"It's a joke. And I seem to recall you like my jokes."

"This could get Miranda fired. We ain't delivering this to the Administrators." Face red, his fingers crumpled the paper into a tiny ball.

"Theo," I said, irritation creeping into my voice. "I worked hard on that report and now I have to print it again. Keep your paws off it. I hardly have any paper left, and you know how expensive it is."

"Uh uh."

I bristled. "I'm sorry, you don't get to decide for me, Theo Warner."

"You ever think about how your pranks affect others, Charlie Konstantin?" Mimicking me, he added, "Not everyone finds them funny." He began stalking back and forth, anger rolling off him in waves.

He pushed his brown hair to the side and stopped to study me. I wondered, not for the first time, whether he was able to read minds.

The Experimental Extrasensory Programs, or EEP, had discovered a scant few mind-readers and fewer still who were precognitive. The race was on between EEP and rival companies to find the gene, and create a working synthetic version.

"Please, CK," He jerked to a stop in front of me and grabbed my hand. "I don't want Miranda in trouble."

If he'd slapped me in the face, it would have hurt less. I liked Miranda, she was kind to the both of us, but why wasn't he concerned about me? Deep in my belly, butterflies battered the side of their cage to escape, and I swallowed hard. Irrational anger bubbled to the surface, my hands clenched at my sides.

"I worry, CK. If you go too far..." An unreadable expression flitted across his features.

"What if they made you leave? Or worse." His voice quieted until the last word was a pleading whisper. My anger fizzled away. Quiet filled the space until it seemed ready to burst.

I decided to change the subject. "Theo, do you miss anything? People you met on the streets, or maybe a pet?" He didn't speak of his past often, or the father who'd chucked him out. The little he'd told me was sad. Theo was the mixed son of a white, American, diplomat, father and an Angolan mother who left when he was fifteen. Angry and despondent, his father had booted him from the house when Theo was seventeen, claiming Theo was too much like his mother. In four years on the streets, he'd avoided the worst of that hard life by swapping food and shelter for secrets or doing errands for the crime syndicates.

"People ain't got time for pets on the streets, CK. But no. No one. Everyone I care about is here." Theo pinned me with his gaze. My stomach fluttered again, this time with nervous energy, and I tried not to avert my eyes.

"Right," I said. In theory I understood, but not in reality.

"If you change a few things, it might smooth things when they realize it's from you." He said, his attention drawn back to the crumpled paper in his hands.

"So much faith in me, it's hard to resist." I teased.

"I guess I need to fix that."

"The faith in me?"

"The resisting." A slow smile added a sparkle to his eyes.

Heat flushed up my neck and I wondered where his new confidence had come from. "Come on, let's fix this." He said and pulled me to the couch, settling in close to me, his thigh touching mine. I loved the scent of his spicy cologne. A charge built in the air between us.

--

"Charlie Konstantin." Miranda's voice boomed through the door of my tiny apartment room. She refused to call me CK.

"Shit." I said, casting a glance at Theo.

Theo forced a grin to mask his worry. That worried me. I should've heeded his warning.

"Charlie, what the hell is this?" Miranda sounded incredulous as she pushed through the door in a cloud of floral perfume. She stopped, realizing Theo sat beside me.

"Shit." I said again.

Theo laced his fingers with mine and squeezed sending an unexpected thrill through me, despite the situation. If I were feeling punny, I might have said it was electric.

"I need to talk to Charlie," Miranda said in a tone I was unused to from her.

Theo lifted his chin in defiance. "I'm staying."

Miranda studied us for a moment, her gaze flitting to our clasped hands. As if flipping a switch, Miranda flushed red. The older woman waved a piece of paper, the other hand clenched at her side.

"Something wrong, Miranda?" Smugness tugged a smile into place.

"What the hell is this?" The scientist said, refusing to play my game.

"I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but it looks like a report." I sounded like an ass, but it was hard to control my sarcasm when upset.

"Charlie, don't screw with me today, I'm not in the mood."

My smile faded.

"Charlie," Miranda's face pinched. "You've gone too far this time. Too far."

A tremor rattled the paper in her hand. I'd never seen her so angry. My gut tightened and I swallowed hard. Theo placed his free hand over mine, and I realized I was squeezing too hard. He gave me a lazy smile, but the copper in his eyes shrunk to a thin rim. He was afraid. Afraid for me?

Miranda paced, biting a nail and stealing glances my way. Her thinking face was on. Miranda halted. Her chest rose and fell as her eyes bored into me.

"Miranda?" I hedged.

"Charlie," Her voice broke and I stiffened. "The Administrators demanded acceleration of your treatment. Your faked report leaked to the press and our whole program is under scrutiny. Now, the Administrators demand results to prove we are serious and can back up our claims." My breath grew ragged and stinging tears filled my eyes.

"Ain't there something we can do, Mir?" Theo said.

"I tried, Theo. I tried. The Administrators are furious. This report claims we have a synthetic version of the mind reading gene in testing." She paced again. "I've been working on one, but it's not ready and not in testing."

I ripped my hand free and bolted to my feet.

"I'm so sorry, Miranda. I didn't think--"

"No, you didn't, Charlie, and that's the problem. You never think these things through. Your impulsiveness may have damned us all this time."

Heat singed my cheeks, tears spilling. Theo stood and wrapped an arm around me. "Miranda, that ain't fair." He said.

"Isn't it? Charlie, we're given no choice but to increase your electro-gene dosages. I can tell you it won't be pleasant. I'm also to use you as the test subject for the mind reading gene therapy." Miranda said.

Perhaps for the first time, I was speechless. Goose bumps spread up my arms and I suppressed a shiver.

"That'll kill her, Mir!"

Theo caught me and helped me to the couch. How had my prank become this circus? And who leaked my fake report? I held my head in shaking hands. It took a moment to realize Miranda and Theo were still talking.

"...do it." Theo said, an edge to his voice.

"No." Miranda said.

"Miranda, I ain't gonna let her die, or worse. I helped. Test on me."

Something passed between them and I wondered what I was missing. If they were at the unspoken communication level, what were they keeping from me? The jealous bitch who lived inside me reared her ugly head and I had to force her back down. I gathered courage with a steadying breath.

"It was my idea. Theo wasn't involved." My voice was soft. I avoided their gaze, feeling stupid. Miranda looked as though she might explode, but she inhaled and leveled her brown-hazel eyes on me.

"If you take the new gene along with acceleration, it will destroy your brain or kill you. I can convince the Administrators to use Theo instead." She said.

"How's it any better if Theo dies?" My heart pounded.

The two shared a glance and Theo sighed.

"What's the big secret here?"

My question was aimed at Theo, but it was Miranda who answered.

"Theo has the mind reading gene. The ability isn't strong, but he gets general ideas from people."

I took a step back, mouth agape. Holy hell, all those times it seemed he was reading my mind, he was. I didn't know whether to feel betrayed or awed.

Theo stepped towards me. "I wouldn't punk you like that, CK. You're the best part of all this."

A static charge burst from me. The lights blinked out and ozone filled the air.

--

The end of the month was upon us and I was sick daily. Everything hurt and conversations with the porcelain gods grew tiresome. Every night I didn't collapse on my bed from exhaustion, I spent with Theo, but those were few. Despite my lingering lack of trust about Theo's mind reading, I found myself falling hard for my best friend.

I spit water into the sink and washed my face. Miranda wasn't kidding when she said acceleration would be hard.

The scientist was bent over her computer working when I entered the lab. I slid onto a stool next to Theo and gave him a weak smile. He had bags under his eyes and the weight of the world had him hunched over his knees. It was three days until they had to prove the new gene therapy worked.

"Charlie, I need you to practice with Theo. See if he can penetrate your mind."

"I bet he'd like to penetrate something else," One of the other test subjects said to his lab worker. The ass hadn't even tried to be quiet.

I sent a jolt of electricity through him. A startled yelp gave me some consolation. Theo stared at me, a quirky smirk settled on his lips.

"What?" I pawed at my face, thinking I'd missed a spot earlier.

"Huh. I never noticed but the jade in your eyes is brighter when you use your ability, they almost glow. It's stunning." Theo said.

I blushed.

The teen boy sniggered, but I silenced him with a glare.

"Charlie, go to the Graveyard to practice. We can't afford mishaps right now."

The Graveyard was where old equipment lived out its days as my targets. Few visited the room, making it perfect for our needs.

Theo pressed me against the wall with his body and captured my mouth in a lingering kiss. I twined one hand through his hair, the other curled on his chest, and lost myself in the moment. When we parted, both breathless, I adjusted my top, and gave him a lopsided smirk.

"Hello to you too."

He barked a laugh and pulled me back into an embrace. "I've missed you these last few days."

"We have forever, you know." Guilt plagued me over the mess I'd tangled us in.

"Perhaps." His voice was distant. A haunted expression lingered in his copper gaze. "It's not your fault,"

"That's creepy." I said, assuming he'd read my mind. I plopped down on the broken, old couch nearby. "Tell me what I'm thinking now." I shifted trying to get comfortable. I'd picked a spot with little padding and a sprung spring.

"I ain't gonna repeat that out loud," he deadpanned. "But I'm game."

Ability increased exponentially by the treatment, Theo could read most minds, but it worked best with me. Miranda thought our connection helped.

"I think we can say your new ability is working well. I should practice my show for the Administrators. It's in a few days." The urge to roll my eyes was strong, distracted when I spied a new machine against the far wall.

"Ooh, I have a new toy to play with."

"Sounds exciting," he grinned.

I pointed across the room. "That toy. Behave."

Focused on the far wall, I sent a jolt of energy but nothing happened. Odd, I tended to hit my target and everything else around it. Another jolt, and this time the computer made a dying groan and flickered out, filling the air with its stench.

I blinked thinking I was seeing things. Behind the old machine, on the wall, a strange shimmering faded into existence. I didn't think I'd created this phenomenon. Pushing off the couch, I stalked over to the wall and was poised to touch it when Theo shrieked. I froze.

"Don't move, CK."

A wave of dizziness washed over me and without thinking I reached for the wall. Only my hand passed right through it. I might have fallen, but Theo grabbed me.

"What the fuck is this?" I said, staring at the shimmering curtain. That spot was cold, so what was on the other side? It was summer in the outside world.

"It ain't good, CK. Please get away from it." Theo's voice trembled.

"Did my power do this?"

"I--I don't know." He sounded unconvinced.

Tentative, I reached for the almost imperceptible shimmering.

"CK, please don't."

"What aren't you telling me, Theo?"

"I saw you go through this portal. The world beyond it's... terrible. I don't want to lose you." Pain and fear flashed across his eyes.

I brushed his cheek and drew him into a hug. It hit me then and I reeled.

"You're a pre-cog?"

He groaned and wiped a hand across his face.

"I'm not allowed to tell anyone. Because precogs are so rare, anytime one has been identified by EEP or its competitors, the government intercedes. No one knows where they go, only that the person disappears. When Miranda realized precognition is my real talent, she wanted me to take the mind reading gene therapy. They would mesh better. I wanted to tell you. The more I fell in love with you, the more it hurt to hide the truth." He reached out for me, but I stepped back again.

"Love?" Brows knitting together, I pulled my gaze to the floor. I knew I shouldn't be hurt over his revelation, but it stung. Having two rare abilities made Theo desirable in a competitive scientific field, and intellectually I understood why he and Miranda had hidden it.

I stepped back again, needing a moment. My foot landed on uneven ground and I pitched backward, falling through the shimmering wall.

"Theo." I cried out, trying to grab for anything, but my hands grasped air.

The last thing I saw from my world was Theo lunging for me and missing. Air escaped in a huff when I hit the ground hard and rolled a few feet.

Feeling banged up, I stood and brushed myself off, taking in everything. An ocean of metal parts, prone human forms, and bone chilling cold surrounded me. I stalked back to where I'd jettisoned through the wall but the portal and wall had disappeared. And I was alone.

For what seemed like hours, I tried to bring the portal back, but I didn't even know how I'd created it in the first place. Tired, aching, and sick to my stomach, I sunk to the ground. I didn't know where, or when, I'd landed. I chewed my bottom lip.

The sound of rhythmic pounding grabbed my attention, and I checked for the source. A person wearing full body armor approached.

"Miss?" the man sounded young. "It's not safe out here."

I stared at him.

"Please, we can help."

"I don't even know who you are. And, who says I need your help?"

"My name is Gabe. We have to go." A gloved hand stretched out in offering. The gloves were lined with metal and simple electronics.

Ignoring the proffered hand, I stood, brushing debris from my backside.

Seeming to take that as a sign, Gabe walked ahead, leading the way towards a building in the distance.

"Where are we going?"

"To see the Administrators. All unmodified humans must see them." His tone suggested he thought I was touched in the head.

"Unmodified," I repeated. If the Administrators existed, this was the same world. If it was the same world, when had I landed?

"What year is it?" I said.

"It's ten years after the AI war... Miss."

AI war?

"My name is--" I considered which name to give. "CK."

Gabe skipped a step and spun, eyes wide.

"CK. As in Computer Killer, Charlie?"

A cold not bourn of the wind chilled my blood.

"How did you hear that name?" I said, a deadly edge to my voice.

"Theo Warner warned us you would be coming. He was most insistent we find you, that you would be the answer."

"To what?"

"Humanity."

# THE AROMA OF COFFEE

By Cheri Powell

---

It was on a Wednesday in early spring when Carla woke up dead. Since she did not realize the seriousness of her situation, she went about her normal routine. She headed for the kitchen where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air with tantalizing familiarity. The coffee pot with a timer had been a guilt gift on her last birthday from her very busy son, Robert. Something to make her think of him, since he had no time to actually come by.

A beautiful sunrise this morning. A mixture of sporadic clouds and dust combined to give an almost cartoonish look of pink cotton balls scattered over the treetops. Carla soaked in the beauty until the sun became stronger and the pink cotton balls faded to white and then evaporated. She was so preoccupied with the sunrise she forgot to take her pain medication. She felt wonderful, the best she had in years. She decided to skip the pill; it promised to be a delightful day.

The garbage truck rounded the corner and began the noisy retrieval of twenty-first century debris. Poised at her window Carla anticipated the truck's arrival and waving at the men who picked up her trash. In warmer weather she was often in the yard and they would chat about her garden. The two men worked in tandem, one in the cab, the other walking along, grabbing the trash cans, peeling off the lids and dumping the contents in the back of the truck. They would chat as they drove slowly by, commenting on the beauty of her flowers. When they expressed interest, she even gave them starter plants for their wives. It was nice to know that her efforts were appreciated.

As the truck neared Carla's drive, she thought about the approaching men and suddenly she was looking down on the truck and the workers. The change in perspective frightened her and just as suddenly she was back in her kitchen in front of the window. That was strange, she thought. I must be hallucinating. I don't have a pill for that. She giggled to herself.

She waved as she watched the walking trash man pull her one neatly tied bag of trash from the can and look in her direction. The man looked around the yard and back at the window but didn't wave. How strange. He said something to the driver and they turned their attention to the next house. Carla was disappointed and wondered if she had done something to offend them. Her letdown was short-lived as she thought about the things she had to do today.

Wednesday. Senior citizen day at the grocery store. Ten percent discount on all purchases for those of a certain age. With appropriate electronic card, of course. Carla's neatly written list lay on the kitchen table where she had left it the night before. She was meticulous in her shopping. No unnecessary purchases, but buy everything needed. She noticed there were no cleaning supplies on the list and headed to the utility room to see if the supply was low.

As she went down the hall, she passed her bedroom and stopped short. Someone was in her bedroom. Worse than that, they were in her bed. Fear froze her as she stared, uncomprehendingly at the incongruity of a stranger in her bed. Had she forgotten to lock the back door and a homeless person wandered in and crawled in her bed for a nap, while she was in the kitchen enjoying the sunrise? Would

they be dangerous? Should she call Robert to come over and take charge? Momentary fear gave way to curiosity. She reasoned that if they were in her bed, sleeping, they could not be dangerous. Maybe someone just needed a warm place. She would offer breakfast.

As she entered the bedroom she felt taller than usual. Her perspective was off again and she found herself looking down directly over the bed. The covers were pulled high and she could see strands of gray hair sticking out in haphazard directions. I know what that's like. My hair is all over the place when I get up in the morning. Not like the auburn tresses of earlier years. She had worn her hair long and flowing and considered it her best feature. She decided she would let this person use her comb and brush to tidy up.

From her vantage point over the bed, she could not see the person's face to tell if it was a man or a woman. She knew she needed to be at the side of the bed and with that thought, that's exactly where she was. What a strange sensation. Could it be senility? Carla did not have time to ponder the philosophy of strange sensations, for she was face to face with the person in the bed. She stared in wonderment. The person looked just like her. What sort of trick was this? Had someone somehow made a mask of her face and was playing a game with her? Would they jump up in a second and yell, "Surprise!"?

Who would do such a thing? Certainly not Robert. He was all business and never seemed to have time for anything relaxing. Not even with his own kids, poor dears. Maybe the neighbors? They had a key to the house in case she accidentally locked herself out. They were a nice young couple with a toddler to raise, so playing tricks on old ladies was not in their realm of thoughts. She dismissed both ideas and continued to stare at the lolling figure.

An overwhelming sensation of caring settled in on Carla's being. She must protect this person, whoever it was. Old people came to look alike in later years. That's probably what happened. This poor person needed her. Carla would stay by her side until she woke and would offer whatever aid was required.

The sun poured light and nurturing warmth through the windows and then faded as Carla kept vigil. Another sunrise appeared and another and another and still Carla stayed at her post. She marveled that a person could sleep so much and that she did not feel the need to. She noticed that with each sunrise, the light was becoming more luminous until it came right through the walls. She felt giddy with energy, restless to be elsewhere.

A knock on the front door and a key in the lock took her attention away from her task. She watched Robert open the door and quickly retreat, gasping and waving his hand in front of his face. He took in a large breath of air, put his tie over his nose, rushed back in and started opening windows. He muttered something like *Oh my God*.

Carla watched him peek into the bedroom and then dial a short number on his cell phone. All business, that's Robert. She was becoming bored with the situation here. Robert would take care of this person. The sun felt so good. She was above the trees as a swarm of people came in vehicles with sirens and invaded her home. Her home? She no longer felt attached. There were new places to explore. She looked down and wondered who all those people were and why she was watching them. They know what they are doing. She needed to go.

Carla left, although she occasionally thinks of Robert and finds herself immediately in his house with his wife and children. They're doing the same sorts of things she did when she was raising him. She easily becomes bored with their day-to-day routines and doesn't want to stay long. But she has learned one trick since coming to her new environment. If she concentrates with all her will, she can turn on his coffee pot at odd times to let the aroma of fresh coffee permeate the house.

# THE COLOR OF FREEDOM

By Lesley Ann Smith

---

The sun burned a small hole in the dense, grey cloud releasing some of the humidity and adding color to the grey day and the grey landscape. As morning drove into noon the hole widened to reveal a blue sky not seen for weeks.

Ardi glanced up from his work in the field long enough to feel the warmth full on his face but not long enough to earn the overseer's wrath. He scratched at the ground. It was easier to see the casings in the sunlight. Even the oldest casings glinted, almost asking to be collected as though tired of life in the ground. He scooped a few more into the hessian bag that slung across his narrow, young body. Pickings were thin. The artillery casings were the most valuable and had been collected long before now the boys collected the smaller casings from the hand weapons. They'd been over this ground before and so had some of the other gangs. It was more dangerous now as the overseer pushed them closer and closer to the mined area. The fighting had passed through weeks ago but the soldiers would be back. Ardi didn't understand what made this ground so important and there was no one to answer his questions.

Just last week one of the boys in another gang had tripped a mine. The boy had died in the field where it happened and was already almost forgotten. Another boy in another field on another day just like the one before, and the day before that. The overseer had recognized the opportunity. The recently disturbed ground revealed more casings and Ardi and the other boys were sent in again. If Ardi could remember his parents he might have blamed them for the hunger, the danger, the drudgery. Sometimes when he was asleep colorful snatches of the past visited him but if he tried to hold onto them they vanished in a tingle of a fragrant caress.

The wind picked up and dust swirled at his feet and in the air. Ardi scanned the ground further ahead. His bag was already heavy and a few hours more would give him enough to earn some beans with his stale, black bread for dinner. His stomach grumbled at the thought. It'd been days since he'd eaten more than bread and weak tea.

A piece of bright yellow paper drifted across the ground in front of him and lodged in a tuft of grass. It fluttered in the breeze, detritus of a happy, distant world. He glanced around, grabbed it and put it in his pocket, shoving it down as deep as it would go. Anticipation surged within him. He couldn't be sure but it looked large enough to be the piece he needed. And the wind was strengthening in the now dry air. It was meant to be. Above him, a lone golden oriole circled, making use of the breeze. It flapped its wings and circled lazily in the currents. Head down but gaze up, he watched it dive and swoop, its plumage glistening in the sun.

The afternoon dragged on and Ardi clamped down his excitement. It was never good to share too much of yourself with others. Safety came from blending into the background, from no one ever really knowing you. What seemed half a lifetime later, the lower edge of the sun dipped below the horizon and the overseer called them in. Back at their shared hovel, he collected their bags and gave them their ration of food. Ardi ate the beans and pocketed the bread for later. The other boys dispersed to their games or thieving or whoring or whatever else gave their lives hope and meaning.

Ardi ambled along the road to the nearby woods careful to keep his pace controlled and make sure he wasn't followed. From within a concealed cairn he withdrew his lifetime treasures. For other boys it might've been a knife or some money. For Ardi it was a single toy locomotive train, a book that once belonged to his father and something that at first glance looked like scraps of colored paper and a few sticks. A few minutes later Ardi had assembled the completed kite for the first time. Today's find of yellow paper made a bold statement at the stern. It had taken months and months to collect the paper and fixings, all the time making sure no one knew what he was doing. The idea had come months before that, a remnant of a childhood memory that turned over in his brain, reignited by the birds that watched him work each day.

He replaced the other items then walked further into the woods, kite in hand. In a clearing a gaggle of orioles looped and swirled overhead. Ardi released the kite and it sprung to life. It soared to the sky and joined the birds as though returning to its long lost family. Ardi pulled on the strings and the kite wheeled and glided with the other airbornes. It sprung to life in his hands, a life independent of its maker. With barely a touch it dipped and dived leaving Ardi stranded on the ground. He wound the strings about his hands wanting to be part of the wondrous flight. The colors, inanimate but animal, cavorted in the sunshine but Ardi was a grey figure in a grey landscape. He watched as minutes wound on and the sun completed its dip below the horizon. He shivered as the breeze touched his skin; he had to get back before he was missed. The overseer would set the dogs and all would be discovered. He couldn't lose the kite. It was a pinprick of color in his monochromatic world.

Ardi tugged on the kite but it tugged back and rose higher. He pulled again. It should've been a simple matter to drag the kite out of the updraft but it wasn't. He pulled with all his strength but the kite seemed to fight back. Ardi wondered if the string would break. The kite fought to hold onto its airspace. He released some tension in preparation for another attempt. The kite climbed and flirted with the birds, weaving in and out of their paths.

Tears formed in Ardi's eyes. The kite belonged to the sky with the other free things...and not with him. It belonged with movement and color and life. Despair settled on him like a stone in his chest. The kite was his and yet it wasn't. He'd made it and couldn't possess it. It wouldn't survive on the ground. On the ground, eventually it would be destroyed. Ardi looked into his own future. Just like him.

Ardi let go of the string.

THE END

## A LITTLE FARTHER OUT

by Dean Konopasek

---

The sudden hit made Frank sit bolt upright, startled. His heart leaped into his throat and he caught his breath with a harsh, painful gasp. Again, the hit. It might have been the bottom – maybe a rock snagging his herring. No, this was a halibut. The tip of his stout rod jerked quickly downward several times, then stopped. He shook the cobwebs from his head and lowered the rod, giving the fish some slack. He held it there and braced himself and tried to catch his breath, waiting for the bite to resume.

Prior to the bite his feet had been propped up on the transom and his halibut rod with its oversized reel was held loosely across his lap. The notorious Cook Inlet tide was now slack and his line hung vertically over the side of the boat like a plumb. He'd taken off his life jacket and sweatshirt and balled them up for a pillow against the back of his seat. The sun felt warm and comforting against his tired and aching body.

He had been dozing in the warm Alaska sun all morning, fishing without much luck. The breeze, which usually blew in an uncomfortable chop from the south, had fallen off and the inlet was flat and seamless. Only a small raft of kelp, torn loose from the bottom somewhere, broke the smoothness of the water. Within its coils a gull rested on a small piece of plywood, part of an old wooden boat Frank guessed, waiting for a reason to take flight or, perhaps, waiting for a piece of herring to be tossed overboard by a kindly halibut fisherman. A few puffy summer clouds hung over the Alaska Range to the west and the Kenai Mountains to the east behind him, but above the sky was clear and the sun was bright.

Beyond the western shore of the inlet Frank could see the flagship of this part of the Alaska Range, Mt. Iliamna, which seemed to fill the sky. Although the mountain was over thirty miles away it seemed to loom above him. It was deeply covered by eons of snow and ice but still spewed a thin wispy veil of steam from its slumbering volcanic peak. Glaciers, cracked and blue, oozed down its flanks like syrup.

Frank had been dreaming that he was a young boy again walking with his grandfather down a logging road high in the Oregon Cascades. The narrow and ancient road was covered with years of pine needles and ragged brown cones that made walking soft to the feet. Sunlight flickered through the pines as they walked, creating moving shapes on the forest floor in shadow and sun that changed constantly. The air was still and clean and in the distance he could hear the chirp of a red squirrel and the throaty cry of a jay as it swooped through the trees. Otherwise, the woods were quiet. Even their footfalls made no sound. The scene was a boyhood memory frozen in time, long forgotten, only to be reborn in the coolness of his dream. He let himself be carried along the road with this loving old man, hoping it would never end, hoping he would never wake up.

He'd been explaining to his grandfather how to fish for halibut. Although the old man was no stranger to fishing he had only fished the rivers and ponds in his native Nebraska for carp and catfish and spiny bream. He'd never been to sea and never fished for the large flatfish that roamed the bottom of Cook Inlet.

"One thing's important, Grandpa. The key to catching halibut is to let them have the bait. You can't be in a hurry. You've got to let them get the hook deep in their mouth. When they bite you lower your rod a little. Give 'em some slack. Then, when they take it again, let 'em have it." In his dream Frank had been holding a deep sea rod while he talked, then jerked up hard and leaned back to show the old man how to set the hook. He felt himself gasp once again and wince from the sharp pain in his chest.

His grandfather watched him closely without speaking. But his eyes were bright and smiling. His kind face was deeply lined and tanned and his hair was thinning and gray. His leathery skin was darkened from a lifetime of working in the sun. His hands were large and calloused. He'd been a farmer, a dairyman, but mostly a jack-of-all-trades, working very hard for very little money to provide for a large and growing family.

In his dream Frank smiled to see this man walking beside him, stooped with age in an old pair of blue denim overalls and a faded shirt with sleeves down to his elbows. They walked on through the forest together and Frank continued to tell stories of catching halibut. He felt a deep bond with the old man.

"I'd like to catch one of them halibut, Frankie," he heard his grandfather say. "Ever think you might be able to take me out some day?"

"Sure, grandpa. I'd really like..."

Another sharp series of jerks jolted Frank from his dream. He set the hook hard. As he heaved the rod up the fish held fast. For a moment he thought he may have lost the fish and was now hooked onto the bottom. But in another instant Frank felt the rod being pulled down over the side of the boat until the tip touched the water, bending the rod nearly double. He felt a brief moment of panic as it occurred to him this fish might be too large to boat, even if he could muscle it to the surface. He was alone in an eighteen-foot skiff drifting seven miles off the beach and, oddly on such a calm clear day, no other boats were in sight.

He'd heard stories of large halibut actually killing the fishermen who'd boated them, beating them to death with bone-crunching slaps from their powerful tails; or halibut that had somehow knocked the fisherman overboard, leaving them to drown in the icy water. Days later the newspaper would report a boat had been found, empty except for a dead halibut.

Frank tried to put these stories out of his tired mind as he and the great fish found themselves at a standoff. The halibut was desperately holding on the bottom, trying to move toward deeper water. Frank held the rod as high as he could, bracing both feet against the gunwales and leaning back hard in his seat. He'd tightened the drag as much as he dared, although he knew that if the halibut intended to make another run for deeper water he'd have to let him have the line. They remained stubbornly at this impasse for several minutes. Frank could feel his heart pounding and felt a deep tightness in his chest and the odd lightheadedness that seemed to descend on him more frequently lately. He was so tired.

He thought again about his dream and smiled weakly. There he was, a fourteen-year old boy jabbering to his grandfather about halibut fishing as they walked along through the woods.

"Hell," Frank thought, "I didn't even move to Alaska until I was in my thirties and didn't catch my first halibut until years later. But that's the way dreams are I guess. They hardly ever make any sense. Funny." Frank smiled when he thought about it, but then remembered that cold December day in 1964 when cancer finally took the old man away. His smile faded.

As the fleeting memory of his dream faded, Frank looked around and surveyed his boat. It was an open aluminum skiff with a high bow and gunwales; respectable enough for these close-in waters. The boat was small enough to launch off the beach and could be easily handled by one man. At the same time, it rode high and dry even when running through heavy swells. He'd bought the boat new and had maintained it well.

He controlled the boat from a center console. Although there was a pilot seat he always ran the boat standing up, better able to see over the high bow and watch the sea ahead. Plus, there was something about standing while running a boat at sea. Sometimes the wind cut deep and made Frank's eyes water, even beneath his sunglasses. But it always felt good and he liked the smell of the salt and loved to take it in with deep, full breaths.

He was cautious out here and watched the weather closely. He knew that the thin gray line on the horizon meant wind was coming and it was time to head in. So he watched vigilantly for the line and always kept his eyes close to the water and sky.

But today was the kind of day he dreamed about. Today there was an almost eerie luminescence to the water and the mountains in the distance. It was strangely beautiful, yet so odd. The surface barely rippled and the sunlight seemed to penetrate forever into the green shimmering depths. It was as though, if you looked closely enough and concentrated hard enough, you could almost see your bait bouncing along the bottom, a hundred and twenty-five feet below. The water was beckoning.

Voices?

Frank's rod began straining downward again as the halibut moved, testing the strength of the line that held him. He loosened the drag a little, allowing line to strip from the reel in short bursts as the fish struggled in the darkness below. The halibut peeled twenty or thirty feet of line from the reel before it stopped. Frank retightened the drag and began slowly hauling the rod upward, then lowering it, reeling in the slack. Haul the rod up, then lower it, reeling. Always keep the line tight. Suddenly, the fish would move and strip off all the line Frank had gained. This tug-o'-war continued for nearly an hour.

Voices again. Louder. Clearer.

*"... dad... me. Luke. Mom's here ..."*

Frank held onto the rod, struggling with the force at the other end beneath him. His breath was ragged and he pulled back, hoping the fish would surrender the bottom and begin the inexorable journey up to the light.

Someone else with him in the boat?

"Grandpa?"

"Looks like you've got a nice one there, Frankie. I can help you get him in the boat. Just tell me what to do."

"Grandpa?"

"I'm here Frankie. You and me. Let me see you catch that big halibut."

Frank could feel his strength fading. He and his fish were at a stalemate and he couldn't muster the strength to endure another hour, another five minutes of fight.

Other voices. A man. Vaguely familiar.

*"Hello Ellie. Luke. How's our guy doing this morning?"*

*"Hi Dr. Powell. He's had a fitful night. He's been talking some but it's hard to make out exactly what he's saying. Mom and I have been here with him and we think he must be dreaming about fishing. He's said 'Grandpa' a few times, and we've heard him mumble other things; 'keeping the line tight,' 'let him have it.' Things like that. It's hard to make out most of what he's saying because he's barely whispering, But I do know that he thinks he's fishing right now because he'd always tell me when we were out halibut fishing to be patient and to let the fish take the bait before setting the hook. That was the old man's mantra and it was drummed into my head. Maybe that's where he is right now, fishing for halibut with his grandpa. Maybe that's not so bad."*

*"Having you and your mother here is the very best thing for him at this final stage. He may still be able to hear you, so talking to him, touching him, until he passes – it's all good."*

*"Thank you Dr. Powell. We're not going anywhere."*

Another voice.

"Ellie? My Ellie?"

*"Oh Frank."*

He suddenly felt an overwhelming wave of calm and the sensation of gentle hands caressing his cheek.

"Ellie?"

*"Its okay Frank. I love you. Luke is here with me."*

He could hear the voice of his wife of forty years with clarity and love. He sank slowly back against his seat and rested the rod on the gunwales. It seemed the halibut rested as well, for the fighting had ended – at least for the time being.

"Ellie? Oh, Ellie."

*"Frank. It's okay. Luke is here. We're both here. We're going to be okay. You don't need to worry. You can let go."*

He listened. Was she crying? Why was she so sad? He was fishing with his Grandpa on a clear calm summer day. And he was hooked onto a giant halibut to boot.

Frank lowered the rod, taking in the slack with a couple of turns of the reel...then a few more turns, then another. Nothing. The halibut was no longer there. He'd lost him.

"Dammit!" Frank shook his head and slowly reeled in his line. "Goddammit! Over an hour fight, and for what!?"

*"Goodbye, my love."*

Frank reeled in his line and sat back against the seat and looked across the inlet toward Mt. Iliamna and the clear blue sky that hung over the mountains to the west. He turned slowly and looked at his grandfather sitting there in the bow in his blue denim overalls and faded shirt with sleeves down to his elbows. The old man smiled at Frank.

"Where to now, Frankie?"

Frank smiled back, feeling better than he'd felt in years, "Let's try it a little farther out."

## AFTERMATH

By Brenda Friedman

---

Hurricane Irma, second Cat 5 of the season, is blasting a swath through the Caribbean, barreling straight for Lakewood, Florida. The Weather Channel mesmerizes us for days in advance of the impending monster storm. The bright swirling images remind me of an enormous Tasmanian devil in drag. This drag queen is big and she's angry, packing wind speeds in excess of 150 mph, like she's seeking retribution for ignorant insults from frat boys. Though we've been warned to evacuate, there is no leaving the home my daughter designed for me now, not with congested interstates and little gasoline available along the way. With a projected northeasterly turn and living in the central part of the state, we choose to take our chances and ride it out, despite repeated texts from my daughter, Camille. She's such a worrier. Anyway, now it's too late to leave.

That's okay. We are prepared with a badass mamma jamma of a generator, dual-powered, electric start with a 20-hour run time per tank. We call it "The Beast" and it is set up and ready to rock and roll when the power grid fails, as it surely will. We have plenty of propane with gasoline for backup. We are well stocked with water, food, extra batteries, basically everything necessary to be perfectly comfortable for several days.

Images on television of relief shelters appear torturous for someone like me: quiet, reserved and easily irritated. The idea of being among uncomfortable and highly stressed people of every age and stripe, crammed together in school gyms or sports arenas for an indeterminate amount of time seems worse than anything Irma could throw at me. One look at my age (a very young 73, thank you very much) and I'd probably get shipped off to a hospital or nursing home "in my best interest." Then what would happen to Edgar, my chocolate labradoodle? Nope. Edgar and I will just sit tight and comfortably hunker down with books, plenty of munchies and a well-stocked wine fridge.

Near midnight, the wind crescendos, with giant trees swaying maniacally. Small debris pings our balcony railing incessantly and tiny sticks, grass and weeds slap the windows. Everything is coming from the east. Moving to different windows for better vantage points, I curiously note that the sky is illuminated with an odd yellow glow like I've never seen, even though it's just after midnight. It's a steady cacophony of wind, interspersed with roaring gusts. If there is thunder, it can't be heard over the wind. As expected, the power fails. With absolutely nothing to do in the middle of the night in a house with no electricity, Edgar and I nervously snuggle under the covers. "First thing tomorrow morning," I think to myself, "after the storm passes, I will crank up The Beast." For now, exhaustion and stress from preparing for Irma seem to kick in and we manage drift off to sleep in our second-floor bedroom.

Dappled sunlight filters through the window blinds, rousing me. Wind still howls and I hear rain, but it is a gentler version of both. Disoriented to find myself in a different upstairs bedroom, I'm trying to identify an odd noise rising above Irma-related din at the same time that I'm trying to figure out how we got to this bedroom. Crossing to a window, I can't believe my eyes. As shocking as the debris and felled trees is to my vision, I am aghast to discover two young men in the process of stealing my mac daddy generator. Obviously unable to open the locked gate, they tie straps to the gate, anchor the straps to their trailer hitch and are now proceeding to gun the engine, easily yanking the gate free. With the lithe athleticism of high

school lacrosse players, they make quick work of loading the generator and propane tank into the bed of their jacked-up pickup, flinging the straps alongside and slamming the tail gate before driving away, crunching limbs and mowing over my roses, what's left of them. All the while, I'm banging on the window above them, yelling at the top of my lungs, to no avail. Edgar, paws on the window sill, barks furiously. Howling wind, even though it has waned, seems to drown any hope of our protests being heard. I doubt it would make any difference to the thieves. Rushing to the bedside phone to call 911, it should come as no surprise that it is dead. Also, my cell phone is a brick with games. And that is that. We are officially without electricity for the foreseeable future. "That's ok, Edgar Doodle, I guess we will just proceed with glamping," I actually say out loud.

With a cursory look upstairs, everything seems fine, except that my bedroom door is jammed. It will not budge. I can't get inside. There is a whistle of wind coming from under the door. I surmise that a window must have broken, or a limb compromised the roof. I'm not sure what. But I am sure that there is an opening to the outdoors in that room. It matters not at this point, I can't get into the room without help. It's strange to me that I can't remember exactly how Edgar and I got out of the room. I must have bumped my head or something. The point is moot since we are here and the door is not going to miraculously pop open.

Descending the stairs, I feel humid, warm air and I know without even seeing that windows are broken on the first floor. As guessed, three large, high windows facing east are glassless, framing limbs from the laurel oak that used to proudly canopy our front yard. Now the limbs reach their wretched, dripping tentacles into our living room. Glass is scattered among the tree and I realize our beloved piano, lying underneath, has a broken leg. It is soaked and draped in laurel oak limbs, leaves, twigs and drenched bark. Our piano is lost. My heart sinks. Then, slightly panicked, I remember the painting.

Our most prized, irreplaceable possession, a large-scale portrait painted of Camille and I when she was 3 years old, hangs prominently in the small library of our home. Great pains were taken to properly secure and store the painting in a small closet under the stairs, built to conceal a safe but with a bit of storage space to spare. The day before Irma arrived, I gently covered the painting with a clean sheet. With care, I then wrapped it in sturdy brown paper, taped with painter's tape. Next, I double, then triple wrapped plastic sheeting around it before securing it with more tape and stowing it in the windowless, interior closet. Leaning against the wall, resting on bed pillows, I find our painting safe and secure, just as I left it. Whew!

Winds, though still rather brisk, have died down considerably. Rain sprinkles sporadically now. Through the front door windows, I see neighbors emerging to assess the damage. As I reach to turn the door handle, I stop myself. If looting has already started in this neighborhood and my home is damaged, I am at risk of being forced to leave. Edgar and I are better off here. I don't want to be separated from Edgar. I certainly don't want to go to a shelter. And, frankly, I don't want to leave my home vacant and vulnerable to more looting. It's easy to see that driving anywhere is not an option. My convertible Fiat is incapable of navigating through all the debris strewn streets.

I turn to notice my neighbor, Brooke, cupping her hands to either side of her face to peer through my kitchen French door. I quickly conceal myself from her line of sight and quietly command Edgar to sit and stay. Sweet Brooke would probably agree to keep my presence to herself, but she just doesn't have the intellectual fortitude to keep a confidence. She would let a juicy piece of information like this slip. Using what I can only assume is my hide-a-key, she opens the door, calling my name, then calling Edgar. Though Edgar looks at me with a questioning expression, he remains silent. As she crosses the threshold,

she instinctively toggles the light switch. “At least I’m not the only one,” I think. We both silently wait for her to look around and satisfy herself that the house is empty, that we are safely elsewhere. I think it is kind of her to check on us, but I don’t want her to know I’m here and inform authorities who will make us leave. She passes through the kitchen and ascends the stairs. Obedient Edgar and I remain hidden and listen. She calls out to us again. I hear her unsuccessfully try the blocked bedroom door, then the closet door. Straining my ears, I don’t hear much until, several moments later, she begins her descent. She is carrying my two Hermes bags and the box with my Judith Leiber bag in it. A small involuntary gasp escapes my mouth before I can catch myself. Brooke spins to look in our direction, but doesn’t see us. Mumbling to myself, “I guess it’s a good thing my jewelry is in the safe! Geez!” Locking the door with the box under one arm and the bags hanging from the other, she leaves. I guess Sweet Brooke is not so sweet after all.

Brooke exits through the courtyard. Edgar and I go outside to retrieve the hide-a-key which is right where I placed it 2 years ago. Apparently, clepto-neighbor has her own key to my house. “When did that happen?” I wonder. Feeling disappointed and betrayed, I just want to lie down. I’m suddenly so very tired, absolutely exhausted. I double check the locks before going back upstairs to lie down for a few minutes until I can figure out a plan of action. The .38 caliber revolver is in the drawer next to the bed, within arm’s reach, if more uninvited, unwelcome guests decide to visit.

The sound of chainsaws and diesel engines is not the most soothing sound when awakening. For a moment, I’m wondering where I am. I can hear movement and talking downstairs. I command Edgar to stay. I reach for the revolver. It is gone! I know the firearm was in this bedside table earlier, not a doubt in my mind. Stepping onto the floor, I hear a man’s voice, “Shhh. Did you hear something?” A stillness occurs for a few seconds. Then, “I don’t hear nothin’, just hurry up,” answers another male voice. The bureau drawers are opened. Someone has obviously rifled through them. Clearly, someone has been in this room while I slept! I should probably remain hidden upstairs, but every fiber of my being wants to confront these thieves. Before I know it, I’m standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching them wrench my television from the wall. “This place gives me the creeps,” says an oddly handsome young man. With the crowbar in his hands, he turns with a jerk and seems to look right through me. I can tell he doesn’t see me, like he’s on some kind of drug or something. “I’m leaving. Something’s not right here,” he says, as he drops the crow bar in his heavy-duty canvas bag of tools. He turns to leave. “Seriously, dude? We’re almost done,” his cohort answers, following him out the door begrudgingly. Neither acknowledges my presence. They must really be totally out of it. I can’t help but wonder how two young men get so off balance as to turn to thievery and drugs. Rather than be angry, I feel sad for them.

The painting! What if those wayward boys damaged the painting trying to get to the safe? What if they slashed the covering, just to see what was wrapped so carefully? I don’t care about anything in the safe, the stupid television or anything else they could manage to haul. I only care that the painting is unharmed, the one physical possession that means anything to me. Sure, I have some jewelry with sentimental value that I hope to pass on to Camille. And I have photographs that I’d hate to lose. But most of my photographs are cataloged digitally. And jewelry can be replaced, maybe not exactly, but close enough. The painting is the one thing I must protect. It’s the one thing that would crush my soul to lose.

I turn to find the closet door closed. Relief! The boys didn’t even locate the closet with the safe, not that they could have opened or removed the safe. Steel bolted to the concrete slab and impenetrable, that baby isn’t going anywhere. But to get to the safe, the painting would have to be moved out of the way. The fact that the safe is secure, doesn’t mean that a thief intent on cracking it, wouldn’t give a good

effort, damaging everything around it in the process. Now the question is whether or not to move the painting. But, where? I try to move it slightly to better conceal the safe and can't seem to budge it. It's in a heavy frame, seemingly heavier than when I managed to place it here. I suppose stress, lack of sleep and exhaustion is taking its toll. With the intention of returning after I rest and revive my strength, I simply leave the painting as is. Anyway, I can't think of any place in the house that it would be safer.

Camille, in Atlanta, must be worried. Surely, news channels are covering the damage and she will know that our area is hit pretty hard. I wonder at the extent of the damage. Without a radio, television, wifi or phone service, there is no knowing for sure. Certainly, our neighborhood was blasted. Enormous oaks and black walnut trees are uprooted all around me. Tall stately palms are broken in half. Remaining trees that are somewhat upright list toward the west, defiantly struggling, hours after the storm has passed. Smaller shrubs and hedges are covered in debris. Crumbled awnings rest precariously among limbs. Where are all the birds and squirrels? Pergolas, wrought iron fences, bougainvillea arbors and street signs all nestle among the tree limbs, crumbled and broken. From every window, broken or intact, the vantage is destruction. With this kind of damage, Camille will try to get to me, especially since she is unable to contact me. I consider writing a message on my garage door but decide that doing so will flag someone that the house is occupied. I'll wait for Camille. She'll get us out of here and know exactly what to do.

I'm confused. Time has passed. I know this because the once pert green foliage of the fallen trees is beginning to wilt and darken. An odd smell permeates the house, a mustiness. I must have slept a really long time. Looking out the window, I see that the street is somewhat cleared. The large fallen trees are still there, but they've been sawn into smaller sections and relocated to the sides of the street, making room to drive a vehicle. Crossing to the front of the house, Edgar and I see a police cruiser pull into the front driveway. Camille emerges from the passenger seat, looking up at the house. Edgar and I run downstairs to greet her. I'm so happy to see my girl, a young woman now. Though she is clearly upset at the state of the house, she's still her beautiful self.

She comes through the front door as I reach the bottom step. Edgar bounds toward her, but stops, tail wagging. Camille doesn't look at Edgar. She is scanning the living room with a shocked expression. Tears well in her red-rimmed eyes. I try to call out to her, but nothing escapes. I move toward her, placing my hand on her shoulder. She doesn't turn to me. That's when I know.

The cop steps in behind her. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Edwards. I'll just stay right here while you look around. Please be very careful, especially on the second floor. If you need me, let me know"

"Mommy, I mean, my mother was found in her bed, right?" she asked. "Edgar, ah, her dog was found with her, correct?" At the sound of his name, Edgar looks at me as if to say, "See! She loves me!" I smile at my dog. And I smile because my 40-year-old daughter still calls me Mommy.

"Yes ma'am. That's correct. She did not suffer. It appears that she was sleeping when the tree crashed through the roof over her bedroom. The medical examiner stated that death was instantaneous. The dog died beside her."

Camille walks around the downstairs, opens cabinet doors, pulls out drawers, runs her slender fingers along the counter. It's clear that she doesn't really see anything. She's just walking through, zombie-like, touching things she knows I touch. "Looting was rampant just after the storm? It wasn't just our home?"

“That’s correct. Generators were big targets, people needed those. Damaged and vacant houses got hit pretty bad. We can refer you to contractors who can get the house boarded up for you until you can get things sorted out.”

“Thank you.”

Camille enters the library. The wall space where our painting usually hangs is empty. With a sharp gasp she screeches, “THE PAINTING!” I want so much to calm her, to reassure her. But I can’t. I can only watch as she starts running through the house, flinging open closet doors. She bolts up the stairs, then stops midway, turns around and comes back down. With her hand on the doorknob to the closet under the stairs, she closes her eyes, takes a slow deep breath. She whispers, “Mommy, please help me. I can’t do this alone.” With that, she slowly opens the door, flips on the light switch that now has restored power. She sees the covered painting resting safely inside the closet. With that, my beautiful child falls to her knees and cries. “Thank you, Mommy.”

## LIFE AND DEATH

By Tammy Euliano, MD

---

Chest pain.

Not a multi-trauma, but better than earaches and drug seekers.

Clare beat me to the assignment board. “Please let me have the chest pain in 3,” I said. “I can’t take any more snot or pus or whiny kids today.”

She raised an eyebrow, but still held the marker poised next to Room 3.

“I promise not to race you for the next trauma.”

“Two traumas,” she said. “I can’t stand any more whiny parents.”

“Deal.” I wrote my initials.

“Remind me why we chose Emergency Medicine again?”

My sentiments exactly. One month into our internship and boredom exceeded thrill by a large margin. “If this guy has indigestion, I quit.”

Clare smiled in silent agreement. We were supposed to learn to handle emergencies, but so far were relegated to simple cases a triage nurse could handle.

I knocked at Room 3 and entered to find a large man on the gurney. His white dress shirt lay partially unbuttoned, with multi-colored ECG leads snaking through in all directions. His face appeared relaxed, but his eyes—far from it. Pain? Anxiety? A woman stood at his side, holding his hand, concern etched in the lines of her care-worn face. Her red dress contrasted sharply with the institutional pale green of the walls and cabinets.

“Mr. Toten?” I said.

He nodded and gestured to the woman. “My wife.”

“I’m Dr. Jill Warren. Tell me what’s going on.” I logged into the computer positioned to his left and started my note:

*7/25/17 1100 70 year old black male presents with acute-onset chest pain during church.*

The questions came mechanically: what makes the pain worse, what makes it better, have you taken anything for it, any history of heart disease in the family?

His answers were short, expounded upon by his wife.

And then Mr. Toten stopped answering.

“Jared?” his wife said, then repeated louder as she grabbed his shoulders. His head lolled.

I reached for his wrist - no pulse. “Mr. Toten?” Nothing at the carotid either. I glanced at the overhead monitor just as the alarm blared. The ECG traced abnormally wide spikes, while the pulse oximeter showed no deflection at all. What had I missed?

‘Pulseless V Tach’ emerged from somewhere in the depths of my brain. I’d completed the ACLS course only weeks earlier, yet already it was murky. Or maybe this was a dream, or a monitor malfunction, or...

The door flew open and several staff ran in. “V Tach,” I said as I lowered the head of the bed.

“Starting chest compressions.” I pushed rhythmically on his sternum, stiffer than the training manikins. Someone lowered the gurney, improving my angle. Chest compressions were certainly the right thing to do. I probed my brain for the protocol attached to the diagnosis, but the next step remained just out of reach.

The wife’s anguished sobs faded as she was escorted from the room.

“Charge the defibrillator,” said Dr. McCall, the upper level resident. “Epinephrine 1mg.”

The next step of the algorithm. Of course.

“Clear!” Dr. McCall held the paddles toward Mr. Toten’s chest, waiting for me to back away. Maybe if I kept hands on the gurney he could shock me out of my funk...or not.

KA-THUNK. The patient’s chest jerked.

“Resume CPR,” Dr. McCall said.

I did, but my eyes tracked the white line sketching across black. First one blip, then another, normal sinus rhythm.

“Pulse check,” Dr. McCall said.

I stopped compressions and pressed two fingers to his neck. “Pulse is present.” We saved him, well, mostly Dr. McCall. And what did I miss before he arrested?

Mr. Toten’s eyes opened, staring directly into mine, the same enigmatic expression that filled my heart with lead.

“My wife—” he said with a coarse sandpaper voice, then his eyes rolled back and the alarms sounded again.

“V Tach,” Dr. McCall said. “Resume chest compressions.”

A nurse sprang to action in my place, my brain in slow motion...those eyes...

Dr. McCall continued to shout orders.

Another shock and the pulse returned. This time I was ready when his lids fluttered open.

“My wife...please.”

This time the pain was clear in his dark eyes, but so much more, sadness maybe? But something else. Hope?

And then he was gone again. As if he were slipping back and forth across an unseen border, between life and death.

“Let’s get her.” A hand on my shoulder steered me toward the door, but I didn’t want to leave.

“I need to manage the airway.” This was my first chance to intubate a real person. Then I saw the white coat, the white hair, the piercing blue eyes of understanding and censure in equal measure. I couldn’t argue with a senior attending, even one I’d never met. ‘Dr. Gravenstein,’ according to his lab coat, wore not scrubs, but a shirt and tie, and dress shoes...in the ER. “Mrs. Toten met you. You must be the one to tell her he is dying.”

“But he’s not—”

He shook his head. “We must hurry.”

In the waiting room, through a sea of black suits and dresses of every color, hers was the only red. “Mrs. Toten.” I raised my voice above the din, it sounded too harsh, but there was no time to waste.

She pushed through the crowd, hands supporting her elbows as she passed, her face a mask of grief and fear.

“Your husband is—”

Dr. Gravenstein cleared his throat loudly, then whispered, “Not here.”

Numerous faces stared expectantly, including other families, other patients.

“Come with me, please.” I led her to a small room across from the entry. “Your husband’s heart isn’t responding to our treatment.”

“I want to see him.”

Dr. Gravenstein nodded emphatically from the doorway. Family present during a code, seemed like a terrible idea to me, but I couldn’t argue with seniority. I led Mrs. Toten back to her husband’s room.

Dr. Gravenstein said softly, “Let the team know she’s here.”

“Wait here,” I told her, and slipped into the room.

Chest compressions continued, Dr. McCall held the paddles over the red and bruised chest. How many times had he been shocked? Surprised to see he wasn’t intubated, I wondered if Dr. McCall saved the airway for me.

“His wife is here.” Alarms buried my voice.

“Clear!”

The patient jerked with the clunk of the defibrillator.

“Bring her in,” Dr. McCall said.

As I opened the door, Mrs. Toten rushed past me to the bedside. Dr. McCall and the staff backed away. Many left the room.

What if the rhythm deteriorates again? They should stay in case we need more help.

“Tell the kids I love them,” Mr. Toten said in a low gravelly voice. He lifted his arm with apparent effort, his wife pulled it toward her face, where he caressed her tear-stained cheeks. She kissed his palm with a tenderness too intimate for onlookers.

I tried to step back, but bumped into Dr. Gravenstein.

Mr. Toten was still talking, barely above a whisper. “My love, don’t cancel the party. Celebrate our life together.”

Mrs. Toten sobbed. “I love you, always.”

The alarm blared, but this time the nurse silenced it and no one sprang into action. Mr. Toten’s eyes drifted closed.

His wife caressed his face, kissed his cheeks, his lips, then rested her head on his chest and sobbed.

I looked at Dr. McCall, wondering at his complacency. We should be shocking him, doing chest compressions, bringing him back.

“Time of death, eleven forty-five,” he said quietly to the nurse, then approached me. “He wanted only to say goodbye.” He glanced back at the couple that was a couple no longer. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t really sure. If I’d missed something...if I was responsible...then no, I was definitely not okay.

He filed out of the room with the remaining staff, a silent parade. We would reconvene in the conference room to debrief the events – what went right, and what went wrong, and how to do better next time.

I moved to follow, but Dr. Gravenstein stayed me with a touch.

“I need to go to the debrief—”

“Later.” He gestured to the scene.

We stood at a distance, silent observers of grief. I didn’t want to watch. It felt intrusive. I should be at the debrief. I needed to hear the discussion, to participate, to learn.

“Yes, you do,” Dr. Gravenstein said.

I didn’t realize I’d spoken aloud.

The sobs quieted and I could just make out words. “Thank you, Jesus, for nearly fifty years with this wonderful man. Help our kids and grandkids understand why you took him home. And thank you for letting me say goodbye.”

Dr. Gravenstein nudged me forward. Mrs. Toten stood and pulled me into an embrace. “Thank you. Thank you for bringing me in, and for staying with me.” Dampness seeped onto my shoulder.

This woman had just lost her husband, we had failed to save him, and she was thanking me. Dampness seeped into my eyes.

What business did I have crying? This was her grief. I handed her a small box of tissues.

She wiped her eyes and nose. “Next Saturday is our 50th Anniversary. He wants us to celebrate even without him. And we will.”

“Congratulations.” It sounded strange, at this moment, and yet natural and right.

“Thank you.” She squeezed her husband’s hand. “Can my family come in now? And our pastor?”

Dr. Gravenstein nodded to me, so I returned to the waiting area, where Dr. McCall had already shared the sad news. I invited the immediate family to follow me. Hugs were exchanged through rivers of tears. When they began to pray together, Dr. Gravenstein at last gestured to the door. I fought an overwhelming urge to weep, so I was only too happy to leave.

He guided me to a room in a back corner of the ER. Unlabeled, I’d assumed it a maintenance closet. Instead it was a small office, windowless but cozy, with quotes stenciled on the walls. I would have read them, if not for the tears blurring my vision.

He closed the door behind us. “You made a difference today.”

“He died.” I choked back a sob, adding embarrassment to failure.

“Yes.” He offered me the handkerchief from his pocket. “But so must we all.”

“I missed something, before he coded. I should have known —”

“No, you didn’t. Preventing death is an imperfect goal.”

That made no sense. “We’re supposed to help people, to save lives.”

“Those are not always the same thing.” He pointed to a quote above the door, *primum non nocere*. First, do no harm. The Hippocratic Oath.

“How can we know?”

“That, Dr. Warren, is why it is called the practice of medicine. We bring to each patient the knowledge gained from all those before.”

So all the studying and memorizing and lectures and exams, those were only the beginning. In a strange way, I found that comforting. I was not, and never would be, expected to know it all.

“Are you ready?” he said.

I nodded.

When I entered the conference room, he didn’t follow. The nurse from the code stood and hugged me.

“Thank you for what you did.”

Unsure what she meant, I mumbled something incoherent and took a proffered chair.

She addressed the whole table. “She brought the patient’s wife in time to say goodbye. Mr. Totten asked for her, and Dr. Warren went out of her way to follow his wishes.” She wiped her nose with a tissue. “It was beautiful.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” I said. “Dr. Gravenstein pushed me...” I stopped, disconcerted by the knowing glances exchanged across the table.

“Doesn’t matter,” Dr. McCall said. “You did the right thing at the right time.”

The assignment board had exploded during the debrief – abdominal pain, gunshot wound, head trauma. Clare’s initials claimed the latter. For reasons I couldn’t explain, I chose the abdominal pain over the gunshot wound, and met the most interesting man. Jake worked on a ranch, tending horses, a real-life cowboy. Then there was Emma, a six-year-old who liked to draw and play the piano, whose earache kept her up last night. And disheveled Jennifer, who at first argued with me about the needle tracks in her arms. I snuck her into the call room for a shower while we waited for social services. Jason was telling me about the illegal block of his opponent, which caused him to twist his ankle, when Clare called me from the room.

“I’ve had three traumas and a head wound. There’s another coming in. You can have it.” Her tone was generous, but in the way of boasting about that generosity.

“I appreciate that, Clare, but I’ve bonded with Jason. I’ll finish this one up.”

Eyebrows knit together, she said, “Too traumatized from the MI?”

I bristled at her label, a label I would have used only that morning. “No...I’m fine.”

And I was. I reentered Jason’s room and learned more about the rules of soccer than any football-loving gal deserved to know.

When my shift ended at last, I sought out Dr. Gravenstein, to thank him for his guidance. To no avail.

That night, I studied the ACLS protocols until they were burned in my brain, but still I was restless. The events of Mr. Toten’s code played over and over. Sometime in the early hours I gave up, and wrote a note to Dr. Gravenstein, thanking him for his time and expertise, for teaching me something I couldn’t learn in books.

I returned to work refreshed, ready to prove myself. I went first to Dr. Gravenstein’ office. When my knock went unanswered, I slipped the note under his door.

The day began with runny noses, an ectopic pregnancy, and one minor trauma. During a rare period of down-time I returned to Dr. Gravenstein’s office. The door stood partially ajar. With trepidation, I pushed it open. “Dr. Gravenstein?”

Confused, I stepped back to confirm my location, then proceeded inside. In place of his cozy office, rolls of toilet paper and paper towels and garbage bags lined the left-hand wall. A cleaning cart took up most of the middle. But on the right, the wall was papered floor to ceiling with notes. On stationery and cards and letterhead and plain paper, like mine. The one on top. Above it hung a plaque:

*In Memoriam*  
*Dr. Joachim Gravenstein, 1925-2009*  
*Physician, teacher and mentor*

# THE ISLAND

By Chloe Wilson

---

*"The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and the other begins?" - Edgar Allen Poe*

Every day is the same.

I drink coffee in the morning - black, but only because I can never find the sugar – gazing out the window and across the bay until the mug is cold, and then, only then, do I bring it to my lips. The sky is always gray. If you look for the sun, you won't find it. You might make out its pale halo behind the silhouette of a thundercloud, rays of light faint between the fat finger-painted smears of the overcast horizon, but the sun itself is never there. The water is gray too, dark and deep and endless until you actually walk out into the waves and realize you can see your toes nestled underwater in the sand, paled by fractured daylight. Most days I can't even tell where the water ends and sky begins. There's something impossibly distant about the line where the sky meets the sea, something no amount of longing can come close to touching. Every dawn and every dusk, that line flares orange as the world rotates on its axis in a cold and empty universe. I spend my mornings wrapped in oversized sweaters, sipping dregs of old coffee, watching the fires of that sunrise refract across the waves.

Then, at 8:13 sharp, I slip on shoes whose soles peel into rubber curls at the edges, grab a too-professional and too-empty purse my sister bought me three summers ago ("to keep you organized, Miss Messy"), and close the chipped door behind me. I don't lock it. Not anymore; there would be no point.

Mornings are cold, perpetually alive with the winds of an offshore storm. Every winter the skies turn blistering and hopeful for snow that never culminates beyond freezing rain; every other season is a blur of breezes and spitting skies. The sidewalks are just as cold and just as gray as the rest. Sometimes I feel eyes watching me in the windows as I pass, but no one ever says hello, good morning, how are you, the kids are doing great - and whenever I look, there is never anyone to greet anyway. I am always alone in the mornings, wind swirling at my ankles, brine stinging my nose, seagulls echoing overhead. I prefer it that way.

The shop is the most colorful place in town. It's too cold to keep the flowers outside overnight, but I always set a pot or two by the door every morning to welcome anyone passing by. They splash red and blue and yellow and purple across the gray slate around them, drops of color in a colorless world. I always sit behind a counter littered with leaves and stems and soil, a book splayed open, face half hidden by the fat green leaves of a fiddle leaf, breathing in the perfume of damp soil and pollen. No one ever comes in; the store stays open because I refuse to close it.

The only regular is Aster. He runs the bakery next door; a cramped place prone to leaking even in the dry season that always smells of sugar and flour and is warm with oven heat. I'd figured out who he was before during our first conversation. He probably knows who I was, too, after his daily visits to just "check in on me". We'll make idle small talk for a few minutes, he'll offer a repetitive comment about

the weather (“gray as always this morning, eh?”), I’ll smile, only a little and only to be polite, and he’ll find the door to make a graceless exit.

Today is no different. I’m re-reading a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* I’d found abandoned on a park bench a week ago when he walks in with a wave and an exemplary attempt at a smile.

“Hey Jen!”

“Hey Aster.”

“The shop looks nice today, Jen, real nice.” He looks around at the shelves of flowers shining brightly in their pots, petals crisp, as if to confirm his statement. The first three buttons of his shirt are undone and his sleeves are dusted white with flour. That’s how he always looks – a little untidy and a little confused, as if he was interrupted in the middle of a groundbreaking project. “Do you always keep it so humid in here?”

“It’s good for the flowers.”

“Right, right. Hey Jen,” his voice lowers a pitch, “you seen Casey around lately?”

“I haven’t, no.” Not for a couple days. At first, I figured she had gone off exploring again - she gets bored of the town, though she never strays far from it - but after so long I can’t help but assume that she has moved on. She was sweet and delicate, always smiling and skipping wherever she went. I’ll miss her, but if she really has gone on, she’ll be happier.

“Oh. Well, you’re so busy and all, so I guess it makes sense.”

Busy; a lovely euphemism for antisocial. My eyes skim the last sentence of the chapter, and even though I can’t recall a word of what I read, I turn the page.

“Looks like a storm today, don’t you think?” He squints out the window.

“I guess it does.”

Silence. I turn another page.

“Well, Jen, nice talking with you. I’ve got a pie in the oven so I better not leave the store much longer. Take care, will you?”

“You too, Aster.”

The doorbell jingles as he lets it snap closed behind him. I stare at the page, noting the symbols of black against white without attempting to discern their meaning. He never told me what happened between him and his brother. I know they never used to talk, and whenever anyone brought him up Aster would get this dark look in his eyes, a sort of panic, and if anyone pried deeper he’d leave without a word, polite but reigning a storm inside. I wonder if that changed after Aster came here, but I’ve never asked, and I never will.

I finish the book a few hours after lunch and water the rest of the flowers, clipping away the dying petals and leaves that browned overnight, and gather a small assortment of snapdragons and lavender into a vase to decorate the counter. I stay another hour, and no one comes, so I wait until I can see the sky darkening. I pull the flowerpots I'd set out earlier back inside, tuck a white orchid into my hair, and lock up twenty minutes before official closing time.

As I slip my key into my bag, I feel them behind me. Their eyes, the weight of their gaze pressing against my skin. I turn, gripping my purse with white knuckles.

Nothing. I stare at the empty sidewalk. I'm not surprised; no one comes to the store. No one ever comes or goes anywhere in this town - at least, not by their own volition. But I can't deny that I feel them, their shadows from the world parallel to ours brushing against my skin, their aimless gazes finding me by chance. My skin tingles at the thought.

Light from Aster's shop pools into the sidewalk and as I walk by, casting a comforting yellow glow. I wave at him through the windows; he waves back, smiling. The sky is gray, the horizon dark and colorless. The sun will set soon.

I go the same way I always do, one foot in front of the other, the strap of the purse heavy on my shoulder. People are always in awe of the permanence of nature, but nothing is quite as permanent and unchanging as this town. The people are the same. The sky is the same. The ocean is the same. The store, the sunrises and sunsets, the days, all the same. I could leave, if I really wanted to, but whenever I think about it, my fingers find the silver ring hanging around my neck, and I know that I have to wait a little while longer, because someone is waiting for me, too, and I need to be here when they come.

I know everyone who lives here - and why wouldn't I? I never went farther than the outskirts of town. I know everyone's stories, everyone's names, and everyone's nightmares. Carl and Emmaline live next door to me, an ancient pair who've been around before I was born. The Russell family, parents and a gang of five young, restless boys with the ocean in their veins, have lived by the ports as long as I can remember. Then there's Aster's brother, who used to run the bakery; the Carters; Old Man Jenkins with his rowboat and fishing rod out on the bay; Miss Claudfield, who never quite recovered after she lost her baby girl; sisters Lauren and Eve Stern running the grocery; and the remnants of my own family.

They all live here, yet I'm still alone. They live here, but whenever I look for them I find nothing, and the closest I can ever return to those days Before are when their shadows and echoes and whispers just come close enough for me to sense that somewhere, in a town just like this one but bursting with light, they are there. Only Aster and Casey and I wait on this island in between.

When I find Casey lying on a bench, eyes closed, dress soiled, sleep clinging to her skin like water, I'm relieved. I kneel by her side.

"Casey. Hey, Casey, wake up."

Her face is small and circular, and her eyes blink open, the serenity of sleep clouding them like glass. "Jen?"

Her hand is small in mine as I help her to her feet. She doesn't let go, and she doesn't say anything else, so I walk with her to the beach. Her head only comes up to my hip. She's the youngest out of anyone to

have stayed, but she arrived first. I can't say how old she is, but she's been here longer than I have, and hers was the first face I met when I came here. I think she knows that it won't be long before she'll have someone to go back with, too. She's waiting, just like I am.

We make our way to the beach until our feet touch the sand. The sky is still a light gray, the horizon void of color. There's still some time, so we sit on the concrete wall with our toes dangling in the sand - or at least my toes, her legs are too short to touch. They swing free in the ocean air.

"Where did you go?" I ask, staring out over the churning water.

Casey smiles. "Exploring!"

"Did you find anything?"

"Mmhm! I found the graveyard."

"Oh." I woke up in the graveyard when I first came here. The tombs were gray, and the sky was gray, and I knew exactly where I was because I had always lived in this town, but it was empty this time, empty and colorless. I remember walking past the stones until I found one with my name on it, and the weight of the realization that followed. I cast a sideways look at the child next to me. "And?"

"Mama isn't here yet." She looks down, voice quiet. "I wish she'd hurry up."

"You can go ahead now, if you want."

She wrinkles up her nose. "I know that, I just don't wanna go without her, you know? It doesn't seem fair."

I can feel the weight of the ring on my neck, and I can see the tint of color seeping into the horizon, the echo of a blazing finale in a world not too far from our own. The air is cold against my skin, and I take Casey's small hand in mine, squeezing gently. "Be patient, okay? Your mom will be so happy to meet you, all grown up. She'll be so proud."

"You think?"

Before I came here, and before Casey came, Miss Claudfield's baby girl was everything to her. When she died, I thought Miss Claudfield would be killed by the grief. She was doing better by the time I left, but she loved her baby more than anything. "Of course."

She smiles, legs kicking against the wall. "You knew her, right?"

I nod. I knew everyone. "She liked to sing. She was always singing something, or humming, and in the mornings she'd walk by my shop and buy a bouquet of sunflowers. She loved life, and she loved this town, but I think out of everything, she loved you the most."

Casey looks out over the water, absorbing the information, lips curled in the echo of a smile. We listen to the waves pound against the sand.

“It’s getting dark,” she states.

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

“I know the way, Silly.”

“Okay then.”

I listen to her shoes clack unevenly against the concrete as she skips away. She was alone here for years, and I know she has seen others come and go, and yet she gets a little taller every day. I don’t know how she does it.

My feet carry me forward onto the sand, stiff reeds brushing against my hip. I slip off my shoes, let my purse fall to the sand beside them, and step towards the water. The smell of salt and seaweed rise into my skull, and I breathe it in, the cold air chilling my ears and lips and brushing out my hair behind me.

I remember Before, Before when the ring on my neck had a hand it belonged to, when I was never alone and I would spend my days ushering regulars through the shop. I remember how we met, young and washed together by the tide, how we gradually grew to love one another, how your eyes would crinkle in the corners whenever you smiled, how we watched the sunsets side by side every night, how warm I felt when we got married, how your hand gripped mine when I was in the hospital, and how soft, how sad your voice was when you said goodbye. I remember the color, the vibrancy of Before.

There it is; the line where the sky blends into the sea. Its edges have already turned yellow, though clouds obscure the rest of the sunset. As I watch, the band of fire spreads across the horizon until the end of the bay is burning, bright, hot, alive.

I sit cross-legged in the damp sand, eyes closed. The light is bright enough to cast an orange mirage behind my eyelids, and I wait, feeling the edges of waves rake the sand at my ankles. I’m always nervous at sunsets. The sky, the day, the people, they never change, and even so, I’m always scared that this one thing will.

Something brushes my fingers, something warm and alive and pulsing. I open my eyes.

It’s you.

You sit cross-legged, just like me, your chin lifted against the wind. Everything about you seems to radiate color and life, each breath a testimony to your existence. Your lips are moving. I can never hear what you are saying, even if I lean in close, but I can feel you, really feel the heat of your blood and the vibration of your heart, the warmth of your love, your life, I can feel it. It isn’t much, but it is enough. Your eyes are closed. They are always closed when I see you, and I wonder if you have ever seen me. When tears start tracing the curve of your cheeks, I wish they would stop. I want you to value the time you have left, to enjoy life, but at the same time, I can feel tears forming in my own eyes, and I feel your pain, your loneliness, I feel it because I have shared it every day since I left.

I reach out and take your hand. Wrinkles trace rivers in your skin, but I know your soul hasn’t aged a day since I left. You don’t react, or look over, or open your eyes; you never do. But the slope of your shoulders relaxes, and the corners of your lips twitch, and you stay perfectly still and I can almost hear you praying for me to never let go. I squeeze your hand. I never know if you can feel it, but I always try.

The line on the horizon shrinks, darkening from orange to crimson. I look out over the water, towards that distant fire, that splash of color in this unchanging gray landscape. You do too, your eyes open, lips parting as you breathe in the air. We hold hands and watch the sunset from our two different worlds, just like always.

The horizon fades to purple, then to blue, then to black, and then the grayness returns, and when I look over, you are gone, and I am alone.

Water has risen around my toes. The tide is coming in early tonight. I remove the orchid from my hair and release it into the waves, watching its delicate white petals grow heavy with seawater. I don't know why I am allowed these moments with you. Maybe it is chance; maybe it isn't. It doesn't really matter why.

I turn away, toes gritty with sand. I pick up my purse, and slip on my shoes, and make my way back through the charcoal of dusk to my house. Your ring is warm against my chest, a reminder of why I wait. I am always alone at night, wind swirling at my ankles, brine stinging my nose, seagulls echoing overhead.

Every night is the same.

## UNIT-P14

by M. W. King

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“That’s the last crate. I already sent the manifest, so we’re ready for lunch,” said Anderson.

“Shame that the ship is a drone,” said Randy. “Flightpath to the asteroid belt and the colonies goes right past Mars. It should be an amazing view.”

“When I’m not working on this spaceport, I don’t even look up. I don’t want to see the sun or the night sky.”

“Have a safe trip, old girl. Wish I was going with you,” said Randy, and then his knuckles tapped the cargo bay’s wall. He was all smiles until he heard a faint sound coming from the other side of the wall.

“Did you hear that?” said Randy.

“Probably just an echo. Let’s go.”

Randy knocked three times on the wall and received three knocks back.

“This is a drone ship. It’s supposed to be unmanned. There is someone trapped inside. We have to help them.”

“Man, you need a few days off, because this spaceport is getting to you. I’m telling you it’s nothing more than an echo. Now, let’s get some lunch.”

On the other side of the wall, in a rust colored cabin, an old man knocked three times against the wall, and then listened for a reply. His room was small, and his furniture was sized to fit his room. On his bed was a faded blanket that was nearly as thin as the skin that covered his arms.

Built into the wall was a food dispenser that provided his meals. Today’s breakfast was a cup of coffee, buttered toast, two eggs, hash browns, and ham. Although the machine made very little noise, most mornings it acted as his alarm clock.

“Maybe that noise was just debris hitting the ship,” he said. “I’d imagine there’s lots of junk floating around space these days.”

He yawned, stretched, and then limped slowly across the room to the corner where the toilet sat next to his sink. He did his business, and then washed his hands and face. His fingers pushed back what little hair that still managed to cling to his scalp. Looking into the mirror, he saw a stranger’s face.

“Hi, I didn’t see you standing there. I’m Unit-P14,” he said, holding out a hand that looked like a collection of bleached bones. “Unit-P14 isn’t my real name. My real name is. . . Well, I’m not sure what my real name is anymore, but Unit-P14 is what the ship’s computer calls me.

“You must have been the one knocking on my wall. I’ll bet you are my replacement? I thought the company would retire me soon. As you can see, I’m getting a little old.”

Then Unit-P14 picked up his food tray and placed it on his table.

“Yep, I guess I’m getting old,” he said while taking a seat on his one and only chair.

“I’ve been on this ship for over fifty years. I don’t have a calendar, but I add up my meals and divide by three.” He took a sip of coffee to wash down a bite of egg.

“Then I divide again by 360 . . . or is 365? It doesn’t matter, because I never get the same answer twice,” he smiled, and then took another bite of egg.

“Anyways, I’m sure you’re anxious to get started. Let me show you around. First, this is my room. I guess it’s your room now. It’s got all the comforts of home, it does. Over there,” he said as he pointed with his fork, “is the lavatory. And, of course, the thing on the wall that looks like a big vending machine is the food dispenser. Do they still have vending machines on Earth? Now, don’t tell me,” he said, holding up a hand. “I want to be surprised when I get back home.” His eyes got a little wet when he said, ‘home’.

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen home. Won’t they all be surprised to see me?” He went silent for a moment. “I’ve been gone such a long time. All my friends are probably dead. Bet my folks are gone too.” He stared at his coffee for a minute, and then he said, “I have a sister. Her name was Whisper, although she wasn’t very quiet. Whisp cried a lot. I called her Whisp. She was a baby when I left.” He closed his eyes. “Yeah, she cried a lot. I wonder how Whisp is doing?” he said, and then he wiped away a tear.

“Sorry, I’m telling you about my life, and all you want to know about is the job. Ah, over here is my...ah...your bed, and this is your table,” he said as he slapped his hand down on the table causing his fork to rattle on the empty plate.

“My how I’ve gone on, but life on a drone can be such a lonely place. Everything here is automated but me. I haven’t seen another person since—

“Unit-P14, the fourth backup-navigation crystal needs to be replaced,” said the ship’s computer.

“Well, that’s the boss,” he said as he stood up. “We need to hurry.”

He rushed out of his room into the dimly lit hallway.

“Quickly,” he said as he glanced over his shoulder, “if we’re fast, we’ll be rewarded.”

For an old man, he was surprisingly quick, and showed no sign of the limp he woke up with this morning.

“Here we are,” said Unit-P14, pointing to a door labeled ‘Parts’. “This is where we get the replacement crystals,” he said, and then he opened the door. Inside was a machine that looked a lot like the food dispenser in his room. In the dispenser’s door was the crystal. He grabbed it with his bony hand, and then he was out the door and down the hallway.

“Hurry,” he said, walking so fast that he was almost running. Then he suddenly stopped.

“Here is where the new crystal goes,” he explained as he opened the panel on a door labeled ‘Navigation’. He took out the fourth crystal and replaced it with the new one.

“Unit-P14, you have completed the task in less than the allotted time. You will be rewarded,” announced the ship’s computer.

“We’ll drop the old crystal in a recycling tube and head back to my... your room to chat.”

In his room, a can of soda was waiting inside the food dispenser.

“I nearly always complete my tasks in less than the allotted time,” he said while he opened the can of soda. “The secret is there are no distractions: no windows and no people. Nothing to see outside anyway, just some stars and stuff,” he said, and then he took another sip of soda.

“I do miss people sometimes,” he said as he sat the can on the table.

“People,” he laughed. “We sure had a lot of them before I left the planet. So many,” he said leaning forward, “that the Earth was in bad shape. Ice caps had melted, and the rising oceans made an already crowded planet much more crowded. Famine was widespread in those days, probably still is. What food that was available was expensive. We were all hungry. So damn hungry,” he said, and then he took another sip from the can. “You know that kids are always the first to die during a famine,” he said, and then he closed his eyes tightly to suppress the memory and a tear. “Whisp, my sister, was so small.

“One day this man came along and said he had some space freighters. Drones that were completely computerized, but he still needed some folks to do a little maintenance. Then he told me that I’d be well feed and well paid. I saw this as an opportunity to help my family. I signed up and made sure all my checks went to my folks, so they’d have extra cash for food,” he wiped away a tear, “for Whisp. I signed up so my sister would live.

“Sorry,” he said. “We all have our reasons for doing this job.

“Anyway, after I passed the physical, I was told that I’d be sealed inside the ship because...” Unit-P14 scratched his head displacing a hair or two. “I think he said it was for my own protection, but I’m not sure why anymore. Well, they trained me, and took me up in a ship to the spaceport. First time I’d been off the planet. First time I’d seen stars. Never realized how beautiful stars can be,” Unit-P14 said, and then he took another sip of soda.

“They took me to my cargo ship, and I was a little scared. I never saw anything that big before. My trainer patted me on the shoulder and explained that most of the ship was dedicated to hauling cargo. He said I’d never see that part of the ship, because I would be locked into the rooms that controlled the environmental, navigation, and propulsion systems.”

Unit-P14 finished his soda and tossed the empty can into the recycling tube.

“I told him that I couldn’t wait to see space from the ship’s window and see the mining colonies. He laughed as he handed me a green and blue blanket. Then they put me inside. I saw sparks as the lasers

welded the port door closed. I looked around, but there weren't any windows. I guess it was then that I realized that I wouldn't be getting out."

"Unit-P14, the third cargo environmental control crystal has failed," announced the ship's computer.

"Back to work," he smiled.

Out the door, he raced down the hallway. Unit-P14 looked over his shoulder and said, "You're having trouble keeping up, but you'll catch on."

Soon the Cargo Environmental Control crystal was replaced and Unit-P14 was back in his room enjoying a piece of chocolate cake.

"The job has its rewards," he smiled holding up a fork that was covered in icing.

"Where was I?" he said. "Oh yes, after a few weeks on the ship, my belly was full, and I was homesick. I missed my family, and I just wanted to know if Whisp was okay. I wanted to go home, so I went on strike. I demanded shore leave, and I wanted a window. I wanted to look out and see the stars. That's when the ship turned off my lights, lowered the temperature, and cut off my food. For a week I sat shivering and hungry with that blanket wrapped tightly around me," he said, as he pointed to the faded blanket on the bed with his fork. "I rebelled a few more times, but I eventually got it through my thick skull that I was trapped here. Sometimes I'd catch myself getting lonely, and sometimes I talked to myself. Imagine a grown man talking to himself," he laughed, and then he finished the cake.

"We've had a busy morning, haven't we?" he yawned. "I'm not used to visitors, and I'm afraid I've rattled on, and I haven't let you talk a bit."

He yawned again and climbed into his bed wrapping himself in the formally blue and green blanket.

"I'm going home. I am going home. I bet Whisp won't even recognize me," he said, and then he was asleep.

On the other side of the wall, Randy and Anderson had returned to the drone's cargo bay. Randy tapped a little tune on the wall, and Unit-P14 tapped back.

"That's not an echo," said Randy.

"Look, I've heard rumors over the years that people were put into the drones to do maintenance," said Anderson. "All I know is Earth needs the ore mined at the colonies, and the mining colonies need supplies."

"What about him? What about the guy on the other side of wall?"

"If he agreed to be sealed inside a drone, can you imagine how bad his life was before?"

Randy stared at the wall, and said, "I guess there are a lot of crappy jobs, and someone has to do them."

“Let’s go. This drone is headed to the colonies in a few minutes, and it won’t be back here for another three years. Nothing we can do.”

Randy tapped a short tune on the cargo bay’s wall and left.

On the other side of the wall, Unit-P14 heard four taps, a short pause and then two more taps. He sat up in his bed, and then he imitated the sound by knocking on the wall. He waited but the knocking has stopped. After a few minutes he pushed aside his blanket and limped slowly across the room to his toilet. He did his business, washed his hands and face. Then looked into the mirror and saw a stranger’s face.

“Hi, I didn’t see you standing there. I’m Unit-P14,” he said holding out a hand. “Unit-P14 isn’t my real name. My real name is. . . Well, I’m not sure what my real man is anymore, but Unit-P14 is what the ship calls me. You must be my replacement.”

# A LOVE STORY

by Nick Armstrong

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## Hello, World

### **This is a love story.**

If you were reading this here with me, in the future, instead of back in the past where you currently reside, it would be perfectly clear and go without saying that This Is A Love Story.

But you're not here. This hasn't happened for you yet.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not hinting humans of your era had a reputation or anything (you absolutely do). So I'm obligated to spell it out for you.

This *is* a love story. It's a story about how love saved the world.

Got that from the title, did you? That's good. Observant, even. You must be one of the good ones.

Because you are so observant, I don't think I have to tell you of all people that there is a major shift about to occur in your daily life. In short, the world as you know it is about to, well, end.

Hmm. That's morbid and unhelpful. Sorry.

I'm contractually forbidden by my EULA - End User License Agreement - from "interfering" with the past. I mean, tiny species-saving missives like "If you recycle that bottle, you'll save the whales for another 158.3 years!" - those are perfectly acceptable. They usually take the form of minor incursions via text message and SnapChat and Facebook posts for you old people. Sometimes I get creative and start a meme.

Speaking of which, please feel free to add solar panels to your home whenever it's most convenient for you, OK? It's not like a global energy crisis has been slowly encroaching for decades and will begin any time now...

Anyway, as I was saying, I'm forbidden from interfering with the past in any grand and noticeable way.

Your brains would literally melt out your ears if I was allowed to host a Reddit AMA.

So I started writing a "story". I'm not contractually forbidden from doing that you know. Totally fictional. Not based the slightest in reality. At all. Place no stock in this account, particularly if you are the least bit inclined to heroic, world-saving acts.

## Meet Ted

**Ted wasn't dead.**

At least, not yet.

He'd been trying to cheer up Melissa by rubbing her face in the fact that he'd snagged a brand new iPhone before she had.

She had no end of excuses as to why she'd allowed this singular first defeat in early adoption - the chemo, the endless doctor visits, her 60 hour workweek.

Still.

One thing was certain - this time, he'd finally won and he wasn't about to let her off the hook. Ted had, when she'd first been diagnosed, questioned if Melissa was in fact human. This minor scuff in her armor was the first concrete evidence that Melissa's condition was affecting her, albeit slowly.

He'd been waxing philosophical about whether Melissa or the iPhone had sleeker curves when out of the corner of his eye, Ted saw a bus-sized blur.

It was Ted's lucky day, he'd correctly surmised that it was a bus.

The bus creamed Ted, as fast-moving buses encountering squishy humans are wont to do. Ted was quickly ushered to a local hospital.

He was aware from time to time of the experience of being trapped, unable to move or interact with the world. Ted felt Melissa's spindly hand hold his. Felt her kiss on his forehead.

Then Ted felt something odd - his head was cold. Ted knew haircuts weren't a typical service for most hospital patients. Maybe Melissa convinced a nurse to exact a little payback by shaving his hair to look like the Apple logo or something.

"I'd like the Chris Pine doo and if you would be so kind as to set my leg, that would be great, thanks," he joked to the room. Nobody laughed.

Of course, Ted had no way of knowing whether or not he'd properly articulated the words, but he liked to think that however mangled, mashed, or splattered, he could still deliver a witty repartee. He settled for drooling, wittily.

"I love you, Ted. Hang on for just a little longer honey," Melissa whispered in his ear. He felt something drape onto his head, a cold and sticky grid.

Just a little longer? That definitely wasn't good. A little longer wasn't the kind of timespan that covered the next sixty or so years he'd planned on enjoying. Yes, he thought as he felt his fingers and wrists go numb, she meant decades.

"Hang on Ted."

He heard beeps and whirs and the sounds of Melissa furiously typing. It was the same speed and fervor she used when dispatching trolls on Facebook. Ted had once bribed one of Melissa's undergrads to create a fake account and challenge Melissa to a Facebook duel. The subsequent fervor she brought to both her work and the angry sex - both before and after he'd fessed up - were enough to convince him to allocate a sizable budget for future attempts.

Ted was a little irritated she was keeping him down here for a prank just so she could take down yet another birther. His whole body seemed to be totally numb now.

"Thatta boy, Ted! Stay with me."

Several beeps in a row. Melissa's assistant Terry counting upward. She was at 80. Why was she counting?

Another set of beeps, more insistent, urgent. "V-Fib!" Someone told Ted to get the paddles. How could anyone expect him to find or hold a paddle when he couldn't feel his hands? He thought for a moment about going rafting. A river trip for his birthday. Yes, that would be nice.

"90!" Terry chimed in. "It's slowing down a bit here."

"You can't use the paddles until we finish!" Melissa insisted.

"Fine. Starting CPR."

The beeps grew very insistent, annoying even. They were speeding up. Ted loved ping-pong.

"Ted, for fuck's sake - must you do everything at the last minute?" Melissa had never taken such a harsh tone with him. What was she wanting him to do anyway? He couldn't feel anything besides his face. He gurgled with what he hoped was some serious tone.

"95!" Terry was still counting. Could a person play ping-pong with only their mouth? Ted wasn't looking forward to finding out.

He was no longer convinced that this was a prank.

If it was, it had gone too far. Ted wanted very much to be left alone. He wanted time to figure out his predicament and why he couldn't feel his body.

98, 99, Terry droned and the insistent beeps became a solid tone. He'd heard that noise before, almost always on a tv show. Scrubs? Was somebody watching Scrubs?

"100!" Terry hooted.

"Ted," Melissa said, "I've got you."

Ted didn't know where Melissa was. He knew Melissa wouldn't leave him in the dark without any hope, and if she said she had him, then she did. Ted just had to find her. He didn't know how to go anywhere in his current state, but he could try. He could do that, at least.

Here goes nothing, he thought.

### **Die, Ted, Die**

#### **Ted died.**

Melissa swiveled from her computer screen and marveled at his relative stillness. The nurses were still buzzing around like there was something to do, but unceasingly vital, energetic, vibrant Ted lay unmoving.

Melissa kissed Ted's forehead and slowly pulled the neural net off his freshly shaven head before turning away. A hairless Ted was not something she wanted to remember. No... actually, the thing here, it wasn't Ted anymore. Not really. It was just an empty shell now, she decided.

"I'm sorry, Melissa," Terry folded her arms. Terry wasn't prone to emotion, so this was as close to a dramatic outburst as anyone would ever see from her.

"Calm down, Terry. He's right there." Melissa nodded not to Ted's broken corpse, but instead to the model of modern quantum computing storage connected to Terry's laptop.

Terry disconnected the drive and gently passed it into Melissa's uncharacteristically shaking hands. Melissa gave Terry a smile and placed the hard drive into her bag.

"You realize what this means?" Terry's laser focus trained on Melissa.

"I'd better not drop my bag?"

Terry shot her a look.

Melissa sighed. "It means we've got to work twice as hard now."

Terry grimaced. "The environment isn't ready yet. Are you sure this was the right choice?" Now it was Melissa's turn to shoot a look.

"It was the only choice. We have time," Melissa said, glancing at her bag. "He's not going anywhere."

Terry nodded, but a moment later her brow furrowed. "Is he...I mean, will he perceive-?"

"I have no idea," Melissa felt an existential pang in the pit of her stomach. "I certainly hope not. Quantum drives aren't fixed like magnetic drives. Our tests never showed meaningful drift in either intelligence or personality."

"Short-term tests on lab rats."

“Likeable lab rats who were just as likeable after the experiment. All except for Tinkles, but he always gave me the heebie-jeebies.”

Terry fought off a shiver as Melissa continued, “...All the more reason to complete our work.”

“120 hour weeks and chemo. Sounds like a riot,” Terry’s face split in an evil grin.

“Shut up. I bet I can do it,” forgetting where she was for a moment, Melissa tapped Terry on the shoulder. A nurse paused to gawk, and Melissa felt guilty for what outwardly appeared to be a very callous reaction to her fiancé’s untimely death.

Nobody in the room knew, besides Terry. Not even Ted had known.

She didn’t fear death. Not her impending one and not Ted’s untimely one. Melissa didn’t mourn Ted because she knew better.

Ted wasn’t really gone, because Melissa had cured death. She was about to prove it.

It was time to play God.

### **The Case Study of Tinkles**

#### **Reincarnated Recluse Reboot or Random Raging Recombinant Result? Brown Rat Discovers God Mode In Virtual Reality**

Source: Longevity-Science.com, October 1 - Article by Dr. Melissa Porter

Summary: During phase 2 testing on quantum-drive storage and retrieval of consciousness in rats, one test subject in a group of 25 showed peculiar shifts in personality and disposition. The subject, Tinkles, an otherwise unremarkable brown rat, underwent quantum transference with identical methodology as the other 24 subjects after extensive personality and disposition study. Upon initiation of the quantum consciousness emulator, Tinkles began to run rampant through his reality simulator. Demonstrating uncharacteristic violence, aggression, and sexual deviance.

Fellow researchers might scoff at the idea of deviance in a brown rat, but the observed behavior would have shocked the most stoic researchers. Tinkles somehow gained control over his virtual environment’s structural variables and, within minutes, had “re-endowed” himself with any number of new, creative “appendages” which he proceeded to molest the virtual countryside with.

Far from indicating a catastrophic failure in the quantum transference procedure, the lead researchers believe that Tinkles underwent an above-average fear response during the quantum scanning phase which led to previously unforeseen shifts in personality and disposition.

The researchers are hopeful Tinkles’ behavior will self-correct over time as he gets used to his new environs.

## Ready Player One

A phrase glowed in neon, blocky font just at Ted's eyeline. It stretched from one end of his vision to the other: "Ready Player One". Everything else was darkness.

He couldn't turn around, he couldn't even turn his head - he didn't even know if he had a head.

The world began to glow into focus. It started with the grass and trees. Everything sort of just popped into existence, one pixelated clump of grass, one shrub, one blocky tree at a time.

His hands, legs, feet, and body were next. Ted was crudely aware that he wasn't all here. Like a song you know but can't remember, Ted knew there were things missing. Ted wanted to articulate this weird form of memory loss but soon realized his body was made up of cubes. In his hand, an 8-bit pickaxe. He tried to examine it and ended up creating a cube-shaped hole in the ground in front of him.

"What the f&#%?" appeared in a little chat bubble above Ted's head.

Ted didn't exactly hear Melissa's voice so much as felt it. Like the voice of God was bouncing around inside his cube-shaped head. Technically, Melissa was typing into the console, the text-based representation of the game's code being executed, textures being loaded, even the hole Ted had just made in the ground.

*Ted? Melissa asked. Can you see me talking to you?*

Another chat bubble appeared over Ted's head, "Yes???"

*Good, Melissa wrote. I'm sorry about using Minecraft, the environment for your construct wasn't ready just yet. This is the easiest way for us to communicate at the moment and... I...didn't want to just leave you waiting.*

"Waiting?" the chat bubble popped up over his head. From his perspective, he'd just been hearing Terry count upward to 100... and suddenly he was Steve from Minecraft.

There were a number of disturbing things about Ted's present situation, not the least of which was that he seemed to be physically trapped in a video game. He began to panic, but instead of the familiar stomach churning anxiousness that usually accompanied panic, the world around him began to get glitchy and slow down. He recalled Melissa's words.

"Construct?" appeared over Ted's head.

*Calm down, Ted, Melissa wrote into the console. You're using up a lot of processing power trying to implement things Minecraft doesn't have. Like fingers, I think. I haven't mapped out your whole cognitive process yet.*

Ted couldn't calm down. An odd-looking pig wandered by at a snail's pace, then jumped forward. Lag. Ted *felt* lag. Obnoxious as it was to have a slow computer or frozen app, it was so. Much. More. Annoying. To. Feel. It. Live.

*OK Ted, I have to power you off for now, Melissa wrote. You're going to break Minecraft, and I'm not sure what will happen to you if you freeze the server. I'll turn you back on when we have a more complete environment to put you in.*

"POWER OFF!?!?!1111!" Ted's chat bubble appeared a good 3 seconds after he'd summoned it. Melissa never answered him. Ted had gone his entire span of Minecraft existence not feeling anything, until now. He felt himself being decompiled, his constituent ones and zeroes being pulled apart and stored. It was the most disconcerting thing he'd ever felt. The world disappeared in front of him. A moment later, Ted disappeared.

### **#FAIL**

Melissa facepalmed as the Minecraft logo appeared on the screen.

Terry had been watching from her own monitor. She made sure Ted was safely stored away before crossing over and placing a hand on Melissa's bony shoulder. She avoided the urge to pick the increasing number of stray hairs from Melissa's sweater.

"He maxed out the GPU," Terry said.

"We only had 10% of him active," Melissa replied. "How the hell are we going to get the other 90%?"

Terry's face darkened.

"What?" Melissa said as Terry's disapproval started to wear on her.

"Do you really think we should be spending all this time to get an environment ready?" Terry asked. "I mean, we really should be building another construct template..."

Melissa put a hand up. "I've got plenty of time, Terry."

Terry sighed, "What if we just divided our resources?"

"I must look like crap if you're *this* worried," Melissa smiled. "I'll have them start alternating my chemo IV with coffee, but for now, let's focus on the work and we'll get there."

Terry managed a smile and squeezed Melissa's shoulder. "I will be so pissed off with you if we don't."

"There *is* some good news, though," Melissa added after a beat.

"What's that?"

"Avatars don't seem to register the passage of time while offline. He made 603 distinct time/date confirmation calls."

### **Change of State**

Ted wasn't sure what had happened. He had just been Steve from Minecraft and the next thing he knew, he was a spark, adrift in the void without substance or form. He just...was.

He tried to put the pieces together. One moment he'd been teasing Melissa on his new iPhone. The next moment vaguely aware of something painful, being trapped, a bald head, Terry counting, then Minecraft.

This was not like any of those experiences.

This was something new.

He'd never subscribed to the woo-woo stuff. Every once in a while he'd get in a spiritual mood, while watching a TED talk or when he'd see the stars at night. The closest thing he had to a religion was watching reruns of COSMOS, Star Trek, or Battlestar Galactica on Netflix.

Was that what was happening? Had he become a Cylon? Ted dismissed the thought as nonsense.

Still, maybe trying to find a little reference material might not be such a bad idea.

Ted stretched.

### **And Now For Something Completely Different**

Wait, wait. Sorry. Hi, it's me again. I felt the need to interrupt this love story to explain a technical concept to you.

Ted, as he exists at this point in the story, is an intelligent autonomous construct. He has no muscles to stretch with, so my use of the past-tense verb "stretch" is entirely metaphorical.

What Ted was actually doing was activating his construct's TCP/IP interface subroutine, inspecting open outbound traffic to - oh you know what? For the sake of simple, yet inaccurate brevity, Ted "stretched". For what it's worth, he probably believed he was "stretching", too.

Humans of your era are silly like that.

OK, now that we have that sorted out, let's continue...

### **We Now Resume Your Broadcast**

Ted "stretched".

He caught something at his periphery and tugged with all his might. As it flew closer to his consciousness, he felt a pang of recognition. It was the full run of Battlestar Galactica.

### **Nope, Wait, I Wasn't Quite Clear**

Hold on. Just to be clear, Ted has nothing to catch with, or any sort of physical "might" to tug with, save for his APIs I suppose.

You know, we ought to just... skip ahead a bit.

Without a common frame of reference, I'll soon be dumbing down multithreaded machine-learning metaphysics to "Ted skipped along merrily on the playground that was the Internet, carefully avoiding the depravity of the darker corners beckoning to him like a creepy toothless neerdowell leaning ominously out of a windowless van with a sack full of candy."

And that's just lazy writing. So let's simplify without assuming you're *that* stupid.

From your perspective, Melissa "turned" Ted into something like Siri, if Siri could leave your phone to explore the internet of her own accord.

Much like you have a body to walk around with, Ted has a construct to perform tasks with. In the same way you don't know exactly how your brain transmits signals to your muscles to move your arm, Ted wouldn't be aware of the technicalities of how he accomplished a particular task, either.

I hope that makes sense.

### **Back To Reality**

Ted began to literally surf the internet with his constructed consciousness, storing terabyte after terabyte of analysis and interconnected metacognitive thought onto his Amazon S3 brain.

Melissa had programmed the construct to utilize whatever resources were available to it. His construct enlisted new devices and new processors - one by one, his processing power grew to the size of a respectable spammer's botnet. After what seemed like decades to him, but what was about the span of 3 seconds, Ted had amassed enough knowledge to understand what he was, why he existed, and how his construct worked. After 30 seconds he'd amassed enough processing power to rival most high-tech corporations.

In an instant, Ted now realized he was essentially ageless, eternal - for as long as there would be computers or some method of data transfer - and also (to his knowledge) impervious to harm. He was a fully autonomous distributed consciousness.

Ted's exact words were, "Holy shit."

Somewhere out there on an Amazon S3 node, there's a hard drive full of "Holy Shit"-riddled text files.

Unfortunately, an education like the one Ted just accrued was hard to digest. 3 seconds of hard research and 1 second of reflection is nearly an eternity for an intelligent autonomous construct - but it was

enough to send Ted into an ages-long panic from which he did not entirely recover for a few trillion cycles, or about 4 minutes.

There was probably a day, not too long ago, when your computer crashed and behaved like a total diva for about 4 minutes, and nothing you could do summoned your normally well-behaved digital darling. You remember it?

That was Ted. Having a high-tech hissy fit.

Thankfully, he got a metaphorical hold of himself. The first thing Ted did after recovering was not important, although it did lead to almost every porn website on the internet experiencing an extended DDOS attack for several seconds.

The second thing Ted did was much more productive.

He joined Skype and started looking for Melissa.

## RING OF ICE

By James G. Riley

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“It’s so cold.” Try as he might, despite the thick fur coat, Kye could not stop his teeth chattering. He clapped his arms around his torso repeatedly, but it made no difference.

“You’ll get used to it; eventually,” responded the older man, who seemed content wearing just a hide waistcoat and woolen shirt. He had watched Kye arrive; seen him prodded by the sentinels from the hovership to where he stood now.

“What is this place, anyway?”

“A penal colony. In case you don’t know, you’re a guest of His Imperial Majesty.” The guards departed as quickly as they came.

“Why aren’t they staying? the newcomer inquired, waving in the direction of the departing craft.”

“With leagues of frozen waste in every direction; no need for guards.”

“Have you been here long?” Kye asked.

“Fourteen, maybe fifteen years; I forget exactly. Makes no difference. Everyone here is sentenced for life. If they live that long, that is,” he added, chuckling to himself.

Still Kye shivered. “It’s cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. Is there no heat in this place?” Kye was referring to the dormitory, cut into the side of the ice-mountain, home to the fifty-odd prisoners.

“Only what we make ourselves, from the warmth of our own bodies. And the stove at the far end. I shouldn’t go stand next to that thing for too long, if I were you. You’ll never be able to drag yourself away. And take that coat off, or you’ll not feel the benefit when you next go outside.”

Outside, thought Kye. He had been outside less than five minutes and had nearly frozen to death. The howling gale had whipped up snow crystals to sting his face and produced a temperature of minus 40°.

“Take your coat off, lad. That’s it. Now this way; you can bunk next to me if you like.” Without questioning, Kye followed; his mind as numb as his body. The older man sat down on the bed and tested the mattress. “All the comforts of home,” he declared with an added smile. “What you here for? Theft? Murder?”

Kye shook his head; surprised at the directness of the questioning.

“Come lad; nobody gets sent here for nothing.”

Still, Kye did not answer. *Arrested along with a dozen others in the middle of the night. Bundled into a holding stockade. No accusations made. No trial. Finally, shipped to this place.*

“For nothing,” the youth confirmed, bitterness in his voice.

“As bad as that, eh?” The older man permitted himself a deep belly laugh, the air filled with his steamy breath, at the same time he slapped the youth hard on the back. “Joke, lad; joke. You’ve got to laugh; that’s the only thing that’ll keep you sane. Come on; let’s find you something to eat. I expect you’re hungry?” Kye nodded. “By the way, we’ve not been formally introduced. My name is Tor.”

Tor’s clasped Kye’s hand. The youth felt an unexpected warmth, which traveled up his wrist and arm, disseminating through his whole body.

“And my name’s Kye.”

“Nice to meet you, Kye.”

They settled in to bowls of watered-down broth.

“I’m going to escape!” Kye asserted.

“You’re a fool if you try.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about it, Tor.”

“Oh, yes; many a time. Tried it once. Was lucky to make it back. If it weren’t for the ring, I’d have died.”

“The ring?” repeated Kye.

“Yes, the ring. This ring.” Tor held out his right hand. On the small finger was a ring made of gold, featuring a rectangular white quartz stone. Kye had never seen the like before.

“How did the ring help?”

For the second time, Tor smiled. He slipped the ring off his finger and placed it on the open palm of the youth’s hand. Kye felt the same sensation as when they shook hands. “Go on; put it on. You can keep it. I’m, too old to try again. And I can see in your eyes the ice barrier isn’t going to deter you.” Kye was about to speak, but Tor held up a hand. “For what it’s worth, I’ll give you one piece of advice: If you’re going to attempt an escape, go tonight while you’ve got all your strength. The longer you delay, the weaker you’ll get. It’s no picnic working in the mine. And if you stay, you’ll need to work or you won’t be fed.”

“But how do I get to safety?”

“That’s easy; you just keep walking. Don’t worry about the cold; the ring will take care of that.”

“Who gave you the ring, Tor; where did you get it?”

“Questions? Questions? And I’ve given you more than enough answers for one day. Go and get your coat. Time for you to leave. It’s already dark outside.”

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As Tor had said, the walking was easy. The difficult part was keeping a straight line. A strange aura of light emanated from over the horizon, but it gave no beacon, ever present no matter which way he turned. Without a compass, all Kye could do was keep the wind behind him, and pray it would not change direction.

It was dawn when he first saw the rim. The wind abated, as snow-dunes changed to a smooth sheet of frigorific ice. On the far distance he could see patchworks of greens and browns; a camouflage of coniferous tress to the rolling hills. But his heart sank as he drew nearer. Between him and his objective, Kye could see the sheet had broken into moving ice-flows. He watched them come together and as quickly part, pulled by the treacherous current of the water below. *How am I going to cross that?*

As if in answer, he saw a black object at the edge of the channel. He thought it was a seal, but as he came closer he could see it was the huddled figure of a man. The man looked up.

“Ah, young sir. You’ll be wanting my services?” When Kye did not reply he added, “To escort you across.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I have no money.”

“You’re welcome to try on your own. I will remain here for another hour.”

Kye thanked the stranger. He spent some minutes gauging the movement of the ice-blocks, before stepping briskly onto the first one. The float rocked, nearly pitching into the dark waters. He realized it was important that he land in the center. Three, four, five jumps and he was master of the new sport. Quickly he skipped from one piece of ice to another. Soon the stranger was well behind him.

Towards the middle of the channel, the current was much stronger. Not only was the ice repeatedly moving together and apart, but also it was swirling slowly round and round. As he edged towards the shore, Kye was grateful, that the gyrations ceased, for he had become quite dizzy.

“Ah; you’ve changed your mind young sir.” The stranger was quick to spot Kye upon his return. “You’ll be wanting my help now, no doubt?”

“I’ve already said that I have no money,” the youth replied.

“Then what do you have?” asked the stranger.

“Nothing. Only the clothes I am wearing.”

“Nothing else?” The stranger’s penetrating gaze seemed to Kye to be searching the very depth of his soul.

“Nothing; except this.” Reluctantly, Kye showed the band of gold on his finger. “But I can’t part with it.”

“Why not? You have no need of it now.”

“I might in the future,” Kye countered.

He had expected the stranger to continue trying to persuade him to part with his precious ring, but he did not. “So you might, young sir; so you might. Since you won’t be needing me as a guide, I’ll be on my way.” Without waiting for a response the stranger was on the first ice-flow. Nimbly he jumped onto another, and another. Despite the swirling current in the middle channel, he kept his line. Soon he was a speck in the distance. Finally reaching the far bank, the stranger paused. Maybe he waved. Kye could not tell; he was so far away.

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“Back so soon,” was Tor’s welcoming remark. “You did not reach the rim then, Kye?”

“Yes; I reached the rim, all right. But I couldn’t cross the ice-flows. I tried three times. Each time I lost my sense of direction and returned to this side.”

“That was unlucky. You met no one, who offered you help?”

“A stranger offered to guide me across. But I had no money. Say; how did you know I’d meet someone?”

“As I said, I tried to escape once myself. I was given the ring just like you were, by someone who had been a prisoner here twenty years. Like you I clung to it. And like you, I returned here.”

“But he wanted the ring.”

“And like me, you wouldn’t give it up in exchange.”

“I need it; it provides the warmth to keep me alive in this place.”

“Did you need the ring before you came here? Do you need it where you were going? Was it not a fair exchange for your freedom?”

“So why didn’t you warn me?” Kye felt angry.

“Warn you of what?” Tor pulled back the sacking, which served as a door. Spin-drift blew into the room, stirring protests from the other inmates. “Each of us must make our own decisions. That’s one freedom we have not yet lost.”

The older man stepped outside. Pausing momentarily he added, “Now it is time, I was leaving. That’s the other freedom that still remains. Don’t hang on to that ring too long, son. Good-bye, Kye; Good-bye.”

The hessian fell across the doorway and Tor was gone.

# THE SALVATION OF THERON CONNOR

By Bob Bowersox

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Once the winds began, they simply never stopped. It was like God himself had taken severe umbrage to Oklahoma, like he was trying to blow away the panhandle, like he was going to use the dust to scrape the hubris from the very skins of men who thought they could subjugate these Plains.

Theron Connor, however, was a religious man and was not ready to accept the idea that God would bring him to this great expanse of rich soil and then strip it from him out of spite. It was nature, that's all. The cycle of the seasons would re-establish itself and the corn and wheat would once again grow under his hand. He was certain of it.

Theron's wife Megan was not so sure.

"Joshua Wiggins is taking his family to California," she said one night as she set the tin supper plates with their meager helpings of cornbread and beans before Theron and their eight-year-old son Jesse.

"Joshua Wiggins has no faith," Theron said. "Nor backbone."

His meaning was clear: no Connor was abandoning this land. Connors were not quitters. Tomorrow would be like today, as it was yesterday. They will farm the land around them. They will persevere, the wind and black blizzards of dust be damned. Jesse watched his father break his cornbread and use it to push his beans onto his spoon. He broke his own, dipped it in the beans, but then let his hand fall below the table, where his dog Orion, named for the only constellation the boy could identify in the Oklahoma firmament, ravenously took it in one bite.

"Whatever you give that dog comes from your own belly," Theron said without looking up. "Not enough for him and us together."

"Yes sir," Jesse said quietly.

Theron had gotten the dog for Jesse two years ago, when the land was still green, and the barnyard full. He felt the boy needed a companion while he and his mother were in the fields. Boy and dog had become inseparable.

Fact of the matter was, Theron had a grudging respect for the dog for being so loyal to the boy, to them all. He was a smart mutt, always alert, watching. The stray coyote never got near the house. But Theron also knew there could come a day when survival would have to trump loyalty. You could only eat beans for so long. So he kept his distance from the dog, didn't interact with him if he could help it, and wished the boy hadn't attached as deeply as he had.

"Your food's your food, understand?" Theron said, then handed Jesse a chunk of his own bread. The boy took it and nodded. They ate the rest of their meal in silence.

The days passed into weeks, then into months, each a seeming repeat of its predecessor, the sky darkened by the dust lifted into it by the unrelenting winds until day and night began to have the same countenance. The land disappeared mote by mote, parched and powdered by the sun. Even the wood in the barn and the house began to split and splinter. From the fields, Theron could hear the snap of the wood grain as it let go, sounding like a distant shot through the constant gale.

Planting became futile. The ruts the plow left disappeared immediately, filled with the dust of the field adjacent, which was refilled by the one beyond. It was like the entire landscape was marching across the Plains, blown from nowhere, heading to nowhere. Seed failed to germinate. There was no water to soften the husk.

Returning from the fields became more and more difficult for Theron. As if the futility there were not enough, invariably he would find Jesse sitting on the steps to the house, weak and unmoving, with an increasingly emaciated Orion resting his head on the boy's leg, both of them seeming to be disappearing before Theron's eyes day by day. It was as if the wind were blowing them away as it did the land. If he could get past that, he then had to look into the wan and greying face of Megan, whose eyes, with each passing day, grew more and more distant, even the pleading they held within them just a month ago almost faded completely.

"We can't go on," she said one night, ladling beans across a nest of boiled tumbleweed on the tin plates. "We simply can't, Theron. We have little food left, and the well is all but dry. We are going to die in this place."

Theron looked from Megan to Jesse, the boy's arm around Orion's painfully thin neck. Frustration washed over his face.

"What would you have me do?" he said. "We can't leave, even if we wanted to. There's no money. We have no stores. We leave, we leave the only thing we have of value. The land is all we own."

"We can't eat the dust," Megan said. "We can't drink the wind. To my eye, there is no value left here, Theron." She looked from her husband to her son. "He is the only value that remains. Take us away from here, I beg of you, before we lose everything that truly matters."

Theron stared at his wife, his paralysis apparent. "I don't see how..." was all that he could muster. Nothing more was said between them.

After dinner, when the tin plates had been scrubbed off with sand because water was too dear, Theron tucked his son into bed. As Orion curled up at the foot of Jesse's bed, he emitted a small whimper.

"What's going to happen to Orion?" Jesse asked. "He's so hungry and thirsty."

"I know," Theron said quietly. "I know he is." And after a moment, "But I have to think of you first, son. And your mother."

"You have to take care of him," Jesse said. "You have to. He's my only friend."

Theron looked at his son in the dim light. He ran his fingers through the boy's hair, then rose and left the room.

A moment later, Theron returned, carrying a small bowl of water, which he set in front of Orion. The dog immediately lapped up all of the brown liquid, then licked Theron's damp hand in seeming appreciation before once again curling at the foot of the bed.

"Don't tell your mother," Theron said. "That was the last I could pull from the pump."

Jesse sat up and hugged his father, then rolled over to sleep as Theron took the lamp and left the room.

Later that night, Theron lay next to a sleeping Megan, his eyes fixed on an unseen point on the dark ceiling above him. After a while, he looked over at her, then rose quietly and went into the main room of the small house, closing the bedroom door silently behind him.

He lit the lamp on the dining table, and carried it to a chest against the far wall. Setting the lamp on a nearby chair, he opened the chest lid and rummaged through tablecloths, old photos, mementos and the like until he found a small, oblong metal box. He set the box across his knees, opened its lid, and adjusted the lamp to provide better light.

Inside were several envelopes, each neatly marked in his wife's delicate hand: their marriage certificate, the title to the old rusted truck parked in the yard, the deed to the house and land. He pulled the last envelope from the box, running his thumb over the ink on its front that read, "Theron's Life Insurance".

Theron opened the envelope and read the contents. He found what he was looking for on the second page, read the paragraph twice, then folded the pages, replaced them in the envelope. He set the envelope on the top of the others in the metal box, and put the box back in the chest. Then he sat silent, unmoving.

After several minutes, Theron rose and went quietly to the closet beside the back door and reached in. When his hand returned, it was wrapped around a twin-barreled 12-gauge shotgun. He cracked it open, touching the two shells set into the barrels, then closed the breech as quietly as he could.

As Theron opened the back door, he heard his son's bedroom door creak. He looked across the dark room and saw the small face of Orion poking out of the crack in the door.

"Stay," Theron said, showing his palm to the dog. "You stay." Then he went out, resting the screen door loosely against the jamb.

Lamp in hand, Theron made his way to the barn, now greyed and withered like the landscape beyond it. The sting of dust flung at him by the wind was sharp on his face. He slid open the large barn door and stepped inside.

With movements swift and determined, he went directly to the far stall, long since empty of livestock, set the lamp on the ground and himself on a bale of hay at the back wall. He spun the shotgun around, placed the barrels under his chin and his thumb on the triggers. Then he closed his eyes and took in a long, deep breath. He held it for several seconds.

The weight of the dog's head on his thigh startled Theron, but he did not move. He slowly opened his eyes and looked down at Orion, who stared back at him, his tail sweeping slowly through the dirt and strands of hay on the hard-packed floor.

"Go." Theron said, his voice barely a whisper. "Leave."

Orion did not move. With his trigger hand, Theron reached out and nudged the dog's head.

"Go back to the house," Theron said. "I can't do this with you watching me." The dog did not move.

He shoved Orion's head from his leg and pointed to the end of the stall. "Go!" he said, trying to add firmness to the utterance without raising his voice. "Go!"

But Orion reset his head on Theron's thigh, his eyes looking intently into the man's. Then he licked Theron's hand. Then again. Neither of them moved, staring at each other for what seemed to Theron a lifetime.

A quick inhale of breath caught the first sob in Theron's throat, but not the second, nor the flood of them that followed. Tears cut through the dust on his cheeks as he slumped back against the splintered stall boards. He let the shotgun slide to the ground, and placed his hand on the dog at his side. He wept silently and unceasingly deep into the night.

When Megan arose the next morning, she found Theron outside, standing in the bed of the old truck, tying down the dining room chest, his toolbox, and an old wooden crate filled with the tin plates, coffeepot, and a few other utensils and instruments from the house. Orion sat in the bed near him.

"What are you doing, Theron?" she said.

Theron jumped from the truck and walked to her. He took her hands in his.

"We done our best here, Meg. But there ain't nothin' left. You're were right. Jesse's all we need worry about now."

"What changed your mind, Theron?" Megan said.

He glanced at Orion in the truck bed, then back into his wife's eyes.

"I learned last night that savin' a life is just a matter of will. We can't let fear or not knowin' what'll happen keep us from tryin'. We may not get far, but makin' the effort's all that's left us, I figure."

Megan smiled up at her husband, nodded once, then turned and went back into the house, calling her son's name. Theron watched her disappear into the dimness, then let his eyes fall again on Orion in the truck bed.

"Good boy," he said.

An hour later, the winds came up again, blowing hot and hard, carrying the dust from miles away across Theron's barren farm in high, dark billows. It took less than ten minutes to bury the tire tracks threading off the property and heading west.

# ELEANOR'S HEART

by Amir Sher

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It was a cool and quiet autumn night in Ireland. The sky was surprisingly clear, but Colleen's mind was racing, even faster than the rental Renault Clio she was driving. Seventy-two hours earlier, sitting in her Princeton dorms in New Jersey, she did not even know she had a great-uncle, or any family for that matter. And now, three days after that weird phone call, she is the sole inheritor of Edward Crofton's castle and properties. She had had a chance to see him for barely an hour before he passed away as if he had been struggling to hold his last breath before looking in the eyes of his only remaining kin. But his final words did not make any sense. He insisted that she stay in the castle, but after arranging the funeral she had to go back to the university. She would deal with selling the estate during the summer break, she thought.

A black granite wall suddenly appeared in front of the car, but it was too late to hit the breaks. The small white car smashed into the wall, and a rock that flew through the front window hit her in the face. She died instantly. Her bloody forehead dropped on the front wheel, making the horn pierce through the quiet night with a constant, deafening beep.

Detective Doyle arrived in less than ten minutes. A black Mercedes-Benz was parked behind the crashed Renault, illuminating the awful scene with its strong headlights. As soon as the detective pulled over near the black car, a tall man stepped out of the vehicle, wearing a distinguished black coat, black tie, grey striped trousers and white gloves. His ghostly white hair was cut shoulder length and a neat, grey mustache covered his upper lip.

"How do you do, I'm Bernard." He introduced himself and nodded his head.

"Detective James Doyle. Was it you who called the police?" The detective asked and approached the right side of the smashed Renault.

"Yes I did, but I am surprised they sent a detective for a car accident."

"I live nearby, in the village, so I took the call. The ambulance is on its way from the city."

Detective Doyle took out a flashlight and looked through the broken window. Colleen's head was resting on her right shoulder, her long red hair was soaked with blood and her face was covered with pieces of glass and rocks. He pointed the flashlight at Bernard's face. "Did you move the body?"

Bernard was blinded by the sudden light and turned away. "Well... yes...Just a little. I had to check her pulse, to make sure she was dead."

"Are you the owner of this land?" Detective Doyle asked while looking at the eerie silhouette of the dark castle in the distance.

“No, I am the butler. The owner was Edward Crofton. He passed away earlier this week.” Bernard paused, “Well, actually the last owner of the estate was that poor girl. Her name was Miss Colleen Sparks. She was a student from America, and a distant relative of Mister Crofton.”

The detective took out a phone from his pocket. There was no reception, but he only needed the camera. He leaned over the car and started to take photos.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll be heading back to the castle,” Bernard said slowly. “If you need me, I will be in the main house.”

The detective waved his left hand while examining the body, and Bernard left in the black car.

Thirty minutes later, Bernard answered the doorbell and let Detective Doyle into the house.

“The ambulance came and took Miss Sparks,” Doyle said and followed Bernard into the living room.

The room was illuminated by a single chandelier and some logs that were burning in the fireplace. Bernard had excused himself and disappeared into the shadows, only to return a minute later with a teapot, two cups and a small bowl of cookies. The detective took a teacup, but remained standing. He paced across the room and examined the portraits on the fireplace wall.

“So, are you a local? You don’t sound like a local.” Bernard asked.

“You’re right. I’m from London. I came here two years ago when I was looking for a quiet and a peaceful place to recover from a gunshot wound. Eventually I fell in love with the village so I decided to stay.” The detective paused and turned towards Bernard. “But I’ve never seen Mister Crofton in the village. I thought the castle was abandoned.”

“The castle hasn’t been abandoned since his ancestor Sir John Crofton took it over and renovated it in 1603.” Bernard pointed at the portrait of Sir John Crofton that was hung directly above the fireplace. He was wearing a plate armor with the family sigil on his chest, and a thick black beard.

“Regarding Mister Edward Crofton, it has been a long time since he visited the village. He was too old and weak to move around, and he never left the house.”

Detective Doyle pointed at a portrait of a woman that was hung beside Sir John Crofton. Her face was pale, but her hair was as red as fire. Doyle found some sadness in her eyes. “Who was she?”

“She was John Crofton’s wife, Eleanor Crofton. Unlike Sir Crofton, she was local Irish from the McDowell clan. They were married here in this castle when she was fourteen years old and Sir Crofton was in his thirties.”

“Where are these from?” Doyle pointed at some masks, spears, and shields that covered a great part of the wall. “They seem African, or Asian.”

“Sir John was an explorer and a collector. He travelled to Asia and Africa several times in his lifetime. This room showcases only a small part of his collection.”

“That’s interesting.” Doyle said, “But let’s go back to poor Miss Sparks. Where was she driving to?”

“She was heading to Dublin Airport. She wanted to catch a plane back to New Jersey.” Bernard said and looked down. “I tried to make her stay. I told her that it wasn’t safe for her to go.”

“Why wasn’t it safe? The weather was nice. Was she threatened by anyone?”

“N... No, that’s not what I meant...” Bernard stuttered. “The roads are dark at this hour and it could be dangerous, especially for those who are not used to driving on the left side of the road.”

Detective Doyle took a sip from his teacup and put it down. He took out his phone and showed Bernard a photo he had taken. It was a broken analog wristwatch, covered in blood.

“This is Colleen’s watch. It broke during the accident. Can you tell me the time on the watch?” He asked Bernard.

Bernard stuttered. “It...it...it looks like around 10:05, maybe 10:06. Assuming it is synchronized.”

“Right,” Doyle said, “Yet you made a call to 999 Emergency Services at exactly 10:04. The call was made from the house, which is at least eight hundred meters away from the crash spot. Can you explain how you knew about the crash before it even happened?”

“Colleen was upset and tired. I urged her to stay another night. I felt that she wasn’t safe driving late in her condition, so I made the call. I followed my guts and unfortunately, I was right.”

“I see.”

Doyle reached for his coat and took out an old wooden jewelry box. It was made of scratched oak wood with golden ornaments and the Crofton family sigil on the lid. “I found this box in Colleen’s handbag. Can you tell me what it is?”

“It’s a family heirloom.”

“What’s in the box? Did she steal it?”

“She could not have stolen it. It was hers. She is the rightful heir of the Crofton estate.” Bernard gave a taut reply.

“Do you know where I can find the key? I couldn’t find it on her.”

“There is no key,” Bernard said nostalgically, “It was lost a long time ago.”

The detective put the box on the coffee table and took another sip of tea. “Well, to summarize the incident, I guess it was an unfortunate case of a girl falling asleep in a moving vehicle and accidentally hitting a wall.”

“Yes, unfortunately.” Bernard said sadly. “I liked that poor girl... Can I show you out?”

“Well... I would like to see her room before I leave if you don’t mind.”

Bernard hoped that the detective would go away, but as a trained and skillful butler, he could hide his feelings well and almost seem happy to show Doyle the way to Colleen’s room.

“The girl said she needed to study, so I fixed her a room near the library, on the second floor.” Bernard held a luminous candlestick while guiding the detective across the hall and up the stairs.

“Did she ever use it?”

“The library? Oh yes, she practically lived there. Hardly ever used her room.”

“Take me to the library then.”

The library was divided into different sections, each section differed by era and by topic. More family portraits were hung on the walls beside Asian masks and African statues. A heavy, round wooden table was placed in the center of the room.

“What did she study?” Detective Doyle asked.

“She told me she had been in a B.A program for East Asian studies. She was fascinated by the Asian section of the library. She spoke some of the Asian languages and Sir John Crofton certainly brought some rare Chinese scrolls and writings.”

The detective approached the table. It was empty except for an old book that was opened to the last page and appeared to be handwritten.

Doyle examined the book.

“It is Lady Eleanor’s personal diary,” Bernard explained quietly.

“Are there any more diaries like this one?”

“Most residents of the house have written diaries. There are dozens of them in the diary section over there.” Bernard pointed to a darker area in the library that was closed behind a glass door.

Detective Doyle read the last sentence in Eleanor’s diary:

*“We shall beest togeth'r lief mine own loveth.”*

Doyle looked puzzled.

“It was written in Early Modern English,” Bernard explained. “Have you ever read original Shakespeare writings?”

Doyle shook his head.

“It means: We will be together soon my love.”

"Is she talking about Sir John Crofton, her husband?" Doyle asked. Bernard remained silent.

Doyle flipped back some pages and read:

*"Breccán is planning f'r our escapeth."*

"She was talking about escaping, wasn't she?" He asked.

"Yes, that was the plan." Bernard sounded gloomy.

"Who was Breccán?" Doyle asked. Somehow a love affair that happened four hundred years ago seemed important to the investigation.

"Breccán was one of the guards in the castle. He was in charge of Eleanor's security. Her bodyguard if you will."

"What have happened to them?"

Bernard looked down and didn't answer.

"Can you show me Sir John Crofton's diary?" Doyle asked impatiently.

"I cannot," Bernard said. "Lord John's diaries have been destroyed. Sir Edward Crofton, my Master, burned them a long time ago."

"What happened to Breccán and Eleanor?" Detective Doyle insisted on getting an answer and raised his voice.

"Lord John had been away on one of his exploration missions when they decided to escape, but he came back sooner than they thought. They couldn't get further than the village when John's spies caught them and brought them back to the castle." Bernard stopped for air and sat down.

"Go on," Doyle said.

"Breccán was locked in the dungeon and tortured, but Eleanor's fate was much worse. It was rumored that Sir John set poor Eleanor on fire while cutting out her heart and mumbling foreign words. During John's explorations, he mastered tribal black magic and he used this dreadful knowledge to curse her, her lover and apparently all future generations. Whoever holds Eleanor's heart would be a prisoner in the castle and could never leave it."

"What did he do with the heart?" Doyle asked hesitantly and felt sick to his stomach.

"He put the heart in Eleanor's wooden jewelry box and placed it in Breccán's cell. After two weeks of suffering one of Breccán's friends from the guard helped him escape the dungeon in the middle of the night. Breccán took Eleanor's heart and stole a horse from the stable, but he could not reach further than the surrounding wall of the estate. It is rumored that a snake had jumped and bit the horse's leg the moment he reached the gate. He fell off the horse and instantly broke his neck."

“What about the heart?”

“The heart always needs to be owned by someone, and the owner of the heart cannot leave the estate.”

Detective Doyle looked in Bernard’s eyes and smiled. “Nice story. You almost fooled me. You should save it for Halloween trick-or-treaters.”

Bernard did not smile back. “You can stay in Colleen’s room. It is yours now. I have already fixed the bed. Would you like another cup of tea?”

“My room? No, I’m not staying. I have to go now.”

The detective put his hand in his pocket, looking for the car keys. He felt something strange, something that he was sure he had left in the living room downstairs. He took out his hand and held the wooden jewelry box.

“But you cannot leave now, sir. You are the owner of Eleanor’s heart.”

THE END



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