

THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASS 2003

proudly presents



TRUE LOVE FROM OUTER SPACE

...and other weird acquaintances

THE STORIES

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THE CREW

FOREWORD

The last two semesters, the group has decided at the beginning of term that they intend to have a special theme for one evening. The semester before last, it was Hallowe'en, and since Hallowe'en happened to fall on a Thursday, room 122, with dimmed lights, mulled wine, and crisps, was turned into a magician's cave where ghost stories were read by all those who wanted to.

Last semester, the 'project' was to write a Sci-Fi love story. So successful was this topic that one week was not sufficient and we had to spread the readings over two weeks. Many of the contributions in the booklet result from this project.

I have changed nothing in the original stories, except where I detected grammar mistakes, a vocabulary error or maybe felt that the word chosen did not give the idea the author intended.

I very much hope you enjoy reading the stories and maybe even feel inspired to have a go yourself – Thursday from 6 to 8 is when we discuss the stories. What better way to learn a language than by doing something you enjoy – writing and talking?!

Peter Bews

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER

or

How Lohengrin Met the Multi-Meter

Under the cover of night
She crawls into sight
Her skin is cold china white
She's a dark angel wearing dark glasses
Dark shadows under long false lashes

The night exposes the cracks
She wears her makeup like wax
To hide every scratch
'cause she's a dark angel riding dark horses
Sitting pretty in her dim lit covers ... I say

Black cars look better in the shade
She smears her lipstick on right before she sleeps
For all those phantom lovers in her dreams

She smokes them french cigarettes
In cocktail gloves and a strapless dress
She cuts a perfect silhouette

But she's a dark angel wearing dark glasses
A fading beauty as the night time passes ... I say

Black cars look better in the shade
Black cars look better in the shade

Black Cars, Original Version by Gino Vanelli, 1985
Remixed by Eastbang, 2012
Re-released by Oscar and the Wildes, 2045

S don't like this place anymore.

I used to like it, but feelings are hard to remember. I've been coming here for ten years now, every Saturday. It has always been the same: the same music, the same drinks, the same type of people. You won't find any Techno Beatniks, Sprawl Brawlers, Machine-Look Monroes, or Hyper Willies here or just any other of those stupid trend followers, who change their clothes, lifestyles, ideas, and faces according to the latest fashion, without ever questioning if they like it at all or not.

In the beginning it was good. It has never been a 'scene' place. It has always been itself and it has never changed. There's always the same music each Saturday and each Saturday; at ten the trideo-projector casts images of this old retro movie over the dance floor. You won't remember

the movie, of course, because it was about three generations before our time. It was called 'Saturday Night Fever' and the trideo-projector lets the holo image of some dead and long forgotten actor whose name, if I remember correctly, was John Travolta dance next to the real people.

By now I know all of his movements by heart and maybe this is why I do not like the place anymore, I feel stagnation. I have always liked the name, though, and I still like it.

The Knight Moves.

There's a pun here, hah, hah. But I like the night and I like knights, just that nowadays there aren't any of them left.

My friend lights another cigarette. She smokes too much. I watch her watching the smoke she blows to the ceiling. The smoke passes through one of the laser beams from above the bar. Those lasers bring John Travolta back to life and while the smoke passes through the beam the atoms sparkle in red light and for a moment the image of John Travolta's face on the dance floor disappears behind a black cloud.

I find lasers decadent. But that should be okay for someone living in a time the cultural critics like to call Decadence², shouldn't it? Those who are more in favour of the movement prefer the term Neo Aestheticism of course, but to me it's all the same. I think we're now doing just the same thing that Wilde and D'Annunzio did almost two hundred years ago and the only difference is that apart from turning clothes, eating, and interior decorations into artforms, as the former decadents did, we have also managed to turn sex into an artform.

My friend flicks the cigarette away and totally does not care where it lands. She could set the whole place on fire and wouldn't mind. I like my friend. And my friend likes me. She likes me a lot. And she is also lesbian. I'm not a lesbian myself but since I teach history in university, I know that some time ago feeling attracted to your own sex was a problem, although nowadays people don't seem to remember that. But when I studied my ancestry, I found out that my great-grandmother had married a homosexual man because he needed to be married to keep up the façade and as a woman it would have been impossible to follow the university career she planned without his bourgeois connections. Fortunately such considerations don't play a role anymore today. We are free to decide.

My friend says the place is boring tonight. She's always complaining. Why can't she just take things the way they are? But she is right, the place is boring. I am bored.

I check my alcohol level with my multi-meter and it gives me zero point four. That is okay for another drink. I wonder how forty years ago people could live without multi-meters. Not just that driving after drinking must have been like playing Russian roulette, but also all the rest. How could they know how fat they were without checking their body fat index or how could they know if they felt attracted to someone without checking the other's pheromone level?

Just to be on the safe side, I also check my body fat percentage and it's still fifteen, which is also okay for another drink, since fifteen is a body fat percentage that's more than okay for a woman at the beginning of her thirties.

So I order another Habana Real and the barman gives me a smile while he fills a glass with ice-cubes and pours rum over them. He hands me the glass and a small bottle of coke, charges it on my cred-stick, then walks down to the other end of the bar where someone else has

ordered something. I watch his back as he walks and think that he has a cute ass, but my friend tells me that he has a boyfriend. Why are the cute men never for the girls? But I don't think I would have liked him anyway, I didn't even consider checking my multi-meter on him, it's only that his ass is cute.

My friend adjusts her Ghandi style mirror shades. We clink glasses. She touches my hand and smiles. My friend likes me a lot. Once she checked me out with her multi-meter and came up with ninety percent and she said that we should do it and I was really astonished because even with men I rarely get over eighty. I wasn't really convinced about it and used my own multi-meter on her, which showed sixty. Since my limit is fifty percent I said okay, although I have never felt lesbian.

My friend is the butch type and since people generally tell me that I have a very female appearance that was okay with me and I let her eat out my pussy. I must admit that she was really good at it. Having a pussy of her own she knew how to treat the thing much better than any man would. She has a quick and experienced tongue and she moves it faster than a snake. Not that I've ever seen a snake, but I've seen holoflicks of snakes. It didn't feel totally right for me, but I thought that it was an interesting experience and she made me feel rather relaxed and I enjoyed having my pussy eaten and I was relaxed enough, so that at one point this little fart escaped me while she was eating my pussy. At first I thought that maybe she hadn't noticed, but when afterwards she said that now she felt that there was a refreshingly new air to our relationship, I knew that this kind of sex just wasn't for me.

In the mirror behind the bar I see that there's a bloke on the dance floor I've never seen here before. He's got a white suit on, a shirt with the wide collar open almost down to his bellybutton and he's dancing next to the Travolta holography, trying to imitate the moves. Through the mirror behind the bar I look at him and at the Travolta-holography next to him and I feel that there's something strange about watching a real person trying to copy an artificial image, but I couldn't really tell why it feels strange. I do know that it's funny to watch him doing the Travolta thing. Or at least, he thinks, he's doing it. He thinks he's giving the perfect John Travolta impersonation but the way he is dancing he looks more like Donald Duck doing the ballo di qua qua with mirror shades on. The ballo di qua qua is another retro dance. Something the Italians invented, if I'm not mistaken. Italy was a country in southern Europe before that guy Berlusconi sold it to the Japanese government in 2010. And since the ballo di qua qua was Italian of course it looks completely stupid, but at least it's funny. However, I don't think our Travolta impersonator knows he's doing the ballo di qua qua.

Donald Travolta is trying to look as if he was totally immersed in his dancing. I don't know what he's looking at, because he's got mirror shades on, but I feel that he's looking at me. I guess that it's about the last unsolved mystery of human intuition that we still don't have an explanation that could tell us why we feel it when somebody is staring at our backs.

But I know what is going to happen, I always feel when someone is going to make a move for me. It is only a matter of time. I tell my friend I'd make a bet that within five minutes Donald will be closing in. She answers that she won't take that bet because he is already on the move.

And there he is, next to me, leaning against the bar in an ultra cool manner, ordering a triple X synth-beer. That's about the cheapest brand one can get but still he shouts his choice in a voice that is too loud even for an urban disco-bar. He gets his synth-beer, but he gets it without a

smile from the barman. The barman smiled at me, even though I am female, but he does not smile at Donald. I like that.

I can see myself in his silver mirror shades as he leans over to me. The lenses make my face look fat and broad, I don't like that. Just as I don't like Donald Travolta shouting into my ear that he thinks the music's fucking good tonight. I say yes, it's absolutely and totally fucking marvellous. With a beer mat he fans air into his half open shirt. A golden chain sparkles and I wonder if this can be real or if it is just the weird imagination of some sick mind. But reality is always more of a cliché than fiction.

I wouldn't mind if something would happen to us tonight, Donald shouts at me. I think about drawing his attention to the fact that you do not use would in an if clause, but then I only tell him that I, for my part, would not mind if something happened tonight, but that I'm absolutely fucking sure that nothing will happen between the two of us.

Then I turn my attention back to my friend, who, of course, hasn't got anything interesting to say either. In the mirror behind the bar I see Donald Travolta pulling out his multi-meter and aims it at me, while my back is turned to him. Gosh, the guy hasn't even thought about the bar mirror. He must be the type of person who, fifty years ago, when what the people back then called faithfulness was still a topic, could have been caught by means of a redial-button.

He tips me on the shoulder. You see, he shouts triumphantly, seventy-eight percent. You'd be really good for me.

I pull out my own multi-meter and aim it at him. Without looking at the result myself I hold it into his face and see blurry red digits reflected in his shades. I don't care to make the effort to turn the numbers around in my mind, so they'd become readable. You see, I shout at him, way too little. You'd be really bad for me.

He is gone very soon.

I hope I don't appear too arrogant, but I'm glad he realised quickly that he didn't stand the chance of a snowball in hell. The pheromone meter is a good way of measuring attraction, but really, there should also be something else, even though I couldn't say what. And there's also a problem with the pherometer that, strangely enough, most people don't seem to realise: the higher the number that comes up on your own pherometer, the lower the number on the other pherometer will probably be. Now that's not a proven equation, but to me it seems to be the case more often than not.

Nowadays, the men are so weak, they give up at the first sign they might be rejected. They don't chase you any more, my friend says. She is always complaining, but she is right.

We discuss the disadvantages of the various roles men take; the machos who don't know and don't care what a woman wants and the softies, who aren't male at all. Men change their character according to the prevalent fashion, just like women change their wardrobe. They change but they always remain so terribly simple and easy to see through. When they are young they don't understand anything, not the ways of the world, not themselves. When they are older they think they know everything, believe they have experienced everything; and the funny thing is, there is no state in between. My friend says men are like their dicks, either they are so small that they don't satisfy or they are so big that they hurt. I wonder how she can know that, but she's right. The perfect man

does not exist in real life, so it's no good looking for him. Maybe I should not have let Donald Travolta go, but, then again, I don't want to fall below a certain standard.

In the mirror behind the bar I see that Donald's vacant place has been taken by a bearded man with non-mirror Ray Bans. He's trying to light a cigarette but his old fashioned gas lighter doesn't want to work. Then he waves at the barman, probably to ask for a light, but the barman is busy down the other end of the bar. The man shrugs his shoulders and tries to make his lighter work again.

I reach into my handbag to produce my own lighter. Over my shoulder I look at him through my antique Porsche designer mirror shades.

The beard is full and well trimmed. The lips are sensual, that's not bad. But I have never liked beards, men who wear beards always give me the impression that they have something to hide.

I extend my arm without completely turning around, and offer my lighter.

He smiles thanks and takes off his shades and looks at me.

I look into grey eyes and something changes.

I don't know what it is. Suddenly all the other people are gone. There is a presence that was not there before.

I flip on the lighter. I realise that the flame is trembling. Why is the flame trembling? I don't know. I don't care. I look into the man's grey eyes.

Then the connection breaks. Somehow I am under water, everything is so slow.

I watch it all.

The cigarette drops out of the man's mouth, sinks to the floor. His hand goes up to cover his beard, his other hand grabs a plastipaper napkin, dips it into my drink and presses it against his chin. What is he doing?

Sorry about your drink.

I emerge from underwater and come back to the surface. The man is looking at me again, I don't know what the expression on his face means. I smell the stinging odour of burned hair. Now I understand that I have burned his beard instead of lighting his cigarette. That's embarrassing, what am I supposed to do now? Suddenly I feel the urge to laugh. To laugh about myself, about the beard, to laugh about the whole world.

It is necessary to laugh now, vital maybe. I feel my face twitching.

Do you think this is funny? He still has the same serious expression on his face.

I shake my head vigorously.

I think it is. The serious expression changes into a smile, the smile into laughter. His laughter sweeps me along with him, we laugh together. There is no filter, no mask, I sense the man's soul as we laugh. Then we have to stop laughing, because it hurts too much.

My friend is looking at us dumbfounded, the barman is looking, too; he does not know what is going on.

Nobody knows what is going on.

I have to hold on to the bar, because I'm out of breath and my belly hurts. The man orders a fresh drink for me and one for him. I want to pay for it, because it was my fault, but the

man won't let me. The glasses come with a smile. The man clinks his glass against mine and drinks. He does not say anything.

I want him to talk. Do you like the Knight Moves?

He looks at his glass. I like the amount of rum they put into the glass.

Then he adds that the music is retro, but in a way still a bit too modern. I think he's right and we talk about music. He is not a very talkative person, but I'm not sure whether he's shy or just dislikes words. I don't care. I find out, that he likes Wagner. He thinks that Wagner is much better than he sounds. A strange thing to say, but I think he's right. I like Wagner as well, especially the overtures. Yes, especially the overtures, he thinks so too. We talk, I talk most of the time, but I do not care what we are talking about, I prefer to look at him. I have to look at him. It is as if looking at him brought me closer to him, I can feel his presence with my eyes as if I were touching him. We talk for a long time. I talk most of the time, not caring what I'm talking about. I look into his eyes and even consider taking my own antique Porsche designer mirror shades off, but in the end I don't dare to.

Then it's time to go.

My friend must have left already, but I did not see her go. She's probably pissed off, but I don't care. We step out of the Knight Moves into the dark alley. He has not yet offered to take me home. We walk along the street. The wind blows, chasing pieces of paper. I shiver and he offers me his jacket. I decline. He does not put an arm around me. We arrive at the car park and I ask him which car is his.

I don't have a car.

A hovercraft?

No, I don't have a hovercraft.

An LAV?

No, I don't have an LAV. I like to walk.

I offer to take him home. He shakes his head. No, I like to walk. See you again next Saturday. Then he walks off into the alley.

I remain in the dark for five minutes, then I drive home.

I feel strange. I'm lying in my bed, feeling strange. I try to masturbate, but then I stop. Somehow it doesn't feel right to think of him and masturbate. I don't know why. Anyhow, I don't have to. I will see him again in a week. That will be nice. Will he be there? Of course. He's hard to grasp, but he's reliable. He will be there. I'm sure he will.

Absolutely.

Really?

Yes.

I was punctual. I tried to be a bit late, usually I'm always late, but today I was punctual. This is strange. He's not here. I'm alone.

Am I nervous?

No.

We don't have an appointment for a fixed hour anyway. He will come. Definitely. Donald Travolta is here again, always on the dance floor, always in his oh so elegant white suit. I feel him looking at me through his mirror shades. I am alone and I feel vulnerable.

He will come.

Hi, how are you? This time I refilled my lighter, no need to scorch me.

Here he is.

I laugh. We drink. The music is good tonight. I would like to dance, I have not danced for a long time, but he does not look like someone who likes to dance. Still, after he has taken his time to finish his drink he takes me to the dance floor. I enjoy dancing with him. After a while he lets me go and walks over to the DJ to ask for some music. When he comes back, he shakes his head. The only Wagner the DJ knows is Robert Wagner Junior, the old trideo actor. We both laugh and content ourselves with retro wave music. He leads and I follow. In time the music changes, becomes slower and we end up in a tight embrace.

After a while we are in the car park again. Time to take him home. I don't want him to walk. I tell him that the black Durango 69 is my car. A beautiful car, he smiles, black cars look better in the shade. I feel that there must be some joke here I don't get, but I don't mind. We get in. We are sitting in the darkness of the car.

Where are we going?

He strokes my hair.

Nowhere.

His hands reach out and he takes off my Porsche mirror shades. I feel naked, but I don't mind. Then his hand grips my neck, he bends over and kisses me on my lips. I close my eyes and revel in his presence. The wind is rushing against the windscreen. I grip his shirt and draw him closer to me. His breath is on my neck, his hands are discovering my body. From my hips they wander upwards, under my shirt.

I have always been embarrassed about my breasts, I have always thought that they are too big. Now, as he touches me, I know that I am perfect.

I rip his shirt apart. His chest is just as I knew it would be, although I have never imagined it. I dive into his being to find him inside me and I am astounded that it does not hurt.

A gust of wind hits the car. It picks up a piece of paper and chases it up and away.

He breathes into my ear. Can you feel the wind? It's the Valkyries riding the skies.

Yes, I can feel them. They take me with them. We are riding the skies together. It's warm, it's fast, it's free. The world is far below us, we pass the moon and the stars, the skies have no limit.

I bite his lip and taste blood.

The Valkyries admit me amongst their midst in their ride in the clouds. They will take me where no mortal being can go; the celestial palace appears in the clouds. I gallop across the Bifrost Bridge and enter Valhalla, haven of the dead.

You always die alone, but a moment later he reaches Valhalla as well and we are united in death. We breath the air of eternity together.

Very softly he kisses me on my lips. I try to hold him even closer.

Who are you?

I feel him shrug his shoulders. Do you know who you are?

No, he is right of course. I do not know who I am. Nobody knows. But I feel what I am when I am with him, that much I know. And I also know that he will not tell me anything about himself. I don't know why, but somehow I like that.

Playfully I pull his beard. He lets me do it. I pull more and more, until I know that it must hurt. He does not complain. I rip a single hair out of his beard. The beard has not changed, there's still thousands of other hairs left.

Lohengrin.

His teeth smile in the dark. He likes to be called Lohengrin.

I play with the tiny hairs on his chest and he strokes my head.

Peace, tranquillity, relaxation I have never felt before.

Then, suddenly, he kisses me on my forehead. See you next week and already I am alone in my car.

My colleagues want to know why I'm smiling. How can I explain? I cannot explain anything and I don't want to. Why should one try to explain? It's hard to concentrate. I think of him. Why do I think of him all the time? I'm not fifteen anymore, but I have found the hair of his beard in my pocket and I have glued it into my agenda. I don't know why, but I like his beard. It suits him well. Most of all, I remember his grey eyes. Hard and soft at the same time, aloft and passionate.

Another week passes. Again I'm at the Knight Moves before he is. As I watch Donald Travolta checking out another girl with his multi-meter I realise that I've never used the multi-meter on my Lohengrin. When he arrives and I ask him if he minds if I check his pheromones he nods. Yes, I would mind. I don't believe in this stuff and I feel that he's right. Pheromones are nonsense. I should forget about them.

Soon we are in the car park again. I have been watching him all evening. He is like a sanctuary, and I have the impression that I could desecrate him with my carnal touch. But already the Valkyries are calling me and I have no other choice.

Somewhere, far away, there's a remote fear. I don't know what it means and I don't want to think about it.

My friend says she does not understand what I see in him. He is cute, so what?

She does not understand. She does not see him the way I do. I see his shining armour, the Knight of the Swan. Nobody else can see this, only I. I have seen his soul. My Lohengrin.

Another week to wait. But after all, that's not so bad, I've got enough other things to do. There's work that needs to be done and my friends want my attention. Just that I don't want to think of him for the whole week and then see him for a couple of hours.

But what is time anyway? It is what you make of it.

Still, I will ask him why we cannot see each other more often. I don't see a reason why we should not. But on the whole everything is all right.

Why does it have to be only Saturday?

There is no answer and I will not ask any further. It is enough to know that he will be here every Saturday. I know that I can be sure of that. And that is enough.

Each Saturday he takes me to Valhalla, each Saturday I die, each time we are together in my black Durango 69 I feel as if I were born anew.

Why do you not want to tell me who you are? I know that this question is not very much different from asking him who he is, but I still want to try.

Because I am a dream. That is what you want, a dream. We do not want reality.

He is right.

Whenever I feel his presence, everything he says is right.

Saturday becomes the focus of my life. I remember that there was a time when I hated Mondays. I hate Sundays now. So many days left until it's Saturday. I've got work to do, interests to follow, friends to meet. None of that is important. It's only Saturday that counts.

My friend does not understand. How can you be happy if you don't know if it's for real? She wants to know how I can be with a man who's pheromone level might be ten or lower, when my own limit is fifty? I shrug my shoulders as Lohengrin would shrug his. It won't be ten, it'll be a hundred. I feel it, I'm sure of it, I know it.

Still, it might be a good idea to insist. I mean, I know the result already, but it would really be nice to have some proof. A scientific basis for the feeling. I've got to know.

Lohengrin, I want to use my multi-meter on you. I try to sound firm and convinced.

He shakes his head. No, no good can come of that.

I challenge him. You fear the result, isn't that so?

He shakes his head. No, but you should fear it.

I am not afraid. I pull out my multi-meter and hit the pheromone button.

Well, yes, maybe I am a little bit afraid, kind of. I take a big mouthful of Habana Real before I look at the result.

It's a hundred! A fucking one hundred percent! I've never heard of anybody who got one hundred. I hold the multi-meter into his face. You see, I was right, I got a hundred, or rather you got a hundred with me.

He shrugs his shoulders. All right, you got your one hundred. Does that make you happy?

It sure does. My Durango 69 is waiting outside and I don't want it to wait any longer. I drag my Lohengrin into my car and when we are inside the car and he is inside me, I realize that I can move the internal muscles of my vagina on his penis the way one would milk a cow. I ask him if he likes it and he nods yes, but you've been doing it all the time. I didn't know that was possible and he didn't know it was possible either.

Tell me something about you, anything, I don't care what it is.

You don't want to know. We don't want reality. Black cars look better in the shade.

He is right. I don't want to know. I want to feel. I want to feel what I feel when I'm with him.

He is wrong.

I throw the cup against the wall in my office. Black soy-caf runs down the wallpaper. Destruction. I do not want a dream. I want reality. Who does he think I am? What normal person wants a dream instead of reality? What a liar, what a hypocrite! I want all of him or nothing. How I hate his beard. Either me or the beard. He will have to shave it off.

I milk his penis and he likes it. The wind moves the Durango again, but I don't want the Valkyries to take me with them right now. I want to know who he is. I kiss him and put his hands on my behind and let my own hand slide into the pockets of his jacket. He won't notice, he's too busy with his Valkyre ride. I want to find his ID. I need to know who he is.

Suddenly he lifts me off him.

I guess that's what you're looking for. He reaches into his jacket and puts a small, hard cylinder into my hand. Then he grabs his clothes. I bid thee a good night, my princess. And he's gone.

I'm sitting alone in the darkness of my black Durango 69. I'm sitting there for quite a while. I can't help thinking that something has gone disastrously wrong here, but I don't know what it is. Then I turn on the light and look at what I'm holding in my hand. It's some kind of perfume atomizer. The label says Fragrance of the Night. I turn it around and on the back it says in small letters: one hundred percent pheromone response guaranteed. So that's it.

Next Saturday he's not in the Knight Moves. I had expected that he wouldn't be, and now I know that he'll never come back. I still don't know what to think of the whole affair. I haven't been able to make up my mind yet. It seems that there just isn't enough data to compute.

All I know is that I don't like the place anymore.

I used to like it, but feelings are hard to remember. I order another Habana Real without checking my alcohol level. My friend says that I shouldn't think about the whole thing too much and that he was a fake anyway. Sometimes she's a bit too direct for my taste, but she's right.

So I walk over to Donald Travolta and ask him if he wants to do it. He's kind of surprised, but of course he wants to do it. We retreat into a booth in the ladies' room. He wants to put it in, but I say no, because I don't feel like it, plus I haven't got any lubricant on me. So I kneel down and take it into my mouth. Generally I don't like that too much, because it makes me feel sluttish, but tonight I want to feel like a slut. I don't really enjoy it, but the carnality of it is cleansing, kind of. But then he grabs my head and shoves himself really deep into my mouth. I know what Donald wants, because when the tip hits the palate it produces an involuntary swallowing movement. That's supposed to give extra pleasure to men, but to men only. I feel more like puking and so I free myself of his grasp. But just as I want to tell him that I hate it, I get it directly in my left eye and it burns like acid. I see my face in Donald's mirror shades and the spunk is dripping from behind my own shades. Donald just laughs and suggests that next time I'd better wear some goggles instead of them Porsche designer stuff.

I wipe the spunk off with toilet paper as well as I can without taking my shades off and tell him that there won't be another time unless he uses some Fragrance of the Night to boost his attractiveness. There's a certain need for cynicism here.

Donald laughs again and says that he won't waste no hard earned money on such stupid stuff, 'cause them producers of the stuff got sued by about a hundred thousand people, 'cause someone analysed it and found that it consisted only of chemically synthesized alcohol and H₂O and absolutely nothing else and that it had totally no effect on pheromones whatsoever.

I get out of the booth and wash my face in the sink. I look at myself in the mirror. I like the night and I like knights, it's just that nowadays there aren't any of them left.

ALL OF ME

It had turned grey and dark suddenly and then came the rain. It poured onto the roof, the wind carried the spray through the open windows. She could still see thin blue streaks on the horizon, low above the water. It was a dark blue, it had nothing of the baby blue color of her towels or the fading paint covering the walls of her house. It wasn't the night sky, either. It was something very much of its own. The kind of blue you only see in heavy rain over the sea, she thought. If I was a painter I'd try to paint it but I'd try and try and I'd never get it right.

She had never regretted moving to the beach all by herself. She had only taken her dog with her and some records and books. She didn't want a lot of stuff any more. She had kept some of her nicer clothes in a box, though, most of them dresses that represented some kind of memory. Maybe she would go through them some day and find out what memories she was keeping in there.

The rain wasn't dropping down from the sky as fiercely any more when she turned away from the window front that overlooked the grey sea and the palm trees that were scattered on the sand. She hadn't turned on the light before and she didn't want to do it now. A candle would do, with some music from the old record player.

Billie Holiday was moaning in the background when she heard a car engine from the road that went along the beach at a far enough distance as to not disturb her. The engine was turned off, the door was opened, she could hear footsteps on the carpet. Jonathan grinned when he entered the room. "I knew you'd be sitting here in the dark. I have something for you." He sat down on the sofa, which had cream-colored cushions and wooden legs, and put his gift on the black table in front of it. It was a small wooden box, dark blue with tiny mirror-squares, pearls and sea shells attached to it. When she opened it she saw that the inside was covered in blood red velvet, otherwise it was empty. A wishing box.

When she woke up the next morning he had already left. Her bedroom window couldn't keep a secret and told her of the glare outside. She looked at the box, which he had set on the bedside table before falling asleep under the mosquito net. Even though it was small and she couldn't imagine where he had got it from, it was the most precious thing he had ever given to her.

She had breakfast, coffee and toast, then went for a walk on the beach. Her dog, a long-furred black creature with brown eyes that reminded her constantly that humans only have a faint idea of what devotion and trust are, ran alongside her, sometimes jumping into the waves. The water sparkled, everything was clean and white, the sea as always a mirror to the sky. Sometimes she passed the shadow of one of the palm trees, which were the only instances defying the blind light of this day. They were still dark and green and brown and stubbornly rooted in the sand. The wind was her companion today, a breeze from further out, a mediator that kept the sun from burning her skin. When she had walked a few miles and could make out the next house by the beach, she turned around.

The days went by like that. Every once in a while she got into her car and drove to the small town to pick up some groceries. She stopped by the post office sometimes and found a letter from Jon in her box. He wrote about the cities he visited, the foreign places, the people, the music, the drugs. She never wrote him back, there was no address to send a letter to. She imagined him playing, in clubs she had never seen, surrounded by people even he didn't know, she imagined him talking to his bandmates, his friends, acquaintances, a girlfriend. He had always stopped by when he was near the beach. Like last time when he brought that box. They had sat next to each other on the sofa and talked and been silent, watching the candle burn down. It had flickered in the breeze one last time, then the flame had died. They had gone to bed soon afterwards, knowing he had to leave again. Then everything was back to normal. She and her dog, listening to music in the dark, the beach, every once in a while a letter. Her life was like that.

One afternoon she sat in a bar, sipping at a beer. She rarely stayed in town longer than she had to, today was one of the days she did. The TV blared, football, entertainment, news, politics. It had been a hot day, no rain in a long time. Her lungs were tight, and breathing was hard. She had felt as heavy and dense as the air, but now the sweat was drying on her skin. The dog lay on the floor at her feet, drooling and its tongue out, slowly cooling down in the air-conditioned bar room. She had been letting her gaze wander, not thinking, in a dreamy state of half-consciousness, when her eyes focused on the TV set. She heard the voice say business-like and monotonously: "...died in an accident last night... eye witnesses say that ... car went up in flames..." She knew the guy on the picture next to the anchorman, the brown hair in soft curls around the head, the eyes, the look. It was Jonathan.

She sat on the beach for a long time, watching the sun slowly sinking into the sea. The sand was still warm, her bare feet were buried in it. The wind played with her hair. It was sticky from the long, hot day. Salt and sweat had gotten caught in it. Her tears mingled with the tide, which was coming in. In her hand she held the box he had given her the last time she had seen him. The shells were warm under her fingers while the pearls pressed little dents into her flesh. Maybe now was the time for a wish. She opened the lid. There was a piece of paper inside. With trembling hands she unfolded it. It said: *Wish you were with me now.*

Placing the note back in it, she closed the box again.

The sun had almost set. She got up and slowly walked into the waves. The water lapped around her ankles, her thighs, then her feet didn't touch the ground any more, she closed her eyes and exhaled. The sea swallowed her up like a lusty lover.

ORDINARY MORNING

They're going to be here any minute now". The thought slowly makes its way through my dazzled brain, stirring it into action. I must have dozed off for a couple of minutes. No wonder. My Man -United- T-shirt is creased and spotted with splotches. Haven't had time to change. And, besides, I didn't feel like it. I like wearing dirty clothes; it makes me feel alive somehow. Cool. Like one of those blokes on TV, real guys with stubbly chins. I grasp my chin and realize that it's stubbly as well, my fingers roughed up by the tiny little spines that are sprouting there. I would probably be perfect for one of those outdoor - ads right now - grinning into the camera and waving a mud-caked hand, then pointing towards my brand-new Mc Kinley- tent. Come to think of it, I'd really love to be in one of those spots. Lonesome Ranger on a mission. Yawning, I grope for the remote control, the TV flickers to life. For Fuck's sake, why does that stupid cunt always have to be on at 10 in the morning? She makes me want to slap her every time her bloody gob curls into one of those condescending little smiles. I bet she has a good load of plastic in those tits, too - and those awful blond curls! God, how I hate perms. I'd told Lisa so repeatedly. But she simply would not listen. Shame, really. Decent-looking lass she was. Firm buttocks and all. Well, never mind.

I run my fingers through my hair, which is standing out in all kinds of directions like bushels of dried-up, brownish grass, and plough my way through heaps of piled-up clothes and unidentified pieces of rubbish towards the kitchen. The fridge reveals leftovers from yesterday's take-away meal: Pepperoni n' Cheese-pizza as well as the last can of beer. Exactly what I feel like right now. In my opinion, there's nothing better for breakfast than cold pizza and a sip of beer. Heineken's. Not my first choice exactly, but well. Garreth never had good taste. And, anyways, if you're treated, you shouldn't complain. Nice of him to bring a sixpack along, just in case. I have to say we really needed this other pack after last night's football match. Bloody suckers. Two-Nil, and the referee never noticed that fucking foul.

Picking up streaks of cold cheese that have fallen to the floor, I stuff the last bit of deliciously soggy dough into my mouth and take my can of beer back with me onto my sagging greenish-grey couch. Feet up, volume up - they're showing a repeat of Die Hard on channel Five - I lean back and enjoy the scene where one of those brain-dead Fritzes tells the other one to shoot the window so Bruce will have to walk through with naked feet. I look at my own bare feet with their large toes, little ones slightly crooked, and wonder whether this is going to be my last Bruce-Willis-film for a long time. Might well be. Shame. After all, right now, no fucking lass would force me to watch East-Enders instead of a good horror video. Well, it can't be helped now. At least, Garreth and me had a good time yesterday. Apart from the last 30 minutes, when Man- United lost. We got pissed after that, and Garreth left with those blood-shot eyes he always gets when he's had too much. I was just wondering whether to get up and go to bed when I heard the key in the lock and Lisa came in. At first I hardly recognized her. She'd done something awful to her hair. I knew that

bitch Mona, her best friend, would eventually come up with some horror of a new hairstyle. But to have chosen a perm of all things. And blond, too - I swear she looked just like that bitch on TV.

There she was, with those blown-up pouting lips. Nervous as hell, as always before she tells you something she thinks is really vital. I think she said something about having reached a conclusion, that it wasn't going to work out with the two of us or so. Anyways, she should have known what mood I was in, with the game lost and everything. And that bloody perm on top. I can only remember this sudden rush of anger flooding through my veins, my every nerve stretched as if they were about to burst, my vision clouded as if by my own blood. And then it was her blood that came splashing out. Like out of a fountain or something, with every stab I inflicted on her with the knife we'd used for cutting the pizza (the bloke had done a lousy job on it). She just looked at me like a squirrel or some small mouse, surprised, and then she collapsed without a sound.

I left her there in her pool of blood - surprisingly bright it was, not like on TV - and then I must have rinsed the knife and gone to bed without undressing. When I came down this morning - bright and early, didn't even have a headache - the carpet had soaked it all up.

She looks nearly peaceful there - and she's mercifully quiet. At last. No more shrill complaints about me or my lifestyle are ever going to pass those swollen lips. Feels good. Pity I won't be able to cherish my life as a newborn bachelor. But then there would be no use in not telling anyone about it and trying to submerge her in some swamp. You always get found out these days, DNA and all. And besides, I wouldn't want to not get the publicity I've wanted for so long. Self-made film star - fame and glory, here I come. So I made up my mind and called the police at around 9.30. Wonder what is keeping them so long? They should be here any minute now.

From Future Days Lost, part II

THE CHILDREN OF HEAVEN

1

Portrait of an Inspector

*S*o what exactly can you tell me about the happenings of that particular week?" a voice asked. It had a clear, bright quality, was very calm, with the correct, friendly intonation of the clerks that you find at stellar travel agencies.

Instead of an answer, harsh sound of unfiltered smoke blown through clenched teeth was to be heard; you could imagine the mouth of this man (for a man it had to be, that much was sure): old, brittle, seldom kissed in the last few years; the face around it: unshaven; the eyes: deeply sunk, bassett eyes; eyes asking why wouldn't every woman under the sun want to kiss that man? - until you saw the rest of his face.

Then the soft blue light of a timesniffer illuminated the face from below; it looked exactly as it just has been imagined- just a little bit older. The effect was ghostly and strange, but in a certain way beautiful.

"Something happened to you, Inspector Gerard", the Lieutenant said. "Something very particular, very unusual. Supposedly by the time-

"-I sold parts of my soul to an escaped criminal from the 23rd century", Inspector Gerard confessed to the green-eyed lady in front of him. "I suppose someone has bought 'em."

"And you're never sure the deal's really over, and somebody won't ask for a little bit more, right?" she guessed.

"Maybe he has acquired a taste", Inspector Gerard said.-

-"Or she", the man in the white coat suggested.

"Or she", Inspector Gerard agreed, and thought of those calm eyes the colour of the seaweed growing in the shallow regions of arctic pools; they blinked, but never really moved. They tried to express pity, or empathy-

"I think I have found someone very special," Inspector Gerard mused while the Lieutenant was opening the blinds. "Maybe I am in love."

The Lieutenant's eyes, strikingly blue, rested on him.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Donuts?"

They sat at the same desk they had shared for so long. One-way-inscriptors and half-eaten coffee cups were scattered on its surface; tiny holograms flickering in their final spasms scurried through the garbage like cockroaches, as their projectors rolled to and fro in the soft movements of the police department, now hovering across the bay.

Inspector Gerard seemed tired, and casually played with a small bag of instant self-heating donut seeds he had found in the mess.

"You know, I never understood how this works."

"I don't want to hurt you; see, I always said what you need most is a girl. I really have to congratulate you. Big catch. She's amazing."

"Oh yes," Inspector Gerard sighed and looked out of the window. Clouds the colour of eggplants slowly drifted by and hid the air traffic from sight. The silvery blazing lights of a starship cut the clouds like a sword cuts a paper wall. He threw the bag of seeds back on the table, and the Lieutenant picked it up.

"See... no matter what you think..."

"Ah, I don't think that much." The Lieutenant raised his hand with the little bag of seeds. "It's all about the job. All about this."

"The job", Inspector Gerard sighed. "The girl! We're not in possession...."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to tell you."

"No you aren't", Inspector Gerard said. "I tell you, I do not own--"

"Of course you don't."

"And it just doesn't matter, see?"

"Well sure it does."

"I said, it doesn't. You listening?"

The Lieutenant fell silent, thinking it through.

"Ah, no, it doesn't."

"You understand?"

Inspector Gerard looked at the Lieutenant with unusual seriousness. The blue-eyed man nervously shrugged. Maybe he was angry.

"Ah, yes, of course. Nobody really possesses another person."

The New Francisco spaceport was bursting with activity. Ships were loaded and leaving, Abonarean battle ships and freighters heading for Sicolis; others circled above the site waiting for the Anti-G sledges to clear the landing fields. Some of the ships they couldn't identify. They had another first contact this afternoon; one more party to play in the game. The Lieutenant closed the blinds.

*

Two hits, three hits struck the body of Inspector Gerard in the small back alley. The sky was darkened with skyscrapers, parked spacecrafts and smoke, and the only light was the gold sheathing of towers and the neon advertisement blue. The guys in the pink robes with the shaven heads gave him another kick until they were sure he wasn't moving anymore; then they spat on him, recited an Abonarean short-prayer and left.

Nothing more happened except that a short, slightly acid rain came down and washed away his blood, soaking the cigarettes he had just bought; and some large type-7 proto-rats approached menacingly until driven away by a huge streetcleaner bot searching for work. The bot pushed Inspector Gerard's leg a little to the left so he could pass through the alley, and wandered off towards a street which paid for cleaning. The mirrors supplying New Francisco with sunlight made a slight move to their 8 pm position; it was summer, and the air was so thick with nauseating smells that even the bugs in the garbage bins postponed their evening flights for another hour.

"Why would they beat you up" the man clothed in angelic white asked. He seemed to be a holopist, and milky seas were shimmering in his glasses. Inspector Gerard couldn't see his eyes. Obviously he was attached to a chair in a lying position. He couldn't move, only perceive and speak. The room around them was cool, well ventilated, and dark as space itself.

"I told you", Inspector Gerard replied wearily. "Because of those alien folks."

"Didn't you say you were basically working for them?" the holopist frowned.

Inspector Gerard shook his head. "Not then."

Two shoes entered the street. Apparently they represented the lower parts of a slender female body covered by an XX-trendy G-Me-Not Suit. The shoes were red and connoted a slight aura of predatory arrogance. Then they stopped. A zipper was to be heard. Then the rest of the woman, not lacking in almost offensive stylishness, appeared.

Inspector Gerard slowly opened a bleeding, swollen eyelid and tried to stabilize his body with both hands in the puddle he was lying in. He fixed his eyes on the sight of the woman, who was wearing an awesome tight killing-red latex dress. Somehow she seemed familiar.

"You," he or the woman said.

"So who was it", the holopist wanted to know. His voice came out of the darkness.

"Who are you speaking of?"

"Who gave you orders to infiltrate the Babylon Towers?"

"Why would you want to know that?"

A sigh. "Please cooperate. Actually, we're all here to help you."

The silence lingered. In the darkness Inspector Gerard's mind swam in solitude, until he decided that silence was no good.

"Lieutenant," Inspector Gerard whispered.

"Lieutenant who?"

"Never told me his name, dammit."

"Hm. Isn't an Inspector higher in rank than a Lieutenant?"

"Doesn't matter with this one."

"But I thought you said he was dead?"

"Good point."

"Supposing you were dead", Inspector Gerard said, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm not the Lieutenant you knew," the Lieutenant said and handed him another cup of coffee, looking all the same like the partner Inspector Gerard had known for years, neat haircut, eyes unnaturally blue. It was nine o'clock, and neither of them ever came late for work, or for breakfast.

"I'm just a clone... Don't worry about that. Personnel changes...Orders don't. We're all here to help you."

2
Ménage à trois

"I sometimes have these dreams", Inspector Gerard said, apologetically. Cassandra was lying naked and very desirable (and a little upset) by his side, a breathing sculpture emerging from anthracite bedding.

He got himself in an upright position and lit a cigarette, which she obviously disliked. The old ventilator was turning on the ceiling.

"These things will be your death, you know? But you won't believe me", she mumbled thoughtfully.

"Someone will find a clone for me", Inspector Gerard tried to joke.

"Why did you wake me?"

"Sorry for that. As I said, only bad dreams. Don't worry. Please go back to sleep."

"What about?"

Inspector Gerard sighed and scratched his forehead. "About a damned holopist telling me all this ain't real."

With innocent fascination, Cassandra plucked a hair from his chest. She liked being in superior position to him, although sometimes it became an obsession. "I told you I wasn't, and that all this would turn out to be a big fake, just like everything else; but nobody ever believes what I have to say."

"You felt pretty real just a few hours ago."

"Don't overestimate those particle fields. In truth, I'm just a psychographic pojection, you know."

"When exactly did you get into this conscience conflict between the clone of your dead friend and that psychographic projection?" the holopist asked politely.

"Must have been about the time some of my employers from 23rd century future decided to wage war on the alien imperialists."

"They are our friends, never forget this." The Lieutenant folded his hands on the desk. It was a challenge. He didn't move his eyes from him. There was something undoubtedly provocative in the way he spoke, and maybe there was a difference to his old partner, after all. The police department swayed from side to side.

"Know what troubles me most in this job?" Inspector Gerard asked.

"Tell me."

"It's not the aliens. They steal our jobs, ruin our art scene and fuck our wives- but that's exactly what we did when we colonized Africa and the East, and what they did some hundred years later in revenge when they made their deal with Abonar Prime and bought us all up. No, it's absolutely normal that the aliens are doing those things."

"Don't forget the Sicilian drug temples. The teachings of Boophus. Or religion in general", the Lieutenant interjected, rather sarcastically.

"You don't have to remind me. All there to help us."

"So what is the problem? Oxygen ratings? Daylight allotments? Lifetime extension lotteries? Sexual frustration?" Cassandra giggled and tightened her grip. They were still lying in bed.

"No", Inspector Gerard said after a while. He felt very relaxed thinking about those things as long as she did what she was doing.

"The problem is that most people see all this crap as causal developments from their past. Only we know we're already ruled by our future, everything's already written; and even when you think the sky just can't get any darker, and you'll either lose your lungs or your dick any minute when just trying to stay alive, they keep telling you everything's fine, and there's no need to worry. For they're still out there, and their world's supposed to be much worse."

"You don't have to worry", the Lieutenant said. "Everything's fine. We're still out there. It could be much worse."

Inspector Gerard frowned. "Only some minutes ago I thought I understood that you were thrown right out of heaven? Isn't that bad enough?"

"We're all children of heaven", the Lieutenant said, cryptically.

"I didn't want to ridicule you", Cassandra excused. "I see you're a man of insight... that's very sexy... it's only that I have been laughed at all my life for such things. You get complexes at a certain point."

"That's just because the people of your time don't know they're already bought and sold. We do. Nothing happening in our lives is decided by humans anymore. And maybe that's our luck. We know we don't have a future. Our future is already history."

"You're a fatalist", the holopist said and injected another tickling shot of reality-binding agents into his veins.

"But if there was any future universe beyond the 23rd century", Inspector Gerard forced himself to say while fighting against the effects of the drug, "why wouldn't they send time travelers down to them, like the 23rd century does with us?" He sank back in his chair, sweat covering his face.

"You're searching for logics inside a fancy."

"He's a strange little man with a white coat, speaking of General Reality and how human brains interpret it. I sometimes have the impression that they use some misunderstood Einstein or post-rationalist philosophy to sell us any model of reality they prefer."

"Actually, they're doing marketing research on what kind of reality perception sells best," Cassandra explained. "That's the whole point of holistic therapy: if they succeed in arguing away your sense of reality, any problems you have with it cease to serve any higher function."

"Clever", Inspector Gerard said, and only by the fact that he needed an extra match to light his cigarette could an attentive witness have told he was slightly nervous.

"I only wish he wouldn't use those reality-inducing substances on me. I arrested people all my life for using that stuff."

"Sorry for having to bomb out your illusions the hard way", the holopist giggled. The whole room was swaying from one side to the other, and sometimes, when the holopist circled the chair like a tiger does his prey, he would double and triple and reunite and arrive before he left. "But you need to get in possession of reality again. It can be a very sensual experience, you know?" Inspector Gerard fought another wave of nausea and disgust, and just when the man who imagined he was Inspector Gerard imagined the man who imagined being a holopist being not a holopist, but some strange kind of outworld preacher, that preacher exclaimed: "Grasp it, man. Hold it tight. Hail thee, reality! Feel the real thing!"

"What is he going to tell you?" Cassandra wanted to know at some other point, her long fingers playing with a Sicolian pan-kamasutra pill. He willingly sank into her arms waiting, while the pill displayed the usual medical announcements.

"It's not all that bad. Something about a world outside that dark room with breathable air, just some minor ocean pollution and understandable re-enlightenment ethics. A world drawing its energy not from sub-quark but from atomar levels; a world without halfbreds and psionic terrorists. A world still believing that if there wasn't any sense behind it, you could at least invent some. A world to belong, to possess."

"A world using sharpened steel to cut facial hair", Cassandra whispered, now all above him, gently licking his cheeks. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Just give me a break", the holopist said. "I mean, this is all about healing. I dont know what this looks like to you, because you're ill. But you've got a comfortable chair, the best drugs available, and we're not going to put any wires into your brain. I just wish to ask you the following question: which is more probable? A female projection obsessed with making sex to you all night, or the reality of a rainy day in good old San Francisco, 21st century?"

"The rain. San Francisco", Inspector Gerard whispered thoughtfully; then he hesitated.

"What's wrong?"

"It's not all about sex", Inspector Gerard insisted. "I really developed a liking for her."

"I want to you to get rid of that woman", the Lieutenant told him. "I know she picked you up after those monks left you bleeding on the street, I know she has some kind of power over you and is

just trying to survive -if you can call that a life- man, she's only the usual kind of Anima Jeanie you buy down in Little Abonar, or in Chinatown! You cannot trust her."

"Actually, I found her in a fortune cookie in downtown", Inspector Gerard admitted. "You wouldn't believe how small those projectors are going to be in a hundred years. Or maybe you would. I never understood such things."

"So she's from the future, too", the holopist sighed.

"I knew it right from the start. She had those eyes, you know? Smashing green. Not available in my time. Like the Lieutenant's. His are blue, though."

"You're obsessed with future events, you know? I had such great expectations regarding your progress. Always the future..."

"Don't tell me", Inspector Gerard yawned. "Problem is, she is my future. So it's perfectly alright that I or you do not understand about her. I mean, she's a woman, or at least tries to be, which is already quite a lot."

"You're kidding me", the Lieutenant said. "I know we had an agreement, and I know that you somehow... like her. But that was before we realized how dangerous she is! Don't let a woman interfere with your job! I mean... I know exactly how you hate those alien folks. My other self reported it all down to the future before he made his flight from the Babylon Towers. It's all in your files, see? We know you hate them no less than you hate us, cold coffee, your Mandarin name, or yourself. So you have the choice: which side are you on?"

"You have the choice", the holopist said. "My talents are exhausted."

"I acquired a taste", Cassandra told him and licked at his nipples. "My former owner was that guy called Mr. Wish, and he searched for new ways of storing lifetime after you messed up his partner, Mr. Promise. First thing he did was to take the years of your life that you, being his very last customer, sold him; than he fed them into a simple psychographic projector. Probably he didn't expect to discover the secret of the creation of life this way, but he did. That was how Mr. Wish became God. A greedy one, as you'd expect."

"Then you're somehow my daughter, and what we're doing is absolutely incestuous", Inspector Gerard concluded, raising an eyebrow.

"Exciting, isn't it", Cassandra replied, licking her way up to his face.

"Life as we know it is actually a creation from the 23rd century", Inspector Gerard explained to the holopist. He felt rather tired. "You think I could maybe smoke a cigarette?"

The holopist shook his head. "I fear that's not possible. This is a hospital."

Inspector Gerard sighed. "What a shame. Anyway, we're not reality in the first place. Never were. We're just an alternate timeline created when the 23rd century send someone down a few million years after the Big Bang and ensured the development of life in our universe."

"Then how did the 23rd century come into being?"

"I'm no expert on non-causal philosophies, even less than on women or donuts, but I guess it was just some kind of oversized quantum leap."

"Know what I like most about you?" she asked while clipping some psychographical fingernails into the vaporizer. "You're a romantic. And in a truly pre-doomsday way of thinking." She smiled while she watched Inspector Gerard shuffling along barefooted to the fridge to thaw another beer.

"I guess that's why you still stand living with me", Inspector Gerard said.

3 Babylon

"I thought this was about dating."

"I didn't expect you were still in the process of courting," Cassandra said, raising a brow. She was wearing her smashing-red latex dress and dark sunglasses to hide her green eyes.

"I do not court", Inspector Gerard said. "It's just that everytime that I leave you, you keep telling me those riddles and prophecy stuff. Everytime I return I don't know whether your door code is still the same. Now it's the first time we're both outside since the day that you picked me up. I thought I'd ask if there's any intention behind it."

"I just wanted to come here, to show you."

"Show me?" He pointed towards the Towers.

"Exactly."

"Okay, now that we're here... stop riddling. Just tell me."

"What an architectural nightmare", she whispered. "One day, they're going to fall."

Inspector Gerard lit a cigarette, then scratched the grey mat of hair on his head while he looked up the metallic incarnation of alien sovereignty that had come to be known as the Babylon Towers. Surprisingly, it was free from advertisements, but seemed to radiate in an unearthly silvery colour contrasting with the permanent sunset gloom of the city. It was so high he got a headache from just looking at it.

"The main bottom pillars are made of pure platinum", Cassandra continued. "Sicilian work. Statics achieved by giant hovering iron balls more perfect than anything you'll find in nature. Let a sun burn out and wait for a couple of aeons, then you'll maybe get one of those balls. Outer sheathing is synthesized diamond. Antigravitation and magfields stabilizing the upper construction, but the top of the Towers is watched over by three royal saucers from Abonar Prime anyways. That's where they will build the ring around Earth, symbol of their total cultural and cognitive control over us; the ring which will be destroyed again seventy years later by the Carillon-Zeta incident. We didn't bother to tell them cause we thought it might be lots of fun."

"You give me the creeps", Inspector Gerard said. "How many sentient beings are living in Babylon?"

"Nobody knows. We estimate about four or five million. But humans are only admitted to the ground floors, so don't you mind. Most are mind-controlled wage-slaves anyways, illegal immigrants from the 23rd century."

"You as the first artificially created lifeform are trying to teach your father-in-law post-rationalist ethics?"

Cassandra laughed. "If Mr. Wish was supposed to be Pygmalion, you were only the stone in his backyard. Forgive me, sweetheart, but everyone..."

"Yes. I didn't want to claim any rights on you."

"The simile limps, anyways."

"I know. So what about the Towers?"

"You have another cigarette?"

"You smoke?" He was surprised.

"Just as a simile." She lit her cigarette.

"So?" He pointed up to the sky while Cassandra exhaled.

"That's another one."

"And for what?"

Cassandra blew out some smoke, looking up at the bronze-coloured sky around the shimmering titans. "Will you have to climb storey for storey to the unreachable heights beyond the stratosphere to find out? Trying to grasp all the wonders that man isn't capable of? Through all the alien babble and madness you wouldn't wish to encounter on a trip? You have to climb Jacob's ladder in search of your gods?"

He raised his hands.

"I don't think so."

"So?" She fixed her eyes on him.

"It represents everything we are not. It puts us to shame with its beauty. It disgraces our greed and our vanity. It hurts by just standing there, and of course it drains zillions of bucks every second. But I'm not going to mess with it. I cannot possess it, just as it cannot possess me. It's just alright for me as it is."

"I'm very glad you should think so", Cassandra smiled and gave him a kiss.

"So we're going to have another coffee tonight?"

"I admire your imagination", the holopist said. "But what is it going to tell us?"

"Section 17 had been ordered to bring down the Babylon Towers", Inspector Gerard mumbled, scratching his arms where the injections had been given. He was glad he could move again. "They decided not to take into account the people- for most of them were either criminal or, causally seen, not yet born, depending from which century you are- or alien oppressors on the higher floors. They figured out that the seventy years the Towers were going to serve as headquarters for "supervision", as Abonar Prime usually calls it, were just enough to ensure mankind would never attain sovereign status in 99.9 % of all possible future timelines. Blowing the whole thing up would lower that probability to 47.2 %, and that convinced exactly 52.7 % of the staff, which, as you will realize, is just what you call a quorum."

"You're nuts", the holopist whispered, spellbound. "You're totally nuts."

Inspector Gerard shook his head. "I don't excuse anything, nor have I done anything to apologize for. I just tell you how it came to pass that Section 17 went into rebellion against the Global Emergency Government. You can read it, it's all written down in the secret 23rd century

papers, Future Days Lost or the Revolutionist's Weekly. The first Lieutenant was caught spying and killed by a fall 837 storeys long, and the second Lieutenant tried giving me orders to finish his job."

"But that projection calling herself Cassandra warned you to stay away. After you rescued her from her prison inside the fortune cookie."

Inspector Gerard massaged his chin. "Actually, those low-caste monks responsible for Babylon garbage removal already beat me up when I just wanted to buy some cigarettes in the neighbourhood. Children of Heaven, they call themselves, and they were probably having a bad day or a free day or maybe that's just the same for them. I was in the area by chance, before I got any orders at all, but Cassandra mistook it as a first approach. Initially, it was just professional interest, see? She was stalking me by my temporal signature; timesniffers have developed a liking for me since the deal with Mr. Wish."

"So now you're going to get fired?" the holopist asked. "And by which side?"

Inspector Gerard began to stammer, as he himself didn't seem sure anymore of what he had just said. "Why do you ask when you don't believe that stuff anyway? Actually, the Lieutenant was soon replaced with a third clone, following again the Abonarean party line; obviously, the rebellion was suppressed, and I got a decoration for non-activity."

"And Cassandra?"

"Well, we thought about getting married. I think that she really likes me... We're just checking the legal conditions."

"Don't you listen to yourself and realize how ridiculous all this sounds?" the holopist asked.

Inspector Gerard remained silent.

"All this never happened", the holopist said seriously.

"Huh?"

"I said, all this never happened. No freelancing prophetess conjured up from a Chinese restaurant in downtown. No conspiracy of cloned blue-eyed policemen struggling for control in an almighty future. No incomprehensible post-nuclear world out of balance ruled by an extraterrestrial plutocracy residing in heaven. This is America! Early October, and actually a lovely day outside. Go out and see for yourself."

Inspector Gerard slowly rose from his seat.

"You mean, I can go?"

The holopist generously smiled. "You're healed, man. You were never healthier than today. You were never beaten up, never sold years of your life to a Mephistolean timetraveling salesman, and you even stopped smoking by the way, you know."

He helped Inspector Gerard to the door.

"But I'm still an Inspector, am I not?"

"Of course you are. People need you. Doesn't that feel fine?"

He opened the door.

Inspector Gerard stepped outside the Sicilian drug temple in the late afternoon acid rain, shivering, closed his trenchcoat, and lit a cigarette. He took a deep breath.

He decided never to repeat that disturbing experience again; but the mental resistance training certificate that he was awarded was probably worth all the trouble, given that it helped him to a promotion.

Cassandra appeared by his side, out of the air, gently touching his arm.

"Are you alright, honey?" she asked. "I was afraid I had lost you."

He kissed her.

"Know, darling, I never thought that you could actually possess another person", Inspector Gerard explained to her like a father explains to his child, while they sauntered down the corroded casino lane, past alien brothels and restaurants; European immigrants were selling hermetically sealed cow cheese and sweet naive art, millions and millions of pink and blue lights were reflected in the mercury puddles and splinters of old-fashioned bottles covering the ground. The Babylon Towers reared skywards, breathtakingly beautiful, desirable and most remote in their sovereign strangeness.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Arthur Hooper
Alison Hooper - his wife
Matt Hooper - their son, about 28 years old
Rosalia Hooper - Arthur's mother
Fiona Peech
Julia Peech - her daughter, about 10 years old
Don Ferranti, called "the bloody" - boss of the Chicago mafia
Rodney - small gangster
Manager of the restaurant
Waiters + waitresses
Many relations, friends and other guests

Setting: side-room of a noble restaurant in Chicago; many guests are sitting at a large dinner table which is filled with enormous heaps of food; everyone is eating; the waiters hurry around, exchanging plates and refilling glasses

*M*att (rises from his chair, knocks with his spoon against his wine-glass, the people ignore him, he tries again, knocks harder and breaks the glass, he smiles lightly): Dear relatives, dear friends, dear guests. Let me interrupt this jolly party just for a moment to...

Rosalia: Mattie, cutie, look, you broke your glass!

Matt: ... to deliver a small speech in honor of my dear father who is celebrating his 50th birthday today.

Alison (to Arthur): Oh, I'm so proud of Matt! He's really his mother's son!

Rosalia: Matt, darling, your glass is broken.

Matt: My father's life-story sounds like a realization of the American dream. In school and in college he couldn't only be proud of his brilliant grades – he was also one of the most popular guys and captain of the football-team.

(some guests applaud and shout "bravo!")

Matt: No surprise that he married the most beautiful girl in the whole region.

(Alison and Arthur smile at each other)

Matt: They moved to Chicago and after trying a few jobs my father founded the extremely successful company we all know today: "Hooper's computer-marketing". He started with two friends – now he's the boss of 2000 employees.

(all guests cheer)

Rosalia: Matt, can't you see? Your glass...

M a t t (furious): I know, grandma, thank you! (tries to get calm again) But after all my dad's not only an amazing business-man but also a wonderful husband and father, who has always supported his family and has given us so much love. I'm so proud to be your son. Let's drink to my great father Arthur Hooper!

(everybody toasts to Arthur)

A l i s o n : That's so touching! (starts to cry)

A r t h u r (rises, clears his throat): Thank you, Matt. After a speech like that it's certainly difficult for me to find the right words. Besides, I'm a man of deeds rather than of smart words. I just want to say: I am overwhelmed that so many people have come tonight to celebrate my birthday and I have to thank you all. Without you I wouldn't be what I am now – a happy and wealthy man. Matt – you're a fantastic son. I know that once you'll succeed to a greater degree than I. And Alison, my beloved wife: You're the fortune of my life. I love you more every day. Thank you! (sits down again)

(bursts of applause)

A l i s o n : That's too much for me. Oh, I love you so! Oh, Arthur... (bursts into tears)

R o s a l i a : Alison, darling, why are you crying? Have you hurt yourself?

A r t h u r : Alison, my love! (kisses her tenderly)

F i o n a (enters fast, J u l i a behind her): Here you are you crook!

A r t h u r : What...

F i o n a : The hide-and-seek is over, Arthy. You can't run away anymore!

A l i s o n : Who is this rude person? How dare you crash into our party?

F i o n a : Keep out of this! Why are you so quiet, Arthy?

R o s a l i a : Arthy – that's a nice name. I like it!

M a t t : Please leave this place or I'll call the manager.

A r t h u r : I've never seen this person.

F i o n a : Do you always produce kids with persons you don't know?

(noise among the guests, everybody stares at A r t h u r)

A r t h u r : I don't get what you mean.

A l i s o n (excited): What? What did she say? Arthur!

F i o n a (points to J u l i a): Julia! Say hello to your daddy.

J u l i a : That's my dad? But he's so ugly!

A r t h u r : Hold your tongue you ungrateful creature!

A l i s o n : Arthur, I don't understand a word!

F i o n a : Shall I explain things to your wife?

A r t h u r : Well... Alison, that's Fiona. I once worked together with her... on a project.

F i o n a (laughs sarcastically): A project? Sure!

A l i s o n (shocked): Ah... Arthur, you mean... you... this is your daughter?

A r t h u r : Alison, please, that was a long time ago and it's all over now. I promise you!

F i o n a (walks over to M a t t): You are his son?

M a t t : I don't know what you want but I won't ask you again: Leave our party or I'll call the police! (goes out)

R o s a l i a : Arthy, why don't you offer this nice woman a seat?

F i o n a : Don't you think it's unfair that his son's wearing designer clothes while his daughter has never seen one cent from her father? Arthy, I don't ask you to love me but I absolutely demand that you accept your daughter Julia.

A r t h u r : Why are you so sure that she's mine? You bitch!

A l i s o n (furious): I can't believe this! You have sex with another woman, she gets a child from you and I don't hear a word about this in all those years? Damn, I'm your wife! (starts to cry) I thought you loved me!

J u l i a (bored): Mom, can we go now?

M a t t (comes back with the manager): Here she is.

M a n a g e r (to F i o n a): I'm sorry but this is a private company and I have to ask you to leave our house. At once!

F i o n a (to A r t h u r): You coward! You can throw me out but you can never repair your crime against your daughter! Come on, Julia! (they rush out, followed by the manager - everybody looks at A r t h u r , silence)

A r t h u r (laughs artificially): There are more and more insane people.

(A l i s o n looks disgusted at A r t h u r , then shakes her head and puts more food on her plate)

R o s a l i a : Arthy! You haven't been nice! You can't treat your guests like this!

A r t h u r (ignores her): I hope this troublesome incident won't destroy our humor. Let's party!

(slowly the guests begin to eat and talk again)

D o n (comes in with a small package in his hand, looks interestedly around, then sees A r t h u r) : Ah, Arthur!

A r t h u r (turns pale): What... what the hell are you doing here?

R o s a l i a : Arthy, don't swear!

D o n (smiles): Happy birthday, Arthur! (gives him the present)

A r t h u r (whispers nervously): You have to disappear immediately!

D o n : Keep calm, Arthur! I just heard by chance that you were celebrating your birthday here and because I have to talk over a few things with you I thought: why not? Go to Arthur and celebrate his birthday with him. I won't disturb your party long. By the way, it really hurt me that I got no invitation. Arthur, we're such good friends!

A l i s o n : Arthur, who in God's name is this man?

D o n : Ah, the wife. Let me say: You're still more beautiful than I imagined – inspired by Arthur's reports.

A l i s o n (confused): Thank you.

D o n : Oh, I'm so sorry! Please excuse my rudeness, I will introduce myself at once: My name is Don Ferranti, Arthur and I are colleagues.

M a t t : Don Ferranti? The bloody Don?

D o n : Unfortunately I must admit that some people use this unworthy name for me. Arthur, I'll feel hurt if you don't open my present.

M a t t (cries): That's a mafia-killer!

(big tumult among the guests, A r t h u r 's head sinks on the table)

A l i s o n (gets up): Arthur, you have to explain something!

D o n : Has he never spoken of me? We've been partners for over 15 years now. Your husband is a born gangster and the mafia of Chicago couldn't do without him anymore.

M a t t (panicked): What? The mafia? I'll call the police!

D o n : Nobody goes anywhere! Arthur, if you don't open the package I'll do it for you. (rips the paper open, a gun appears, he aims at the guests) Stay cool everybody!

R o s a l i a : Arthy, your behavior today is unbearable! Please offer your friend a seat.

A l i s o n (cries): Arthur!

(A r t h u r is petrified)

D o n : Hey, Arthur, what's the matter with you? Drink a glass of wine or two and then you'll feel better and we'll go out to plan our next jobs, O.K.? Then I'll disappear again.

(silence, everybody's frightened)

Hey, please go on with your party! Amuse yourself and ignore me if you like. It's only my business.

(everybody looks at him totally scared)

Arthur, may I guess that nobody here in this room knew that you work for me? (looks around him and bursts out laughing) Nobody knew! That's really funny! Oh my God! What a joke! That's too much! Probably you haven't even told them that your company went broke?

(A r t h u r gives him a dirty look)

Oh, you haven't. Arthur, you're such an idiot! (he can't speak anymore because he is laughing too much) But I like you! Yeah, I really like you!

(excited talk among the guests, everybody looks at A r t h u r)

A l i s o n : Arthur, what... what...

M a t t : Dad, I don't understand a word!

R o s a l i a : Arthy, doesn't this man want to celebrate with us?

A r t h u r (stands up very slowly, sighs): Why are you all looking at me as if I were an alien? It's me, your friend Arthur! You've known me for years! Alison, I'm still the man you married! Matt, I'm your father! I will explain! I'll explain everything but please don't look at me like that! I... I couldn't tell you that my company went broke. I couldn't bear the shame. You all knew and loved me as a successful businessman. How should I face you as an absolute loser? I needed some money to keep up appearances. A lot of money! But I couldn't find a job where I would have earned so much... until I met Don. Yeah, now you know it. I'm a mafia-killer. Hate me, accuse me and put me into prison. My life's over!

D o n : Arthur, beware! (pushes A r t h u r to the ground, a shot is fired)

(everybody panics, screams and hides under the tables, only R o s a l i a and D o n stay calm)

D o n : Nobody, and I really mean NOBODY, shoots unpunished at Don Ferranti! Show yourself you wretch! I already see you there behind the curtain. (goes to the curtain which forms the boundary of the room and tugs R o d n e y from behind it, he holds Rodney's gun in his hands, R o d n e y trembles)

R o s a l i a : Oh Arthy, I love this party! So many people come to surprise you!

D o n (to R o d n e y): Why are you so shy? Who are you?

(R o d n e y looks at the ground, his face is totally pale)

D o n (slaps his face): Hey, you blowfly, I'm talking to you! Who do you think you are? You just come in and disturb our nice party. Do you think you have to show us how well you can shoot? We're not interested in senseless brutality. We're proper citizens and I don't think you belong here. Scram!

A r t h u r : You... you tried to kill me! On my 50th birthday! Don't you have any sense of honor? Don, he tried to kill me! (to R o d n e y) How could you? I have a wife and children. And I don't even know you.

D o n (to R o d n e y): Your name?

R o d n e y (stutters): R... Rodney.

D o n : And what are you doing here, Rodney?

R o d n e y : I... ah...

D o n : You're not the fastest person, right?

R o d n e y : I...

D o n : Don't you get it? We have no time! Tell us – immediately! Or shall I slay you with the butt-end of your own gun?

R o d n e y : I... I can't explain... I'm...

D o n : Who are you working for? (puts his hands around Rodney's neck) Dear Rodney, please tell uncle Don!

R o d n e y (panicked): It's not my fault! I promise! I just needed the money! Alison, help me!

A r t h u r (confused): Alison?

A l i s o n (turns pale): I... I don't know... hahaha... he must have picked up my name.

R o d n e y : You drove me into this mess. Now it's your turn to help me out!

D o n (to A l i s o n): Could you please explain what's going on, darling?

A l i s o n : Well...

R o d n e y : She told me to! She did it! She told me to kill Arthur Hooper!

(big disturbance among the guests)

A r t h u r : Alison? No! My wife!

A l i s o n (laughs coldly): Yeah, your wife. You are such a lousy husband, Arthur. You've always been! You're never at home! Instead of taking care of your family you fuck young blondies and earn lots of money in crime.

A r t h u r : But... but you didn't know this!

A l i s o n : What does is matter? You've always been a shame! For all of us!

A r t h u r : But why... I don't understand... Alison, please!

A l i s o n : And now, since you know, I'll tell you that I've been planning to kill you since our honeymoon trip. You're so egoistic! Have you ever been interested in my feelings and my desires? I can't remember. But you were good-looking and you were getting richer and richer. Really tempting... Besides, I never loved you!

A r t h u r : I can't believe this! My own wife who I gave a great part of my life to wanted to have me killed.

A l i s o n (cries hysterically): You gave me nothing! Never!!! You only took!

Arthur: Matt, did ... did you know?

Matt: Of course not! Oh dad, I'm so shocked!

Alison: No, this won't work, Matt. We started together and we'll stick it out 'till the end.

Matt: Don't believe her lies, dad! She's totally nuts!

Alison: You're nuts! You're as nuts as your friend Rodney here!

Don: Ah, Rodney! You just helped us so much to investigate this case — we're good partners. So tell us: Do you know Matt? Is he another pitiable small boy who wants to play killer?

Alison: Tell him, Rodney! Matt, I hate you! How can you stab me in the back? Arthur, how do you think your son earns his money?

Matt: I can't bear this! Dad, she's lying! She... I don't mind anything. Tell him, mom, I'm gone! (runs out of the room)

Alison: Your son Matt owns a brothel! He's a pimp and Rodney's his partner.

Arthur: What the hell...

Rosalia: Arthy, why do you always have to swear? Look, you've even driven away your son. Mattie! Come back, Mattie!

Alison: Matt could never stand you! You always told him: "I was the best! I was much better than you are! Why don't you work harder?" And what are you now, Arthur? Nothing but a cowardly loser!

Arthur: But he never complained! I thought he worked as an engineer...

Alison: And we thought you were the boss of a successful company.

Arthur: I thought you loved me!

Alison: Men are so naïve!

Don: I'm so sorry that I have to interrupt your conversation, my dear turtle-doves, but work is calling. Rodney, come with me! I think I can use you somehow. Goodbye everybody! Arthur, it has been a wonderful party. Have a good time! (goes out, pulls Rodney with him)

Rosalia: Oh, Arthy! You insulted him because you didn't offer him a seat!

Alison: Farewell, Arthur! I feel like I'm not welcome at your birthday party anymore. You'll never see me again! (walks slowly towards the door, then faster, finally she runs out)

Arthur (first as if paralyzed, then screams): Why are you looking at me? Piss off everybody! At once!!!

(everybody frightened, gets out fast — except Rosalia, Arthur falls on a chair)

Rosalia: Where are they going, Arthy? Is your party already over?

Arthur: Yes, mom, it's over. Everything's over.

Rosalia: Then I'm going home, too. Time to go to bed. This was a very nice party, my son and I wish you a very happy rest of your birthday. (goes out)

(Arthur covers his face with his hands)

CURTAIN

LES AMIES DES JUIFS

Paris, 1942

"...there were those who were called "les amies des juifs" : nine "Arian" women who, in June, on the first day the Jews had to wear their yellow stars, had the courage to wear a yellow star, too, as a sign of solidarity; but they wore the stars in fantastical ways that were insolent to the occupation authorities: one woman fastened a star to the collar of her dog. Another woman embroidered "PAPOU" onto her star, and another one "JENNY". Another woman attached eight stars to her belt, and on each of them was written one letter of the word "VICTOIRE" [...] These "amies des juifs" had many different professions; among them were secretaries, the owner of a stationary shop, a newspaper seller, a cleaning lady, a post office worker, and students." (Patrick Modiano: *Dora Bruder*, p.140)

*V*iolette Joël, 25, student: She thought about Yael in bed this morning, her lazy beauty, her slender, almost masculine body, her white skin that looked almost transparent in the dim light filtering through the blinds, her mouth, small and sensual, her tongue languidly licking her lips; the conversation they had had over a cup of hot, strong coffee to prepare themselves for the day, about those stupid stars, Yael's husky voice turning into a horrified whisper because of the humiliation, because of what might still come, because of all the fucking helplessness, the way her lips twisted before she burst into loud, harsh sobs, and the way she held onto her, her breath hot and fast, her skin cold with fear.

Françoise Pélissier, 31, newspaper seller: She had resumed her childhood habit of walking along the banks of the Seine when she needed to think, and with every step she took the memories became clearer, more focussed: two little girls skimming stones under the bridge in the pale-blue twilight, giggling at the people who walked by, holding hands, racing each other to the next bridge, and the next, and the next, until dusk gave way to dark and they had to go home for dinner; waiting for the school bus together the next morning, Françoise Pélissier and Paulette Lévy, two names the teachers and all the other girls at school pronounced in one breath, Paulette Lévy whose parents had moved to Marseille during the girls' first year at secondary school, Paulette who, until the end of her time at school, had sent her a letter every week, and then moved back to Paris, where she had lived until that Thursday in May when she had simply disappeared without trace.

Émilie Durand, 23, student: She thought about Professor Goldman and his last lecture before they had made him leave: gesturing vigorously with his hands, he had told them about Darwin, and about natural selection as the only possible mechanism of evolutionary change – how ironic – and

despite the melancholy expression that hadn't left his face since the beginning of it all, despite the greyness of his skin, emphasised by the hollow cheeks and jutting jaw bones, despite all this, his eyes had still looked at them through his glasses with their lenses like the bottoms of bottles with that same piercing intensity that had fascinated her right from the start; she thought about the way he had always pronounced certain words in the old-fashioned, Ashkenazi way, and how in that last lecture, it had suddenly made tears well up in her eyes.

Sophie Fournier, 43, secretary: Her hands ceaselessly smoothing invisible creases in her narrow skirt, she hardly dared to look at the man opposite her at the little table in the café, this man who had been her employer for so long, a tall, muscular man with dark eyes that made her feel a pang of longing and hands whose caresses she'd been dreaming about since the first time they'd met, this man who was now reduced to wearing a yellow star on the collar of his summer coat and who was looking down to avoid her eyes, knowing, she thought, knowing just like she did that things could never be the same again, this man who put his hand on hers and then removed it again quickly, looked up at her, and when he saw the look in her eyes put it back hesitantly and smiled a shy, relieved smile, and she smiled back at him.

Madeleine Bouvier, 21, student: It just wasn't fair, she thought, the whole business with the stars, all people were supposed to be equal, weren't they, and what was so bad about the Jews; she'd never really known anyone who was Jewish; all the children in the private school she'd gone to had been the sons and daughters of Christian families, of course - there had only been that little boy at the public primary school she'd gone to before she'd become a boarder, what was his name again, Antoine, no, Aaron - well, she hadn't really known him, but still, even if she didn't know anyone who was Jewish, that wasn't the point, the point was that it just wasn't right to make them wear those stars, she thought.

Lysiane Comte, 52, post office worker: There had been no drama, no fight, no actual breaking off of the relationship, she remembered, only a gradual weakening of the ties, back then when his visits had simply become less frequent; and she hadn't been offended, it had felt right in a way, them not seeing each other that often anymore - although it had been wonderful while it lasted, she thought, and suddenly felt a nostalgic, long-gone thrill at the thought of his voice and the way he used to whisper things into her ear, the hazy memory of his skin, the way his words used to become clumsy at the sight of her nakedness, and the faint traces of his smell in her bed after they'd spent the night together; and suddenly she was overcome by a sadness she couldn't put into words.

Juliette Argon, 38, owner of a stationary shop: It was so absurd, she thought, so absurd she could hardly believe it was happening - how could they force a whole race of people to wear stars so everyone could recognise and humiliate them, how sick did a mind have to be to come up with such an idea and not realise the utter absurdity of it all, and what on earth was wrong with all the people who were prepared to accept this as if it was completely normal - and what would be next, would they all have to wear signs revealing their professions and religious beliefs, their sexual preferences

and their favourite sweets, would people be willing to accept that or was it only alright for the Jews to be forced to share their private lives with the rest of the world, but not for everyone else?!

Marie-Louise Bazin, 52, secretary: She didn't really like the Jews, at least not the ones she knew: Rosenbaum, the jeweller, for example, was a greedy man, and when he was still allowed to work, the rings in his shop windows had always cost almost twice as much as those of the other jewellers in town; and she also remembered a friend of her mother's who had borrowed money of a Jew, and when she couldn't pay it back by the date they had arranged, he made her sell most of her belongings at the pawn broker's so he'd get his money back; but really, she thought, even though she didn't like them that much, this was certainly going too far!

Margerite Verlaine, 49, cleaning lady: Time seemed to have stopped on the edge of dusk on that cold December afternoon, she thought, looking at the seven little stones placed on top of the big one – seven, one for each month since it had happened, the parents of the little girl must have put them there; and when she closed her eyes, she could see her little face again, she could recall perfectly every second of that walk in the Bois de Boulogne with her niece Aurélie and Aurélie's friend Jenny, the expression of cold fear in Jenny's eyes when the two men in uniform came towards them, spat in Jenny's face, punched her, kicked her, everything happened so quickly she couldn't even say anything; she remembered Jenny falling onto the cold wet path, crying, one man pushing her face down with his foot, she knew she would never forget those tiny, mud-covered sobs, drenched with murky water, and the muffled sound of the iron bar they used to hit her over the head; there would always be that warm vestige of terror.

These nine women "... were all caught by the police and taken to the nearest police station. Then to Les Tourelles. Then, on 13th August, to the camp in Drancy." (Patrick Modiano: *Dora Bruder*, p.140)

It is unknown what happened to the "amies des juifs" in Drancy, but they were probably taken to Auschwitz, along with thousands of other men and women.

ME - AND YOU

I fell back into old habits after speaking with you, and thinking you could stop me. Well, you didn't. I noticed him and I watched him for a while till he saw me and took my hand and then we went to a party. A queer party. I observed them. I watched them dance and kiss. I danced and saw his innocent - or ambiguous - look. And in the end we kissed, but it was not a deep, heartfelt kiss, so I knew I wouldn't have to feel guilty.

On our way back I told him what you'd said about him but he refused to understand or maybe it was just me explaining it 'my way' to keep our little game going.

The next afternoon I felt miserable and I wanted to escape and to talk to him. So after class I remained silent but he noticed nothing. I got angry because he hadn't asked me if there was something wrong, nor how I was feeling, as I had expected him to. How very stupid of me - but this feeling didn't want to go away so I ended up in the library watching "The Eye of the Beholder" and then something drove me into the street and there I met him and he was happy to see me and everything felt o.k. again. I was amazed by our casual meeting and the coincidences that happen in life, sometimes exactly when you need them and I felt relieved 'cause he was just the way I wanted him to be.

We walked hand in hand just as always, and I felt his every movement through the palm of my right hand.

- Am I happy? These thoughts of mine spoiling beautiful moments again, and I had to think of you and how you'd laugh, making this unbearably romantic atmosphere feel natural again.

The idea of him going away soon was a relief. I'd judged him and I knew I had no right to do this, but I always enjoyed it. I wanted him to leave so that I could return to the path I'd chosen for myself, so that I could go back to my planned future. Still not knowing why I let him be so important to me and why I even took the time for this intermezzo. I was hoping that he was not much into 'us' and that he didn't take it too seriously. Nevertheless I knew I would be offended if I'd known he was not taking 'us' seriously, and I actually hoped that he loved me though I know I shouldn't. I knew that the silly one was me, not you, not even him.

Around midnight I woke up feeling this pounding. Like there were two hearts in my chest or like my one heart was laughing at me. I couldn't breathe and I wanted him to wake up but I didn't dare to wake him, I wanted him to be the active one, but - as always - he wouldn't do it. I felt really uncomfortable seeing him lying there by my side. I wanted to be alone, to have the two covers just for me and not to have to share the air in my room with his loud breath. I knew you would have woken him up and thrown him out of the house. Some people are happy to watch the person beside them sleep - or so they tell us in music, literature and film - I don't. Making breakfast, starting the day with Nat King Cole on the piano, the smell of coffee and a morning sun, or maybe some drizzle

to stay in bed, that only makes sense when there is no one you have to think about or have regard for. I know that these thoughts are only the result of your influence on me.

A few days later I went for a walk, and as I was walking up some street I heard someone calling my name and it was him. He looked very strange, somehow disturbed.

- I've got news... He said melodramatically. He'd got a letter from his last girlfriends' parents, saying that she'd been found dead. An overdose of tranquilizers apparently. I didn't know what to say and the very instant I stretched out my arms to hug him I became angry with him and that he'd told me this.

- I needed to speak to somebody. And then I saw you. He said, as if he had guessed my thoughts.

So we went into a bar and he had a glass of wine and I had a gin tonic, and we laughed and then he got this look on his face and I knew he was very sad but I didn't say anything to comfort him and I didn't want to hug him either, though I knew this was what he was expecting me to do.

I said something that was supposed to be funny, I can't remember what it was, but he gave a forced smile and I felt very stupid.

Then he started to speak and I think he was speaking about her and about the time they had been together. I did not listen. I thought about how strange life can be and the things that normally do not occur in real life, the things you think you'll never have to cope with and then they happen, and the only thing that's left for you to do is to say wow! and to keep on living.

Three glasses of wine and two gin-tonics later he told me he was offended because I wasn't paying attention to what he'd said and I told him that I was sorry though we both knew I wasn't. And right there, right then, I perceived the ending of something that could have been wonderful.

He stood up and left and he took all the images with him, and all the memories of the time we'd spent together. These delicate moments of taking part in the great game of life always make me think of you and I wonder how you'd act and react, and I feel jealous. That day I wished to have your strength. You would not have felt sorry that he had left. And, though I knew he'd return to me that same day, I felt lost. I knew that this solitude and loneliness had nothing to do with his absence, I'd just suddenly become aware of this lack of something - maybe love.

In the evening he was waiting for me outside my house, just as I had expected. I smiled and he smiled as if he'd drunk a family-size bottle of happiness and I thought:

- There it is again, the reason why I don't feel comfortable with him.

He took my hand and tried to kiss me on the forehead and I faked a sneeze and when I looked up his smile was gone.

- I'm leaving on Friday so we've only got two days left. Can't you just pretend to like me. He was angry

- But I do like you. I don't know what you mean.

But I knew exactly. I knew that this was you invading me again and that you were gaining time and space.

We went inside and I tried to touch him, I tried to escape his questions and his offended look, but he obviously wasn't willing to play the game. He just sat there, silently and frowning, trying to be cruel. So I knew I had to face the problems he wanted me to face. And we talked about everything that meant something to him and as we talked I realised how little these things meant to me, but I faked a real tragedy, so after four hours of talking he was finally satisfied with my mind and he took my body, too. And then I knew that I would miss him terribly when he'd left. I would miss these little everyday dramas he liked to play, and the acting. Because I had no one else to play my games as perfectly as he did.

The next day I was walking through crowds of people in the streets, and I suddenly felt your presence stronger than ever before. And as I crossed the -symbolic and surreal- bridge I felt that you were angry and I thought that it was o.k. because I was totally satisfied with myself. But as I was thinking that you could not make me feel guilty for that you became alive, and you made me feel guilty. And as you walked our way back home I thought about which one of us is the stronger one, which one is the one that has to be freed and liberated from the other one's presence. I wanted to believe that you are the evil, the dangerous one, my own personal Mr. Hyde, but I knew you weren't. I felt pity for you. I knew you must have been hurt very badly to have become such a heartless creature. But, though I knew that you were trying to make me think the way you did and that your influence on me was killing my feelings, I did not want to live without you. Whom would I talk to in my dreams, if you were to leave me, and in those silent moments in my room, when the lights get blue and icy and you feel the cold expanding inside your veins with every heartbeat?

I had not wanted to go to the airport to say goodbye, and I'd told him. His parents and a few friends were going to accompany him and there was no need for me to go. So he came to my house to say goodbye. He looked very good and I knew he was wearing those things on purpose, to show me what I was losing in him. But I didn't want to feel angry, so I just felt melodramatically lost, like a great actress, a silent film actress, because I couldn't speak. And when he hugged me I smelled his clean, light blue baby smell and I knew that this was the one thing I'd remember about him.

- I'll miss you, and I know you'll miss me too, though you're too proud to accept it. You know, I really grew accustomed to you.

He said and kissed me on the head and I knew that this was my turn to say something, anything, but I couldn't because I was afraid of what you'd say. I am losing a very sensitive and romantic part of me because of you. But I also know that romance and sensitivity don't get you anywhere nowadays, so I know I have to be grateful for this. I'm beginning to see things clearer now. Maybe we're melting into one another. - Will there be anything in us that reminds people of me?

- You seem so cold and distant. I really miss the other part of you. The one who'd have cried when I went away. But now you just don't seem to care anymore. Will you remember me?

He asks with a sad look on his face and I just can't repress a giggle. He looks at me and sighs and I know he has no idea about both of us. He doesn't know that what he just said is the very truth about us, well, about me actually, because she's gone and he'll be gone in a moment. I know I must seem cold and heartless but I'm not. She left and she's not coming back, but there is something that wasn't in me before, it must be something she's left, her influence on me. It's hope. Hope and belief in a better world, in a better life, but above all things: hope that someday love will arise from the dead.



The Julie Archives No. 1:
THE HAPPIEST DAY OF MY LIFE

Thingy 1: Wait As Wait Can

*I*t's my birthday today. I'm turning 15. And here I am, home alone, waiting for Louise and Amber and Meredith and Jill and that pain in the ass Hank and, mh, Steven to show up for my party — sweet Steven, who I have a crush on, and who hates to be called "Steve" or "Stevie," and who always mixes me up with fat Jill just 'cause our names sound a little alike.

I skipped archery just to be home early enough to get all the stuff done, you know, like baking the two cakes, buying Coke and Mountain Dew and Mineral Water (I always need a bottle of water for Amber 'cause her whole family's a buncha neopeppies and her parents make her drink water) and cookies and sausages and buns and chips, well, and cleaning up a bit 'cause our place's a mess; espeshally the kitchen, and Hattie. I was so sure I wouldn't get all that work finished before my girlfriends and Hank (who's a nerd, but he's also Merry's younger brother, and she has to take care of him in the afternoons 'cause her parents both work, so he has to come along) and, uhm, my secret love arrived. But I did it 'cause I hurried up, and how could I know I'd be so effishient?! Dad says I'm slow but today I'm not. I ran home from school, rummaged through the kitchen for Dad's wallet (he always forgets to take it to work) and went shopping. I was so quick I even had a coupla mins left to stop by at Blockbuster to check out a video. It took me a while though to decide if I wanted to see "Rudy" for the 3rd or "Trainspotting" for the 7th time. I never get these wacko flicks from Europe, but I opted for "Trainspotting" 'cause Evan's in it. He's just soo cute; Steven looks a bit like him.

When I came home from Blockbuster with all the huge heavy bags I realized I did have a little time problem: I had to rearrange my hair, and there was hardly any hairspray left. (Not that I had a bad-hair day; my hair's just always rebellious.) So that took me a while. Then I had to feed Hattie; and then I also gave her a shower 'cause she stank like a dead racoon, and I still had to bake the cakes. I got a move on, so now the one cake looks like a meterite and the other like bird droppings. Doesn't matter; Dad says it's the inside that counts. But then Hattie was so coperative that I'm now left with the whole of two hours to spend before the party. I could do my homework; but I don't get math (last time I paid attention we were doing square roots or something), and I just noticed I already wrote my essay for composition. We're supposed to describe ourselves in a few words, and I think I did a neat job:

Hi, I'm Julie, and I'm ~~14~~ 15. (I had to cross out the 14 'cause I remembered that next time we'd be having composition I'd be 15 already.) I'm a student of Patterson High School in

Pikeville, Indiana, and I live with my dad at 36B Old Mill Rd. in Pikeville, Indiana. My hobbies are: Asian comic books called mangas (well, I don't really know if they're Japanese or Chinese, so I thought Asian would sound smart), my dog Hattie, Madonna, P.O.D., Lays chips flavored sour cream and onion, Evan McGregor, going out with my girlfriends, and archery. I have green eyes and blonde hair. (That's not really true, it's a dye actually; but after I saw him kissing that cow Hilary Barns last week after class I have a hunch Steven prefers blonde girls.) Thank you!

Sooo, everything's arranged, foodstuff and drinks're in the fridge, Hattie's as clean as she can get (she's 19, so she always stinks a bit), and I've been watching TV for the past hour now. Patrick Forgid's two-hour "Let it out!" talkshow special's on; today's topic is kids with a trauma. A trauma is something bad that happened to you when you were young, like your parents forgot you in a store or you got yourself nearly killed in a car accident 'cause your airbag didn't open. I think it's pretty boring, but there's nothing else on. There's Edith, whose real mom was a loonie and put her in the fridge next to the chicken salad for an hour when she was a baby, there's Lennie, who got bitten by a rat during summer camp in the Appalachian mountains and is seeing a shrink now, and just now skinny Roger's rambling on and on about how horrible it was when he was at kindergarten 4 years ago, surrounded by a buncha bullies who (here Patrick Forgid says "Let it all out, boy" to whimpering Roger) wouldn't let him go pee until the group leader noticed the yellow stain in the crotch of his white pants. Ooh, spooky! I just wonder, you know, how can Roger-boy remember all this? I can't even remember what happened to me when I was 6, peeing or not peeing. My life memory starts at age 7, maybe 8. Dad would say that's 'cause I have such a lazy brain. Besides, I wouldn't care about peeing in my pants as a baby. There's worse things when you're young, like spinach (heeba!) and math and carrots, or not getting a birthday present, or getting a birthday present from Granny Martha, or Steven mixing me up with Jill.

Maybe my brain's the reason I'm so bored – I guess I just can't entertain myself. I get sleepy when there's no action going on. (I fell asleep during math this morning; Amber nudged me awake, but Miss Christian didn't notice anyways 'cause we sit in the last row and she's shortsighted; thank God I don't snore like Dad.) What with archery, I have no clue why that works for me. 'Cause, you sorta have to be in a spiritual state of non-action, you know, if you wanna be good at archery. But I'm good, I'm really pretty good; even Dad's proud, and that's something 'cause he doesn't get all this manga-zen-Asian stuff. Well, I don't either, but I know Hiroshi looks real cool on "BioTechs 3001 A.D." when she races through Nu Hong Kong on her hypercycle and takes aim at her enemies, mutant aliens and mechanical humans, with bow and arrow. And I feel a bit like Hiroshi when I do archery.

Roger's answering questions from the audience, but no one can understand what he's saying through his sobs; he's such a goggle-eyed cry-baby, even Patrick Forgid's looking at his wrist watch while he's nodding his head. I wish they'd show "BioTechs," or a Madonna clip. Maybe I shouldn't have skipped archery after all – could be having fun with Louise and Jill now, who're also in the school club with me. (Jill's doing archery 'cause she's too fat for any other kindsa sports.) But then again... well, it's just that sometimes our supervisor's a little drunk. Archie's 44, and since

his wife Trisha left him I don't know how many months ago he's never been the same. (At least that's what Dad says, and he knows 'cause Archie's his best pal. I wouldn't know 'cause it's only been a few weeks since I've been a member.) Whenever he thinks about Trisha he obviously can't think straight, or walk straight, and he gets depressed, and then he gets drunk. Dad says it's a vicious circle, whatever that means. All I know is that it's bad for my score when I'm trying to zen-concentrate and hit the target right in the bull's eye while Archie's loose on the grounds, swaying and cussing in his rotten mood. He zigzags about in front of the targets; of course you're not supposed to shoot people, so someone always has to drag Archie's burping body fat outta the line of fire. It's a big-time disgrace for poor Louise, his daughter, who's so sensitive. Fridays are the worst 'cause Fridays are closer to the weekends than Tuesdays. That's the time when Archie feels most lonely — at least that's what Dad says. Must be a male thing — Dad and Archie are in this weekly Single Dads thing together.

Anyways, it's Tuesday today (and since it's August it's summer, and it's real hot outside), and Archie might be a little drunk or not drunk at all, but I wouldn't know 'cause it's my birthday today and I didn't go. Yup, and here I am, freshly 15 years old, lolling on the couch and dealing with traumatized nutcases on TV; heeba! I know, I could just as well go ahead and watch "Trainspotting" with sweet Evan till the party starts — but I wanna save it for later on. I wanna watch it together with the others to make Steven jealous with my affection for Evan.

Thingy 2: Get Yourself A Trauma

I can't believe I'm so bored I actually get up and go upstairs and open the closet (which smells of old shampoo) in Dad's room. I look through Mom's stuff; I usually don't do that 'cause it doesn't thrill me a great deal, and it must be ages since I last did it, but this is an emergency. I've read all the mangas I have, I don't feel like lying on my bed and dry-kissing my Evan-poster right now, and Mom's old clothes and pencils (she was a writer for a mag — something like "House & Home," I think) and postcards're still miles better than stupid kids' traumas.

Here we go again, my bad memory's in its element: It seems to me like all the things I dig up from Mom's old crate're things I've never seen in my life. Well, I don't really remember much about Mom for that matter. She's been dead for ages now (Dad says she got stung by a bee on the way to work; she was allergic) — no one can blame me for not remembering her face or hair color. I was only 7 then. I remember her voice, though: real strange, sorta like a mix between the early Britney Spears and a Russian immigrant. So here's a shoe catalog, a pair of slippers, some blue jeans with holes in them, family postcards from California and Maine, a bus ticket from an old holiday in Hawai, a leather handbag, two setsa pencils and markers and a tube of glue, perfume, some pocket books, and... and a picture book. With photos by Anne Geddes. Heeba! I gulp. I hate Anne Geddes. I hate her stupid babies. The first idea that springs to mind is to run and enjoy Patrick Forgid's last guest. These chubby, dead ugly, freaky babies in silly costumes — I didn't know Mom was into that. I shiver. But I can't resist opening it up (the cover says "Motherhood's Dream Creatures" — yeah,

sure) and have a look at the pics. They make me sickly dizzy. They're terrible. Yes, that's terrible – not your fridge, Edith, not your rats, whatever-your-name-was, and not your stupid pee, Roger-boy. To be an Anne Geddes baby, that's real horror, that's what traumas are made of! I can't understand how any mom can do this to her own baby – hand it over to that Geddes woman, who cuddles and oohs and dresses the helpless kid and then takes these embarrassing pics of it for all the world to see.

I look at the photos first, which're just soo disgusting, then at the names printed below. There's crying babies in watermelon costumes, gaping babies dressed as flowers, fat babies who play cowboy and princess, babies who smile and sleep in silly angel and cow and dog and cheese outfits, babies with bare wrinkled butts and lips like oozy snails. Peter Jimson, Millie Flakes, Jack Krugeroy, Kristin Olandson, Babsie Burlap... Yukk! And all those wacko names! But there's one kid that really totally gives me the rest – a fat, real fat, ball of baby flesh jammed into a white sheep costume with ears dangling in the air that looks dumb as the devil. This one really beats all the others to the prize of "Ugliest Costumed Baby Alive" – now that's a show I'd love to host! I could be the female version of Patrick Forgid and become a famous entertainer on TV. I'd have my own weekly show (called "Ugliest Costumed Baby Alive") and fans and autograph sessions and money. (I'd have a whole lotta money, and I could buy Dad a new car and a palm pilot so he wouldn't forget his wallet all the time, and I could buy myself fancy clothes and heaps and heaps of Lays chips flavored sour cream and onion and all the mangas and Evan flicks in the world.) I'd invite Anne Geddes once a year before TV summer break for the big "This Year's Ugliest Costumed Baby Alive Winner" special. I'd be on prime time, and first there'd be an announcer who'd announce me like this: "And here, ladies and gents, is your host – Miss Juuulie Wilssoon!"

And here I'd come, all styled and in a cool futuristical outfit, striding out on stage and smiling. Then I'd look real tough and mean when I'd present the ugliest babies, and the audience would slap their knees with laughter 'cause the babies're so ugly. And this year, "This Year's Ugliest Costumed Baby Alive Winner" would be the fat sheep kid. There'd be a vid of the photo session – the proud mom and Anne Geddes dressing the baby, the baby looking like a dumb poodle, Anne getting her camera ready, the mom bursting with excitement, the baby still looking like a dumb poodle, the camera flashing. I'd be cracking funny jokes about the sheep, how it looks so demented, how it must be a retard, how idiotic the outfit is, how puffy the cheeks and the fingers and the belly are, how the furry ears hang down, how you can see the sheep's kinky feet, how it looks real pregnant and all, and how it'll regret this photo later in life and hate its mom and that Geddes woman with all its heart. After commershals I'd have some guests, and it would be the grown-up sheep baby and its mom and Anne Geddes. The grown-up sheep baby would look at the pic and see itself in the sheep outfit for the first time in its life, and it would get a trauma right away and cry like Roger (at which I'd be all cruel and laugh and crack more synical jokes, and the audience would rave and cheer along). Then the grown-up sheep baby (which would still be real fat by the way) would attack its mom and Anne, haha! (Later I'd mention that there's a collection of stuffed fat ugly sheep babies and sheep baby key chains and sheep baby posters and mugs and mousepads anyone can order.)

Really, looking at this pic now I don't know if I should laugh or just stare and be sorry for this ugly chubby thingammy. How can Mom've liked this shitty pic? What a disgrace that must've been for the poor kid! But then again, that ain't my problem. Before I turn the page to the next sorry creature I read the name below. I freeze. It says: "Julie Wilson." I read it again, it says: "Julie Wilson." I read it three times; it is my name. Oh boy, so I was an Anne Geddes baby – that means the sheep baby was me all along! I'm an innocent victim of the worst childhood horror ever! Great; just great. Now I have a trauma big-time. Heeba. And my own mom's to blame! I hate her, and I hate Anne Geddes!

Thingy 3: So, What's Your Root?

I drop the picture book and zone out for a sec over Mom's crate. I see a ring of babies dressed and fed and photographed by evil Anne, spinning and spinning in my head, with me as the fattest little bleeping sheep in the middle, and all my girlfriends're there, and Steven, hell, they're all watching and laughing at me – I come to and feel real sick. (I don't easily feel sick, only when I eat too little or too much, or when I see spinach.) I wish Steven was here, or Evan, and would take me in his arms to console me. This is the first trauma in my life; I never thought I'd ever have one. I think I should go see a therapist, like Roger.

I need some fresh air, so I close the closet and go outside to sit in the garden and think my life over. I have some important decisions to make, like how to deal with this trauma, and how to treat my own kids when I'm a mom, or what to say to Dad (what if he's to blame? Maybe it was his idea to have his cute little daughter turned into a cutesy sheep by evil Anne? And what then? Should I run away from home, and should I ask Steven to come with me? But what about Hilary Barns?) when he comes home from work tonight, and what to wear for my party in this horrible heat. It's so hot I'll probably wear my green camouflash tank top and my hotpants. My throat is tight, and I cry a little over my fate. Our neighbor's in her garden too; she's a gardener and always fiddles around in her flower beds, but today she's scribbling around in a notebook. It reminds me of Mom, and I get furious. If Mom wasn't dead, if she was here right now, I'd go inside, get the cool WalMart crossbow Dad bought me as a present last X-Mas, and shoot her where she stands. Our neighbor (her name's Crystal, just like my Mom's, and there's a lotta gossip going on about her 'cause she's not married and doesn't work regularly) waves at me, and I wave back angrily. I hate her, like I hate Mom and evil Anne; come to think of it, I hate all the world right now. Well, except for Steven and Evan, who I both still love deeply and truly.

Suddenly a weird idea pops up in my brain – what if our neighbor's my mom?! What if the name and the writing isn't just coincident? Heeba! I wouldn't know, 'cause I don't remember Mom's looks and we don't keep photos, and Dad wouldn't know either (you know, Crystal moved here only a week ago, and Dad's been working all day every day and hasn't seen her so far, I think) – how convenient that would be! I could take revenge and shoot her right now, while she's out in

the garden. I run back inside, grab the Anne Geddes picture book, walk over the low fence between our gardens and hand her the book without a word. She gazes first at me, then at the book, and breaks out in tears. She leafs through the book and stops when she spots the sheep. She seems to remember me as a stupid fat sheep 'cause she smiles and points at the words written below:

To my dear Julie – you are the cutest child I have ever seen. You were such a sweet baby, and now you are such a pretty girl. I am so proud of you. This is for you; I hope you like it. I know you are angry and confused because I had to leave you and Doug – but I promise you we will see each other again one day, and I pray that you will understand what I could not explain to Doug when you were young – ♥, Mom, 1995 .

(Doug's my dad; like Steven, he hates his short name and prefers Douglas.) She gets real emotional all of a sudden and wails and hugs me so tight around the waist that I drop "Motherhood's Dream Creatures" in the grass. I really wonder what she was thinking moving back here; she must've had a severe case of memory loss (which runs in the family) 'cause she doesn't even explain anything to begin with. Maybe she's just a pervert who leaves her family 'cause she hates doing the dishes and the cooking all of a sudden, but then comes back years later to spy on her husband and daughter next door. Why couldn't she just be logical and take a hike and never show up again like Trisha did with Archie and Louise? Well, all I know is that I would've smacked both evil Anne and Mom for real back then at the photo shooting if I'd had a brain already.

The voice does it: She mumbles my name over and over again, and it sounds like Britney Spears born and raised in Russia. So it's gotta be Mom. It's nice she's still alive so I have the chance to shoot her for coming back, but even more for taking me to Anne Geddes who turned me into a silly sheep. (It's kinda sad though she isn't friends with evil Anne; she could've brought her here with her, and now I could shoot both of them in one go.) "It's okay, Mom; hold on a sec, I gotta pee," I say and break free. She follows me into our house, going "Julie Julie my sweet Julie Julie Julie" like a CD on endless repeat, and sits down in front of the TV. (It's funny, Dad says she always used to be in control of the remote.) Patrick Forgid's special's almost finished; they're showing a commercial for rental cars. She starts zapping through the channels. I leave her alone, go upstairs to my room and get my crossbow. I feel like Hiroshi on an important mission; only that Hiroshi has black hair and mine is blonde.

Mom's calmed down a bit; she's eating the cookies I bought for my party. I get angry – she's eating the cookies I bought especially for Steven! This is too much. I don't make a sound, step closer, aim at her neck, steady my body, collect my balance and soul and zen energy and stuff, and then release the Chi – shoot, just now Mom turns round and looks straight at me. I wonder what's going through her head; is she as proud of my technic as Dad? Does she wanna eat the sour cream and onion chips and the sausages too? Her eyes go real wide and her mouth opens so half a cookie crumbles back out, but I can't stand to hear any more of that Russian Britney business, so I shoot. It's all real, but suddenly our living room's Nu Hong Kong, and the TV set's a 3-D plasma screen, and I'm the cool blonde archer fighting for revenge and justice in a world ruled by

nonhuman monsters. In slowmo the bow releases the arrow, the arrow zinnngggs through our Nu Hong Kong living room, the arrow tears through hot summer air, which smells of Hattie, the arrowhead sparkles in the sunlight and plugs into Mom's forehead with a fast and low sound which sounds like thikk. It slugs only a tiny hole between Mom's eyes, and there's not much blood at all. Right in the bull's eye, and no reeling Archie around to screw up my score. Mom goes limp and slides from the couch under the table so I can reach the remote and switch to MTV. I could use some P.O.D. now. I'm in a good mood; aggressive, but good. Hattie helps me to hide Mom in the closet next to her old crate – it's a tough job, both of us pant as we drag and pull with hands and teeth. I put the Anne Geddes picture book on Mom's chest 'cause that seems a nice enough gesture. I'm gonna get ridda her body tomorrow morning before Dad comes home from work; Pikeville's trash collection'll take care of her – and her offputting pics of Anne Geddes babies.

Thingy 4: Life, Love, Laughter, Madonna, And An Arrowhead

MTV's showing Madonna's clip for the new James Bond movie. I love that clip, and the songs real cool. I sit and watch and join in with my voice (I have a good voice; I sound a bit like Bjork, that short Irish singer who isn't blonde. This summer Mrs. Tarrents said I should join the school choir, but I opted for archery instead 'cause I thought that had more to do with my inner character.) – I feel real neat. Life can be so easy when things work out. You know, 20 mins ago I was bored shitless and then hit by a bad trauma, and now here I am with a great Madonna clip (the one blonde Madonna's just taking aim at the other blonde Madonna with her crossbow, and the other blonde Madonna's falling backwards in slowmo with an arrow in her chest) and Steven not far away and my trauma solved. I just hope Steven'll be able to tell me apart from fat Jill this time.

A moment later, while I'm just busy changing, the doorbell rings and I jump up and quickly get my blonde hair in order, and it's Steven! He's the first to show up! (Even if he's a coupla mins late.) He even gets my name right. (I admit it's hard to mix me up with someone who isn't there yet, but I feel honored and blessed anyways and hug him so tight he wheezes. I can tell he likes it.) His eyes shine like Evan's in "Trainspotting" after he comes out of the toilet from his trip. It's amazing how much they have in common. He gives me my present; it's a journal, which I right away detest 'cause it reminds me of Mom when she was writing in our neighbor's garden. But I love him, so I give a deep sigh and pat his short spiky hair, and he kisses me on the cheek. Heeba!

One by one the others drop in. Louise and Jill're a bit late; they called and said they'd get a ride from Archie after archery. I can see them drive up – Archie must've had a few 'cause he sure grants his Toyota all the space the street gives away. The wavy lines look funny through the kitchen window, where I stand watching the show with Merry and Amber. Hank's munching chips, and Steven's gone peeing – I just hope he won't lose his way and bump into Mom in the closet. (It's the first time he's been to my place, and I'm pretty excited. I don't wanna spoil the party by making a bad impression on him. I'm sure he's not an Anne Geddes fan.) Archie stumbles in behind Jill and his daughter before I can shut the door; he asks me if there's any beer left. Louise's so

embarrassed she breaks out in tears, and Archie leaves to sulk in his car; I don't get how Dad can be friends with this bum. Hank (who's got the hots for Louise 'cause she's the only one who's smaller than he is and looks so fragile and gentle) tries to console her. But then Hattie, that pig, pees on the floor; she has a weak bladder, but she's not allowed to have a weak bladder in the kitchen. Some of her stinky pee sprinkles on Hank's sneakers. (They're mintgreen, like snot, or like spinach with milk; it's some mix.) Hank's so disgusted he turns from Louise and heaves on the cake closest to him, the one that looks like bird droppings. It's ugly, but it cracks us all up. Steven's busy eating the meterite cake.

When we're all done with the food we move to the living room to watch Evan's drama from Europe. (Which's a good thing 'cause the kitchen reeks of dirty dishes, Hank's puke, Hattie's pee, and Hattie in general.) "Trainspotting" is a real hit. Merry (who says the sausages were bad and feels queesy) is shocked by the shit scene where one of the guys in the flick plasters a whole room with his poop; it freaks me out, and I laugh so hard I spill some Coke on the couch, which Hattie licks up. Amber (who feels a bit queesy too 'cause she hasn't eaten anything; as a cheerleader and daughter of hippies she can only eat health food, and I don't have any around aside from WalMart dog food) is fascinated with the drug issue; she says her parents would love this movie 'cause it shows new hippie dimenshons, whatever that means. Steven finds it cool too; we kiss during the toilet scene. My first kiss with gorgeous Steven, heeba! (So much for that bitch Hilary Barns! I knew he liked me best all along.) After the movie Merry pukes in the sink 'cause she can't get over the sausages and the movie poop and asks me what with the rating. I proudly tell her that "Trainspotting" is rated R for certain reasons, but Miss Clarson was all alone in the vid store today — we all know what that means; even though she's only 32, Miss Clarson's a square and a spinster and never reads mags or watches TV, so she has no clue that "Trainspotting" isn't really a European football buddy movie rated PG-13 like I told her. (Ha, she doesn't even know they don't have football over there in Europe.)

I get my presents later that night; Amber gives me a blanket her aunt made of buckskin while she was living at a Navaho reservation, and Merry gives me an umbrella with Chinese or Japanese or whatever signs on it. I get a sticker album from Louise (I feel a bit too old for a sticker album now that I shot a person, but it's nice anyways) and P.O.D.'s "Satellite" from Jill. (Her dad works at Chuck Donoghue's CD store, so she gets all the newest music for sale.) Hank doesn't give me anything, thank God. And thank God Granny Martha's below ground; she would've mailed me a pair of itchy pink socks again, like all those years, which Hattie would've eaten, like all those years. Grampa Lewis, Dad's dad, who's 76 and still alive and kicking, sent me a letter from California, where it must be really hot right now, sorta like around here in our street in Pikeville. Anyways, he's written me a little poum, which I read out to my guests:

Just in case ya din't know // this today is Jilly's show // she's ma grangirl, wow-o-wow!
She is swiet as apple-py // it's her berthday, ma-o-my // have a great day, Jilly, by!

Grampa Lewis's bad at spelling, and he always gets my name wrong. Dad says that since the day I was born Grampa's been thinking I'm a Jilly, not a Julie. I don't much care 'cause Grampa

Lewis's a neat person, and the poum's just making me real teary. I hand it around, and Louise, who's got such a good heart, weeps a little too, and Amber says it's a beautiful pieca poutry and real melancholly, despite the misspellings. But then my sweetheart Steven rubs my shoulder and says "It's okay, don't be sad, it's gonna be okay," and I feel much better. And then when Hank is chased by Hattie 'cause she wants to sniff her own pee on his sneakers, I'm in a totally bright mood again. We play my favorite cardgame, spoons, but Jill doesn't join in 'cause she's too slow for spoons 'cause she's so fat. She kills the whole two packsa buns from the fridge to add to her fat while I'm winning each game. Grampa Lewis's poum must've given Amber an idea 'cause suddenly she disappears to get something from her bag, then much later comes back with her pòmpons (I never liked them; they're orange and remind me of carrots) and a pieca scratch paper. I'm again real touched and moved and all when Amber performs an improvised cheer for me:

1-2-3-4, lemme sing a cheer for your // 5-6-7-8, party, don't you be afraid //

1-2-3-4, of being older a year more // 5-6-7-8, 21 soon, you can't wait!

1-2-3-4, Steven's the guy you adore (here I turn red and glance at Steven, who's eating the rest of my Lays chips, and his crunching cheeks're so cute) // 5-6-7-8, he's gonna stay with you real late //

1-2-3-4, let's all say mighty thanks for // 5-6-7-8, the food and flick, let's celebrate //

1-2-3-4, down to our very core // 5-6-7-8, heeba, our Julie-mate!

— and in case you didn't know, this today is Julie's show! Wow!

I feel blessed; everybody loves me, and Mom's had her payback from me and is dead. Finally, I read out my composition essay about my personality to my girlfriends and Steven; they all seem to like it a great deal. It's true what Dad says, that friends're the best critics. It's a great party.

The girls leave way after midnight (their parents aren't home anyways; well, Archie probably is, but he'll be too drunk to notice poor Louise when she comes back) and luckily take Hank with them; he still smells of puke and Hattie's pee. (Poor Louise again; she really has no luck with boys.) My love Steven's the last to go; we kiss goodbye, and he tells me I'm cute and he likes my hair and my clothes. I can't wait to see him tomorrow in history. After everyone's gone I check on Mom in the closet — no problems there. I clean up the kitchen (well, at least a little) and feed Hattie her dog food (that special WalMart mix they sell for dogs with weak arthritical bones that won't live too much longer) and take her for a short walk around the block; then I change and go to bed. I kiss Evan goodnight the way Steven kissed me and dream of being a superstar singer like Madonna and of being a superstar archer like Hiroshi on "BioTechs 3001 A.D." — oh, but before that I pull the arrow out of Mom's forehead, wash it in the kitchen sink and put it up to dry next to the crossbow. The wet arrowhead sparkles in the glow of my bedlight like Steven's eyes. (I'm sure Dad'll like Steven bunches. I'm so in love.)

Thingy 5: Sleep Sweetly Forevermore

Dad comes into my room sometime early in the morning and softly shakes me awake. For a sec I panic, but then my brain kicks in and I remember that I already dumped Mom. 'Cause, in the middle of the night I had this funny dream of her coming back to life (she chased me all around town and shouted something like "I'll smack you with my gardening tools, you sheep!"), and when I woke up I really didn't feel good about her up there in the closet. So I got up and woke up Hattie, and together we worked Mom outta the house and stuffed her in her own trashcan next door. (I wrapped her and evil Anne's nasty picture book in old newspapers.) Now Dad'll never get to see her; he doesn't worry about garbage.

"Babypie, you seen my wallet?"

"Yup; in the kitchen, Dad. Like always."

"Oh."

"Hey, what you got there?"

"Present for you! Here."

I turn on the light to get a better look at the thing in Dad's greasy hands. I unwrap it – it's a manga I don't know yet. It's called "Mayoto – Solitary Slayer of Doom" and has a bulky bald man in a kimono on the cover. He's holding two huge rifles, and he has a crossbow in shiny blue and silver slung over his shoulder.

"Cool, an Asian techno-archer! Thanks, Dad!"

Dad grins happily and kisses me on the forehead. He looks dead beat. I hug him; he smells of tires, soot, coffee and cronked engines. Dad's a real jack-a-all-trades. I'm glad he's never gonna have to find out Mom wasn't dead after all till last night.

"Dad... I gotta ask you something..."

"What?"

"Do you like the pics Anne Geddes takes of babies?"

"Who?"

"Oh, never mind."

Heeba; Dad'll never know how relieved I am to know he didn't have anything to do with my trauma; I couldn't live with him one night longer if it'd been him who wanted me dressed up as a fat stuffed sheep. (I just remembered Dad once said all sheep're dumb 'cause they have a tiny brain.)

"How was your day, honey?"

"Gorgeous!"

"Glad to hear it."

"And yours?"

"Fine. Lotsa work. Look, I'm sorry I couldn't be there, baby."

"You're good, Dad. It was a fun day!"

"Good, that's good. Real good."

"Erm, Dad... I gotta ask you something else..."

"Hu?"

"You know, I was just wondering – do you ever miss Mom sometimes?"

"Crystal? Not really... she's been dead quite a while now. I think we're a good team, you and me."

I hope he means it. Otherwise my whole performance'll have been for nothing but for me to overcome my trauma.

"Are you sure, Dad?"

"Yes. But then again... well, see, Julie — if she was still here she could at least do the housework. You wouldn't have to do all the shopping and cleaning up and washing and cooking and stuff; you'd have more time for your friends and school and archery."

"Stop worrying, Dad! I love to shop, and I'm a good cook, and my friends can always come over, and school's going well. And I don't mind our piles of dirty dishes. Besides, I had some practice in the garden today."

"With the dishes?"

"No, archery."

"What — you did archery in the garden?"

"Yup; it was real fun. By the way, you know what? I think our neighbor's moving out."

"Which neighbor?"

"The woman in 34. The one that just moved in a week ago. The one you haven't met yet. She told me she didn't like it around here. She might be gone soon."

"Well, bad for her. Soo, you had a nice time with your friends?"

"Sure did — and thanks for the manga; I'll read it first thing in the morning."

"That's wonderful; goodnight and sweet dreams, babypie. By the way: D'you ever miss Mom?"

Dad runs his greasy fingers through my blonde hair; he's such a great guy, and I don't think I'll ever move out any time soon. (Unless Steven asks me to marry him.) It's nice to feel so loved.

"Well... not really; I can't really remember her much anyways, you know. So I'm not traumatized or anything. For real, this was the happiest day of my life big-time, Dad; g'night."

PERFECT LOVE

*S*he lived in her own mind she really did.

Which actually proved to be futile, since her mind did not exist yet.

Harrison's thinking was excited and still sort of frightened.

How could I have let myself be talked into this, was his primary obsession.

She half lay, half sat slumped down on the sofa opposite of the chair he was sitting in right now.

She was beautiful anyway, long blonde hair, alabaster-white skin, supple breasts and marvelous thighs. Hence, one could also have been admiring a statue, for one thing was missing.

Life.

Though she was breathing, though blood ran through her veins, propelled by the pumping heart, she was nevertheless not alive.

Her eyes were empty, staring blankly into nowhere.

She's as alive as a plant, Harrison thought. She's totally new. There's nothing in her. Let's do something about that.

Harrison let out a disgusted sigh. This would be the ugly part of the job.

Dr. Manura's instructions had been explicit.

It's like kind of Adam and Eve being chucked out of Eden, when they learned about death and in a lesser form, pain. The mind is nothing without pain. Pain is what our mind's concerned about. Without concern our mind suffers from a lack of, you might say, gas. A machine without gas is useless.

If you give her something to worry about you will really just be filling up the gas tank. So don't be shy.

Harrison sneered. Adam and Eve, my ass. But why not?

A smile started to form on his face as he stood up and moved towards her.

Eve.

Good idea.

Harrison reached in his pocket and produced a small knife.

He knelt down beside her and scanned her lifeless body for possible points. Finally he had decided.

Harrison placed the knife into the elbow of her right extended arm, gently touched the skin with the knife's tip and then he pulled it down to her wrist in one swift movement, leaving a small red line which began to bleed.

She winced and let out a small, maybe instinctive, whimper. Harrison looked up.

He was surprised. Though the cut had not been deep, the pain must have been to her, unused to it as she was, like hell. Her blank eyes weren't empty now; in fact, they were moving from side to side, following a primitive version of panic, reacting to an unknown thing that had penetrated her little blank land of dreams.

She was effectively alive.
Harrison smiled. Eden's a goner.
"Hello Eve!" he said.

Slowly he opened the door.

Instantly two small silhouettes sped at him, screaming madly.

Before he could prevent it, Harrison felt their impact on him and lost his equilibrium.

With a faint "Uuaaah..." his body toppled backwards in slow-motion and he crashed down on the marbled floor, feeling his spine crack.

Still the two figures clung to him like leeches.

"Hush, you midgets!" another voice said.

Harrison looked up at the newcomer and spotted his wife, Chloe Harrison with her usual facial expression, a mix between scolding and happiness.

As they heard it, Harrison's four- and six-years old daughters let go of him and scrambled.

With an annoyed grunt he lifted himself to his feet and let his wife embrace him tenderly.

"A hard day at work love?" Chloe asked.

Harrison only mumbled something positive.

"Well, then you'd better get freshened up. Dinner's due in ten minutes. And don't be late!" She had said the last words with an undertone that made Harrison twitch.

With that Chloe had walked off into the kitchen and had left him quite dumbstruck.

Having nothing better than to follow her orders if he wanted to avoid her calling him names Harrison undressed and entered the small hygienic cell.

The apparatus looked not very different from an ordinary shower, which most lower workers still had to use. Only that it hummed constantly and someone seemed to have it fitted out with the complete gear of a space shuttle, tubes, various displays, flashing lights and several antennas. The advantage was that it not only cleaned one, but it also kept running a current profile of one's condition, mental and physical.

As Harrison closed the cell door behind him, the humming became more agitated. Suddenly he heard a whirring, followed by a click and then, a voice, cold and mechanical,

"Acknowledged! Harrison, Mortimer, aged 35. Citizen of the United Earth. Current assistant lab-technician to Dr. Yoran Manura, head of Research and Development at Pleasuretech. Current Cholesterol rating 32...."

Mr. Bradley sat in his Chair, his gaze fixed on Harrison.

"It is just a minor assignment you'll be able to handle. And if you succeed it will boost your career in a way you'll never imagine. If you botch it... Well, I think you know perfectly well...!"

He leaned back. "This company can't afford a failure. We have a reputation to uphold. Do you understand that?"

Cold sweat ran down Harrison's spine. "Y-y-y-yes, sir!"

Mr. Bradley smiled. "Good! Right after you're dismissed, you will walk straight to Dr. Manura, who will give you a complete briefing! If you feel bad about this, remember that it was your gossip that inspired the Doctor to this new kind of ... preparation.

You may leave now!"

Slightly shivering, Harrison moved cautiously out of Mr. Bradley's office.

Eve had made a great effort in the last few days since her awakening, an effort which astounded Harrison.

After the pain had settled in her head and she had cooled off a bit, Harrison had let her first take a look around in the small apartment the company had organized for this matter.

The situation was almost comical, yet very surreal and extremely bizarre. There she was, a girl of the biological age of between seventeen and twenty-three, but the mental age of a mere twenty minutes.

This was not an accident; though, she had been planned to be like this.

She was not a clone. A clone is a perfect duplicate of another being, identical down to DNA and memory. Yet cloning is only an option for severely injured or fatally infected people with no hope of a normal cure. Cloning oneself to escape death through age is completely banished and prohibited.

Luckily for Eve, this was not the case with her.

She was something Dr. Manura called a 'Golem' in moments of sick humor. Made of metaphorical clay, basic DNA that is, her looks and everything else had been engineered by Manura and his cronies.

Only the mind was left blank, for obvious reasons.

Now that she had learned pain, some genetic instinct had made her crawl around in the apartment on the lookout for anything that might cause her pain. She hadn't found anything.

After pain, it was time for Harrison to introduce her to something different, namely joy.

Again he had settled down beside her and had stroked her arm, her legs and some of her erogenous zones. She seemed to enjoy that, the latter mostly. Then, after he had given her intravenous nourishment, he had left her to work out the difference between joy and pain.

"You seem a bit stressed dear. Is everything alright?" Chloe asked.

"The work is getting a bit edgy right now!" Harrison answered.

"Good! Then get freshened up for dinner!" she cut him off as he tried to tell her about his work's edges.

My Chloe, the perfect love, Harrison thought.

The next day he had returned only to see her standing upright.

Bruised though, but upright.

Walking on two legs.

Smiling.

And she stroked him.

Harrison was vexed. Not only that Eve had worked out the difference between pain and joy, she had also decided on her own that joy was preferable to pain.

The surveillance camera told him that she had spent the entire night walking upright which explained her bruised state of being.

And she had adopted his smile.

At least that allows me to speed things up. According to Manura's calculations it ought to have taken her three months to learn to walk upright.

The next point of the program dealt with speech. Harrison hoped that, since she had the mental abilities of a kid, she would be able to adapt to speech quite fast.

He began to show her a variety of objects in the apartment, things like 'chair', 'floor', 'table', 'wall' etc., always saying the name loud and clearly. After a while something like recognition appeared to lighten up in her eyes.

Then he just showed her the objects and astoundingly fast she understood that she should name them.

First her speech was slurred, her vocal complex was untrained to produce sounds. But after some time she commenced to articulate her utterances better and better.

Harrison then introduced her to some verbs, and later, to adjectives.

When he left her, she possessed the vocabulary of a four-year old, but she spoke with the clarity of a sixteen-year old teenager.

"Honey, you're late. I was worried! Is something wrong?" Chloe's voice sounded shaken.

"I got delayed at work!" Harrison answered.

"Good! Get freshened up for dinner!" With this, her voice had regained her usual acidic consistency.

But this didn't trouble Harrison. Today's success was worth it.

"Hello Sweetheart! How nice to see you!" Eve greeted him as he entered the apartment.

Harrison was confident that he could bring in the desired results way earlier than expected. Even now he was so far ahead of schedule that Manura would only be able to recognize Eve through DNA analysis.

The girl had changed in the last week. From that primitive humanoid being to a modest educated young woman of the twenty-third century. Her voice was a soft, gentle tune, filled with absolute confidence and devotion. Subconsciously it touched something buried deep inside Harrison by his past years of marriage.

Now the real education would begin.

Harrison sat down in the chair and unpacked the bag he had brought with him. From it he produced something like a pair of slender headphones, only that they covered a human's temples.

Curiously Eve approached him.

"What is this my dearest?" she asked him, a glint of panic in her eyes.

"Nothing that will hurt you, girl! It's just a learning device, called a Neuron-Inductor." He said trying to calm her down. "Here, you put it on like this," he adjusted it on her temples, " and off you go!"

For the next few days, Eve learned everything she needed to know about human history, culture and philosophies. After every NI session, they'd discuss what Eve had learned and she came up with some strangely refreshing phrases, like, "Napoleon must have been impotent," or, "Hitler was clearly a fag," and "This earth-uniter Gandhi the third was just a masochist fuck-up!"

"You're late again! That's it! I WON'T TOLERATE THIS ANYMORE!" Chloe screamed at Harrison.

"Back off you old hag!" With that he left her standing there, her mouth gaping wide open.

As Harrison entered Eve's apartment he felt excited, for this was the day he had worked for all last month.

Eve seemed to feel his excitement, because her face lit up several more nuances as she greeted him.

Harrison didn't waste time and kissed her all over.

It seemed to please her, as she did not push him back, like Chloe did nine out of ten times.

While he caressed her lips, his hands tightened around her ass, squeezing it tightly. She gave out a light "Eeek!" of pleasure and put her arms around his back.

Without any problems he carried her feather-light body to the sofa. A kick on a button and it was transformed into a two-person bed.

He laid her down on it and undressed. Upon seeing this Eve did the same.

Naked, he lay down beside her, admiring her naked body.

After stroking each other for a while, he moved on to her and she opened herself to him, so that he could enter her without any difficulty.

As he slid into her, Harrison felt a wave of thrill he had missed since his marriage with Chloe.

A warmth began to grow at the back of his head. It moved down his spine, traversed his loin and Harrison mustered every effort in pumping and pushing the warmth to Eve.

Faster, harder, yes, that's it, faster, faster! It raced through him.

Under him Eve squealed in the trance of ecstasy.

Finally Harrison gave into a final thrust and he felt the warmth flow out of him into and over her.

For a while they just lay there, feeling each other and recovering from the orgasm.

"You pig! You motherfucking, cheating pig!" Chloe's acid voice cut through the moment. Harrison jumped up.

Chloe stood there, in the apartment, madly furious.

"HOW OLD IS SHE FOR CHRISSAKE?! FIFTEEN?! YOU PEDOPHILE! I wanted to know why you always came home late from work. So I went around the company, only to learn that you 'worked in the field'. They gave me an address and I came here just to find you fucking that... that

slut! I've had it. I'm calling the Law enforcement!" With that she moved backwards out of the apartment.

Shocked before, Harrison now became as cold as ice.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that!" he snarled and pointed at her.

A small tube appeared in the tip of his index finger. One could hear a faint "Twink!" and in the same second Chloe twitched as the poisonous dart hit her.

By the time she had reached the ground she was dead.

Mr. Bradley smiled. "Very good Harrison, Very good indeed! It's not only that our research hasn't been wasted and the money invested will repay itself fast enough, but you've also brought in the results ahead of schedule. The intrusion of your wife was a slight drawback maybe. What do you think?"

Harrison shrugged. "I don't think that it will be a problem. In my case it was just bad luck. With our clientele the wives are seldom to be found near the husbands!"

Mr. Bradley nodded. "Indeed, yes indeed! You'll be delighted to hear that you have been promoted to chief supervisor and that your salary has quadrupled, Christmas gratification not included. As we speak, a huge bonus is being transferred to your account. If there's anything else you desire, name it and I'll see what I can do."

Harrison smiled. "Might I keep Eve?"

Mr. Bradley was dumbstruck. "Who's Eve?"

Harrison made a gesture and Mr. Bradley realized what he meant. "Oh, her! Sure, why not?"

Mister Bradley leaned back in his chair. "The Grow-yourself-a-concubine-set will be the latest thing for every rich and indulgent man on the planet and the outer colonies. If the sales works out we'll launch the male counterpart as soon as possible. The only thing I need now is a fitting label that will burn itself into peoples' heads and pricks. Harrison, do you have an idea?"

Harrison pondered the matter for a minute before he answered. "Perfect Love!"

KURIÖS BLÖMMA

(Ikea catalogue 2000)

Author's note:

This is the 24th chapter of my unfortunately still unfinished detective novel. I think the only thing you need to know is that it is set in the Netherlands and the main character is Chief Inspector Riet de Zwart, who, of course, is busy solving a couple of murders.

*R*iet's morning mood was moody as always. Having had a shockingly cold shower, struggled with the towel, had an argument with her bra, stubbed her left toe, fought an exhaustingly long time with the lid of a jam-jar, she finally sat down on an unfriendly kitchen chair and noticed that the small yellow flowers on her window sill, the ones she could never remember the name of, were dry as hay, in other words, they were dead. As soon as she had sat down she also noticed that she had forgotten the most important ingredient of a well-prepared breakfast table: 'hagelslag'. 'Hagelslag, was the country's only original contribution to the world's curiosity shop of auroral foods. Other countries just have chocolate spread. But it is the tiny flakes of chocolate that - according to the Dutch - have the real flavour.

With a sigh and the protest of her dreaming feet she raised herself up once again to open the cupboard, make a detour to the doormat, where the paper lay, and return to her chair next to the window, which revealed a picturesque panorama of the brick house on the other side of the road, together with two triangles of blue sunny sky. It was a quarter past eight, so in 15 minutes Hoofdinspecteur Riet de Zwart would have to leave. But there was enough time to have a glance at the first three pages of the paper and squeeze some bread between her teeth and drink a drop of milk.

Her eyes needed some time to adjust before the black blots on the grey page meant anything. Then she nearly spat out everything that was in her mouth. In the bottom right hand corner of the page there was a picture, quite innocent. It showed, quite innocently, a man in a suit, behind him, quite deliberately, the logo of a firm. His firm. Him. The picture showed him. Of course, there had been other suspects in this case, of course. But now... Clouds began to float through her head, great, misty, mighty clouds.

This was not just a murder case. No, it was not, quite certainly. It was a duel between her and the man in that picture, because, quite obviously, he had the brains for it. Yes, he did, definitely. Riet looked at her watch. It was 37 minutes past eight. She jumped up, grabbed her bag, threw on her shoes and rushed downstairs. She drove to work, this time with a white moustache glistening in the sunshine and welcoming the morning, which really deserved to be called a fine one.

POOR HENRY

The man who told me the story of Henry said Henry was "poor". I don't think Henry was poor. He owned a large area in Swabia and was well known and liked by his people. You just had to mention his name or nod in the direction of the water meadows behind which Henry lived, and a smile appeared on the face of any Swabian. People liked their duke for his righteousness. He knew no falsehood, no mischief - but not because he was young. He was true to God in almost every respect, had a sense for honour and appreciation of hard work; he was a shield for his fellows, and his face mirrored his zest for life.

When I said that he was not true to God in every respect, I referred to his arrogance. It was not only his youth, his skills, his perfect appearance and his prosperity could be taken as an offence by people who thought that our earth is a valley of tears; with his very deeds Henry contradicted the unspoken rule that joy can only be found in heaven. Unwilling to incline his head, he was not concerned whether people noticed his pride of what he had achieved in the short time since his father, the former duke, had died. I was told that he was seen one afternoon passing a priest who had just witnessed Henry ordering some farmers to take the rest of the day off.

"Sir?" asked the priest in a grave tone, making sure that he wasn't passed by without being noticed.

"Good afternoon," replied Henry and stopped to take off his hat to the man. But the priest bellowed, "I assume you have read about Job?" scowling at the young man who was about a quarter as old as himself and, due to circumstances, his duke, his landlord, and benefactor.

"Yes, I have," answered Henry. He did not intend to make the conversation easier than necessary for the priest, though the other man wouldn't appreciate such subtleties.

"Then you know that even a good life isn't protected against the strokes of fate," the priest said, "Because if you knew, you wouldn't send the men home before the day's labour is done. Don't count your chickens before they are hatched, Sir, and appreciate every minute you can spend on hard work."

"This summer's good. We have more chickens than we can count. Goodbye." Henry went on.

Henry was all sunshine again when he arrived home, shouting greetings into the great hall of his castle, hugging his brother Roland, who had already been sitting at meal with some men. Their meal was more a feast than a humble dinner: another sign of this extraordinarily rich summer. After hugging and fun-boxing a little, Roland turned to a conversation they often had nowadays.

"You need a wife, Henry."

"We need new haystacks."

"You need a wife."

"Why, Brother?"

"All men do."

"The same applies to haystacks. Then let's make a deal. Let's swear that we'll build the haystacks and then take some brides. You and me." Both men broke out in laughter.

"Agreed. How many?"

"Brides? Don't know. What does the bible say?" They laughed again, but then Henry suddenly became earnest. He seemed to be unpleasantly touched by the religious subject. "Roland, I think the priest thinks I am acting against God. What do you think?"

"Well," his brother said, and cheerfully slapped him on the shoulder, "I think God will let you know. At least he should let you know that you need a wife, and, what's more necessary at the moment, a bath." Henry smiled. Now that Roland had mentioned it, he noticed that his skin felt dry and itchy from the day in the fields. He rubbed his forearm and thoughtlessly watched the skin flaking off while his comrades loudly resumed their meal.

When he returned to the feast Henry noticed that bathing hadn't had the desired effect. His skin was itching even more. It felt as if someone had spread crumbs in his clothes, and if his eyes weren't cheating him, he could see some tiny flakes of skin falling down the front of his shirt. The itching felt so unpleasant that he missed the point of his favourite joke while telling it to the other men after dinner. His mood gone, he excused himself in order to design some plans for the haystacks, but he just walked around his room. By nightfall he was in such a bad state that whole patches of skin were dropping off his body, leaving nothing to cover the flesh. He just had to clench his fist to see the bones, sinews and tissue of his hand stripped. But the wounds did not hurt. Anyone who has ever cut themselves and then been exposed to salt, will know what Henry should have suffered. But these wounds didn't even bleed. Henry touched the shiny red surface of an arm, took off his clothes and began to sob when he saw in the hand-mirror what he refused to believe – his body was a nightmare of flesh and bones. Slowly it came to him what this sickness was. It was not intended to afflict him with pain; it marked him as leprous, as a walking offence against God's laws.

"Servant," Henry shouted into the hallway. He disliked this situation. He would not allow the others to see him like this, and even if they did – they knew nothing about medicine. The priest did. But even if Henry asked him to come, the priest wouldn't because of the quarrel they had had earlier that day, and if he had sent him an urgent note on the other hand, the men downstairs would find out what he didn't yet want to make public. There came a delayed answer from the hallway.

"Servant, have the priest visit me. Tell him it's about building a new church." He heard the addressee hurrying away, then turned back to look at himself again. The eye of the mirror was wide awake; and yet Henry had the feeling that there was even more to talk about with the priest.

Before the man entered he could be heard bellowing in the corridor, "You are thinking about building a church? You must be joking, Sir. Isn't one church good enough?" But when he had stepped into the room, he turned silent.

"Why are you silent?" Henry asked.

"Because you...you."

"Then it isn't a dream," said Henry, feeling his hope vanishing. The priest swallowed.

"Have you seen anything like this before?" asked the sick man, so harshly that the priest shook in fear. It took moments for the priest to stammer, "No, I haven't."

"When we met this afternoon, you alluded to the power of God. How does a priest participate in this power?"

The priest sat down on a chair and turned away from the bare flesh, pale, trembling, but now also obviously sad.

"Henry, I respect you as our earthly leader. You know that? You wouldn't see me remaining calm if anybody mocked you in my presence. I know you as an honourable man and a generous landlord. Though you are young and inexperienced, you shouldn't think like this about priests."

This reaction embarrassed Henry. He had felt like accusing the priest but misjudged the man's loyalty. But this also meant that things would now become complicated.

"Do you know any cure for me, Priest?"

The man shook his head.

"Then there's only one chance," Henry sighed. "Tell a servant to bring a bag of silver for me and some money for you. Then tell my brother that I had to leave and that he and my friends are to share what was mine. No word about my sickness. Tell them I'm afraid of marriage. Now hurry." Soon after, the priest came back with the ordered things, and Henry put a small flask of poison and a good knife into the bag of silver.

His friends, now singing and rocking to and fro together in the great hall, failed to see him leaving fast through the rear door.

Wrapped in a cloak, he wandered in the direction of Salerno, barely allowing himself a rest. He avoided the masses. In the forests, he walked through the under-wood; in order to bypass the scarcely spread habitations, he crossed the rivers where they were ankle deep instead of using the bridges, and where the hamlets grew to a village or a small town, one could find him resting behind charnel-houses. He lost weight. The sun's hot, merciless rays were a burden, for he couldn't allow himself the relief of taking off his thick cloak. On the sixth day of his pilgrimage, he was so hungry that his feet refused to walk. He managed to force himself to the middle of a field and sat down on the ground. The harvest was over; his dutiful sows had made sure that not a single grain of corn was left. He cursed these beloved people, and while he once more cursed his wretched misery, a hare came hopping towards him. The animal, skinny and obviously also searching desperately for some food, seemed unaware of him. Henry realised that this was his chance; he looked round to find a stone big and rough-edged enough for a deadly shot. But marvellous peasants and their blessed, restless work - There wasn't even a pebble to throw, only lumps of earth that had been tossed apart by the plough and dried stone-hard in the summer sun. Slowly, Henry reached for a lump and tested it. Better than nothing. He waited for the hare to turn in a better position and threw as hard as he could. A hit on the neck. Immediately, Henry shot a second, now bigger lump - this time at the head. Blood shone on the face of the animal; giving a cry, it zigzagged away; its skull must have been broken. Henry got up and started to run, but his feet tripped over the ends of his cloak, so he

fell before he could reach the hare. He fainted. The animal must have perished somewhere, but when Henry awoke from his delirious rest and looked for it, he tottered and stumbled in vain over the moonlit lumps of earth.

Soon after, he reached Salerno. Walking among the residents, the proud Henry became angry because he had to bend his head to the earth so that nobody could see his face. He spent the whole day visiting every barber, healer and physician, but none of them had ever heard of his disease, nor could they procure a result from their books. Shortly before sundown, he gave in and began to look for a place to sleep.

He lurked around the marketplace to see where people got drunk and careless enough not to pay any attention to him. Looking in the displays in the shops, he noticed a shabby tin sign attached to a door opposite him. Reasonable remedies — proper, occult. Buy monthly bleedings and rare kinds of chicken. Henry checked to see if the door of the shabby house would open. It did. A healer sat behind a desk. Above the shabby collar of the man's shirt there was a greasy face, Henry now noticed as the man leaned towards the radius of the dim candle light. The physician had a skinny, red face full of tiny, circular scars. Perhaps a bad case of measles during childhood. It was weird to see how the greasy scars reflected the light in a thousand directions, and the patches of skin where a beard had attempted to grow cast discreet shadows on the repulsive sight.

"A severe case, I see," said the healer, presumably speaking about Henry.

"I came in the hope that you could help me."

"Yes, you came in hope."

He grinned, blew a thin whistle and waved his tired guest in. Henry looked round the room. He wondered whether there was anything trustworthy about the man opposite him. Naturally, healers did not dwell in the best environments. Being exposed to manifold diseases, most of which they didn't know what caused or what cured them, having to visit the sick in their homes, places indescribable in their poverty, the experimental search for healing ingredients by applying them to themselves, or the examination of urine by taste, and putrefaction by ... well, all this forced the medics to live in a closer relationship with their patients than would have been healthy. But besides this utter sloppiness, Henry's host made him feel suspicious. He thought, 'If this man was a merchant, I wouldn't buy the chicken he offered me. I wouldn't even sell him a chicken.'

"I know your disease," the healer said.

"So there is a remedy?"

"Yes. I happen to own a book. Very wise book that describes various sicknesses of the soul."

"Don't you rather think that my body is sick?"

"Obviously. There is a cure for you anyway."

"What kind?"

"Healing," the other man answered, "is mainly a matter of counterforce; just as you make a greedy man generous by having him sacrifice something. You cure greed with sacrifice, guilt with atonement, and self-love with selflessness."

"If it's a matter of sacrifice, I'll give you silver and write to my friends to send you more." Mentioning the silver to the crook was not the best idea, but Henry, desperate and tired, clung to

the little prospect of hope. The healer, unchanged by the allusion to riches, said, "A maiden, no matter what her origins are or of what social rank she is, must give her life for you. She is to do so willingly. Again: a virgin has to die for you. She has to want this without having any doubts, with her whole heart. Because it is her heart that is to be cut out of her living body and to donate the blood which is your cure. Hear me: she has to do it by her own will, and as far as I'm acquainted with human habits, it is unlikely that you will find a person willing to do so. The good part is that the girl and her parents are sure to get to heaven. No joke."

"Thanks for the consultation," said Henry and left, more discouraged than he had ever been.

There lived a couple and their adolescent daughter in the outskirts of Salerno. Their little house consisted of a kitchen and a bedroom for the three of them. It was evening; the family sat round the fire, each of them engaged in their own occupation. When a knock on the door was heard, the daughter glanced up and the father got up from his stool. He took his laying his tools and the workpiece aside and then opened the door without asking who was outside. For one moment the peasant seemed to be hesitating about whether he should run away or grab the shovel that was hanging beneath the door. The sick man stood on the threshold. He quickly explained what and who he was.

"You are our duke?"

Henry nodded.

"Forgive me the shocking sight, but I'm too hungry to care any longer."

"Please come in," the man said, a man Henry had never seen nor heard of. The family turned out to be good people, though the skinless torso of their guest made them rather reserved. The daughter dared to take several shy looks while continuing her momentary activity — a drawing of something on a wooden board on the floor, something that looked like a picture of saints. A beautiful but weak child, maybe with a sinister obsession for religious arts, for she wore several necklaces - each one with a cross. Henry told his story, and when he described the part where he had found the obscure healer, the family sighed compassionately.

"He said there is a cure. But that is too terrible. He said a virgin should give her life of her own free will, and that the blood of her heart, which has to be cut out while beating, will heal my leprosy. I beg you, let me stay with you and suffer until I find a way out of this." The couple looked at each other and then at their girl. Soon the father cleared the floor next to the fireplace.

"Please accept my apology for this simple bed," he said and the family wished Henry goodnight. In the bedroom, the girl whispered excitedly to her parents, "Do you think it is true what he told us?"

"Why should he be lying? Words don't help with what he has, so there's no need for lies." They fell fast asleep, but shortly afterwards the girl awoke.

"Father, Mother!"

"What is it?"

"He is so nice, so gentle. How unlucky he is and how unhappy."

"Go to sleep, darling."

"And we are unlucky too. Think about it. There won't be a duke like him when he's gone. He said that his brother Roland is now looking after us, but how can we trust in that when nobody knows what kind of man this Roland is. The country has fallen apart, divided among Henry's friends; there won't be much help left for us, and what shall we do if things get worse when we can hardly even cope now. He is so nice."

During breakfast the girl asked Henry what their own future would be like without him, and he tried to soothe her, but she wasn't convinced. She spent the whole day running from mother to father and back to tell them they would starve in a year's time. In the night she would wake again and start whispered conversations about how to restore Henry's health. Was the healer trustworthy? Yes, they knew him quite well. Were there other remedies? None of the family had studied medicine. By morning they were tired as never before.

"I fear It'll be like this as long as he stays," the father said.

Curiosity is a privilege of a host. While Henry was washing himself in the bedroom, the father searched for his effects. He found the poison flask with a skull and crossbones on the label. He thought, 'I promised to host him. She wouldn't allow me to send him away.' The daughter was working in the barn. She was daydreaming that she would commit suicide, right here, but how would Henry come fast enough to find the blood from her heart? She stopped work. Then she thought about what she had just been thinking. Then she sat down and thought for a long time. When Henry went out for a walk after dinner, she whispered to her parents.

"Listen," she said, "I've worked out how to help. It will be me. I will be the help for Henry."

"You are insane. How dare you?"

At night she again started to whisper. "I'm not insane. My thoughts are more reasonable than any of yours; you will agree when I've told you them. See, we are bound to face an impossible life. Next year's harvest can't be better than this year's, but we are already starving because our lands are insufficient. You had the misfortune to give birth to a girl. I am not as strong as a man but eat not much less. I am weak and therefore neither beautiful nor desirable, and I am two years from the age I can get married. Even if I find a husband, you will have to provide me with food, clothes and shelter till then. You need gifts and a trousseau for the marriage, or the husband won't take me. But we have no belongings. So what is better: to live a long, terrible life or to go, and make your life easier?"

"Suicide's against God's will. Sleep."

Then she again started to whisper. "I won't sleep. How could I? We are sure to face an unbearable, no, an impossible life. Next year's harvest will be worse than this year's, but we are already starving because the piece of land we own, our belongings, our tools and our resources are insufficient. And even if they weren't, I'm still the same: weak, neither beautiful nor desirable, two years under age, and I eat too much because I'm weak, sad and unmarried. You will have to provide me with food, and I surely won't find a husband. Even if I did, you would need gifts for the marriage, but we have no spare goods. "

"Sleep. God's still against suicide."

The peasant's daughter so insisted on hearing from Henry how he could be cured that he unwillingly retold her what the healer had said. He found it strange that she laughed at the point where he talked about the virgin who was bound to see heaven. That night, the girl dreamt of sneaking to his bed, committing suicide over his sleeping body, the fountain of blood falling over him, a light brighter than any light emerging from the red splattered linen and illuminating everything, everything, everything, him waking up, laughing with delight because he watches his skin growing and being cured. Henry awoke, still leprous. He crept to the bedroom and heard the people arguing about God and other things he couldn't catch. The argument grew louder. Finally, the girl was ordered to go to sleep in the barn. Henry felt that this had something to do with him. He was so sad to see that he had brought so much trouble into this family that he earnestly thought about leaving them. Deep in thoughts, he fell asleep again. While Henry lay there, the peasant came out of the bedroom and looked for the flask of poison. He found it and took it to the chicken-coop, fed a chicken with breadcrumbs soaked with some drops from the flask and watched the animal die fast.

"A virgin she has to be," the peasant whispered to himself, "But that would be the point, yes. Not being a virgin, she can't help Henry; so what if I...? Oh this is perverse! But what if I ask the miller's son to take her immediately...as his wife? But no, he won't. The miller is a greedy man, who will want a sum I can't afford, but there are no other men near enough. I'll kill her. I'll kill all of us?" he asked and looked at his hand as if a solution for his problem had just dropped from his fingertips. He went back to the house but wouldn't put the flask back in its place.

Before sunset the daughter called for her parents, grim and determined.

"Listen. You said that God is against suicide, and that's right. But not in this case." She explained what Henry had told her and they listened with tired nerves.

"Is that true?" her father asked.

"Yes. There is no reason to deny what I'm asking for. You two want to get to heaven, and so do I. Take this board and some charcoal," she said. "We'll calculate."

Then they added all the costs that would arise till the day of her marriage. Then they added all the costs that would arise if she didn't get married. At last they added what they would earn – with and without her. The figures were plain.

"Now tell me again. Is it better to live an unworthy life or to go to heaven right now?"

"You'll go to heaven after having had a long life," the peasant said, his fingertips nestling around the flask in his pocket, not finding it, but then being successful in the other pocket.

"But who will make sure of that? What if I make a mistake? How hard will I have laboured not to meander from the right path and yet have to rush down the broad road to hell. I will condemn myself and those who made me. Or I may break under my burdens and, out of despair, end my life. Then the gates of heaven will be closed for me and perhaps you too. Helping Henry, we get a guarantee for paradise. Look, think about it! You will be sure to get there, whatever you do. I will be gone and you'll have a good stay on earth and eternal life afterwards."

Many words more like this convinced the parents. Together they went to Henry, and the daughter told him what she wanted. She was beaming, all joy, at least convincingly enough for Henry.

"What do you think about this?" he asked the parents.

"We agree."

"Then let's go to the healer"

"Allow me one thing," said the peasant, who looked pretty exhausted now that a decision had been made. He pleaded with his daughter and Henry to stay for the night so that the family could share a last meal together. They agreed; it would be no good to go to Salerno so late anyway. So the young pair sat patiently at the table while the old man fixed a fire in the hearth. The father asked whether anyone cared for a spicy dinner. His question unanswered, he went to the barn and came back with a handful of onions. The others were surprised that the onions were already peeled and chopped, but the father smiled.

"The kitchen knife broke. Had to use the axe in the barn to chop them."

Henry smiled too. "Good man, you should have mentioned that. I own a very good knife which I don't need anymore," and reached for his bag. "I forgot to use it when I once had the chance to kill a hare, so I don't think that I can make good use of it."

Pearls of sweat were coming to the peasant's forehead as Henry rummaged in his bag. "Too kind, too kind," he said hastily.

"Take it." Henry handed over the knife, surprisingly resistant to the peasant's body language, which embarrassed the peasant even more. During the rich meal, the peasant gulped excitedly and encouraged the others to eat more. "This is our last dinner. I won't allow us to leave a single crumb."

The farmer's daughter was all quiet. She sat on the kitchen floor, finishing her painting of the saints.

She and Henry walked next to each other into the bright day towards Salerno. The weather was mild, which made the thoughts fresh, the senses alive and the tongue lazy in a positive way.

"Your father wasn't really sad, was he?" Henry broke the silence. "I've never seen him with such an appetite."

"He had a reason," she smiled.

"What?"

"I observed him looking through your things some days ago, and when I looked through his things, I found a little flask in his trousers. I replaced its deadly contents with rosewater – just for safety, of course."

Henry was so bewildered by the girl's cleverness, but she had this incomprehensible wish to die. When they reached Salerno, he went directly to the churchyard.

"There is the payment for the healer," he said. "I hid some silver in the charnel-house." Now it was his turn to smile.

The healer jumped off his chair on seeing that his patient had returned with a girl.

"Fancy meeting you again!"

"Yes, and I've brought something with me." The bag full of silver landed on the floor.

"Err...well, well. I suppose that's a step towards treatment," the healer said and scratched his greasy face. He kicked away a strange-looking cock, which was picking eagerly around the bag, and locked the money in a cabinet. Then he scratched again and said, "Hum, then."

"What are you waiting for?" asked the girl, which was perhaps a little too harsh because the healer reacted as if someone had offended his honour.

"It is me who is to talk, girl. Well, has Henry told you how he can be cured? Don't speak, just nod or shake your head."

She nodded.

"Fine, then I assume that he has not revealed the whole truth. You are required to die in order to make this man normal again; I regret so say this. But it won't do the trick if you simply die; you have to do so voluntarily, without crude influences such as persuasion, threat or bribery."

"Is it correct that my parents and I will be given eternal life?" she interrupted him.

"You'll be given this reward. Well then. Do you want to die of your own will?"

"I do, yes."

He became angry. His cheeks now looked nearly as bad as Henry's because of the repeated attacks of his scraping fingernails. "Nod or shake your head!" She nodded twice.

"We will, I will kill you today. You won't leave my rooms alive- do you mind that?"

She shook her head.

"Of course you understand my doubts that you are speaking the truth. Henry's influence, or that of someone else might be too subtle for me to recognise in such a short time. You'll have to take your clothes off."

Now Henry intervened, not understanding why this should be necessary.

"It's a simple fact," said the healer, "that it is possible to hide certain things under the cover of clothes. I myself have met perfect liars," and here Henry wondered whether the man was alluding to himself, "who were capable of telling the most bewildering stories without even blushing. Now, what a face or a voice may keep secret; there are parts of the human body that are not able to reverse the truth. Young lady, go in that room; I'll soon be with you."

The girl did as he asked, giving Henry an earnest wink, which had been meant to look light-hearted. The healer turned quickly to him, saying, "Does she really mean it?"

"She really does. She is truly religious and selfless."

"And...and do you really mean it?" asked the healer, hurrying to his shelf and looking up a page in the book he had pointed to during Henry's first visit.

"It seems that you don't want to cure him," said the girl. She was still standing at the door to the other room.

"To hell with you! In there!" The man forced her inside, entered with her, and closed the door.

The operating room - or storage room or what it ever was - was surprisingly clean. They passed a large stone table and the healer had her stand against the wall.

"I have to check if you're a virgin. Take off your clothes. Don't be ashamed, I'm used to that."

She did as he pleased without any objection. When she was naked, he looked closely at her, only letting his eyes turn to something else when he had finished: "Girl, I'm going to take your life. I will lay you down on this large table and perform the deed with this tool. With this big, sharp knife I will cut your skin, cut your flesh to the very bone. Take it and hold it; it is weighty. I'll cut you

even deeper than your bones because what I need for my medicine it's underneath. I will open your young chest and cut your heart. When I cut your heart out of your body, and that is what I need to do, it will stop beating before God meant it to stop. Consider this! Then you'll be dead, dead after immeasurable pains. Understand, you are not allowed to be sedated. Also understand: your death will be in vain if not intended by you, it will be in vain if he paid you to do this as he did with me; your death will be in vain if you feel the slightest doubt, or if you begrudge him a cure –is that the case?"

She shook her head.

"I admit I can't that you are a liar. Then lie down."

Outside, Henry was having a hard time. Restless and disgusted with having to wait, he walked around, uttering some words to himself, then again tried to spy on what was going on inside the room. The sound of the weird cock the healer had kicked around made him even more anxious. Unable to do anything but wait, he began to doubt. The procedure could result in failure, what then? Nor could he see how to solve things in any other way. Suddenly he felt guilty. No, not all of a sudden. He had actually been bewildered by this young girl, just as he had always felt very odd about her, but things had happened too fast for him – the unexpected offer, the parents' immediate agreement and her convincing speech- so he had been so distracted all the way from the farmhouse with forgotten joy and the hope to escape his fate that he had not realised what it really was that he was about to do: an act of pure selfishness. It was not right to have this young life ended to restore his. How should he explain this to people, how could he justify such irresponsibility? What would he think and how would he feel looking in a mirror again – cured but with the skin of a murderer. If he really had caused his state by his own deeds, if anything explicable had caused it, why then have someone else suffer for that? He would give her the money. Wasn't her motivation to make sure that she and her parents reached heaven? Now, a good deal of money could perhaps fix that. A sum, any sum – there was still Roland and his property – would keep them on the right track, if only they used the money for the good. In a wave of despair he threw himself against the wall of the operating room and yelled, "Stop it, open up." But the healer wouldn't unlock the door. Henry hit the wall, he kicked at the door, so hard that the wood gave a cracking sound, then kicked again, shouting, "Open, I mean it. Open or you'll be dead too, man!"

"No way; she wants it; keep cool," said the healer's voice from inside.

"But I mean it, do you hear? There is no need to kill her anymore. I don't want to be cured. I want to stay like I am."

The door was unlocked. Henry stormed inside; the girl already lay on the table.

"Now repeat that, please," said the healer slowly.

"Let her live. I don't want to be cured. If it is my punishment to be like this, I will accept it, even if I'm sentenced to be without skin for all time. This is my fate; it's my fate and I accept it. Why should I object to God's will? Let her go."

And when Henry had said the words, oh miracle, the healer dropped his knife.

"Put on your clothes," he ordered the girl and to Henry he said, "Take your money and get out."

And after both had been thrown on the street and told not to come to this place again, the girl broke out in tears. She spat and pounded Henry and called him many unpleasant things.

"Now I have lost my chance for paradise."

"You haven't."

She sobbed and asked him why.

"You have won it. Dear child, don't you see? By offering me your life so selflessly, you have done the most merciful thing one can do. What could be higher for a Christian? You'll get to heaven. That's the way Christianity works, isn't it?"

"And what's the way your logic works? You are still sick, Henry."

"I've made my own bed and can't expect someone else to lie in it."

"Even if the other person wants to?"

"Even then. And your parents: I cannot promise but I hope it will make paradise sure for them, too." He handed her the bag of silver. And as she attempted to say something, he said, "This morning's walk was pleasantly silent. Let us maintain that silence. Goodbye." The two parted and Henry went home.

The man who told me the story of Henry said it doesn't end here. He said Henry got cured and took the girl as his wife. But this is the most unrealistic aspect of the story for me. I think that Henry eventually managed to pursue a normal life even though his skin never recovered. He stayed with his brother until he passed calmly away. The girl, I am sure, never stepped from the narrow path.

LIMERICKS

*T*here was an old spaceman called Kent
who didn't have one single friend
but a robot named Clive
the love of his life
to whom he stayed true till the end

There was an old spaceman called Vince
who always had been my prince
but then a lady from Venus
squeezed in between us
and I haven't heard from him since

There was an old spaceman called Lars
who fell in love with a lady from Mars
but it didn't last
cause he couldn't get past
the fact that she had a green arse

THE DAY I GOT LOST

I got lost

I was small and I saw a dog and the dog was eating a small breadcrumb some little boy had dropped a minute ago and it was black and white, the dog not the breadcrumb, and it was just so sweet

and I stayed

I stayed to watch the dog eating

and because I was only small and there were so many people and my mum was busy and she had an argument with the shop assistant about an indigo blue cardigan she couldn't get in pale orange and a size fourteen sweater that was too tight even though my mum had always been a size fourteen

I crawled under a stand

and I hid under a rug, still watching the dog which had by now finished eating and was discovered by the shop assistant who had till then been talking to my mum and now chased the little dog out of the shop, how the hell got it in here? and she blamed a girl named Christine for always leaving the door open

I was still hiding under the rug

and I cried because I was so sorry for the little dog who was chased out of the shop and maybe its master was still in here and now they couldn't find each other anymore and the dog would be unhappy and it would have to eat breadcrumbs for the rest of its life
I crawled out of my hideaway and my mum was gone

She had been here a minute ago talking to the shop assistant about the cardigan and the sizes and the stupidity of a girl named Christine who could fit a size sixteen body in size twelve clothes but was too dumb to close a door properly

And now she was gone and I was lost

and I cried because I was lost and my mum wasn't here anymore and the dog was gone and maybe it was lost as well and maybe now I would have to eat breadcrumbs for the rest of my life and would be chased out of the shop by the girl named Christine who could talk to her boyfriend on the phone for hours but was too stupid to do anything else properly

And I cried harder

and my body was shaking and my eyes turned red and my lips turned purple and I used the sleeve of the indigo blue cardigan to wipe my nose and then I cried even harder because I wasn't allowed to touch things in the shop and maybe now the shop assistant would call the police because I had ruined the cardigan and I would be put in jail and I screamed

And they all came

my mum and the shop assistant and the girl named Christine who was wearing a pink skirt and my mum picked me up and she told me to stop crying because everything was alright now and I tried to tell her about the dog and the breadcrumbs and the rug I was hiding under and the police but she wouldn't listen

And I stopped

ARCADIA

or

The Second Theorem Of Wormhole Transition

The universe is conceived in conflagration, and immediately begins to expand. Matter attracts matter. Astronomic anomalies emerge. Everything is in incessant, perpetual motion. In the blink of an eye for the cosmos, stars are born and die. Galaxies form, only to one day dissolve once more. Comets streak in and out of existence.

And in the centre of a spiral galaxy, harbouring a blue-green planet which orbits a young sun, a stellar giant, its nuclear fuel spent, collapses in on itself, its core unable to withstand its own weight. Its density rises until it becomes so heavy that it literally exits Space. The Big Bang happens backwards. In a cataclysm of cosmic energy, a singularity comes into being, warping space and time, creating curvature. A violent, inchoate fissure. A hole punched through the fabric of the universe. From a distance it looks like a whirlpool, a giant, pulsing maelstrom. A lucent corona of viridian-green gasses swirls around a dark centre, black as the eye of God. Accelerated photon bundles, or tachyons, orbit its gravity-dense, isotopic core, rotating at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. Exotic matter - negative energy threads - keep it open, static and stable. It is breathtakingly beautiful in its perfect conical symmetry. Its size cannot be described for lack of a point of reference. Over the course of countless millennia it has swallowed entire star systems whole. Not even light can escape its gravitational tug.

The wormhole.

Time untraceable passes and a tiny speck appears against the backdrop of infinity. Something approaches. It looks like a bizarre symbiosis of insect and crustacean, yet it is manmade, an amalgamation of steel and fibreglass. Countless tiny lights wink on and off in its cavernous belly. Viewed against the distant tapestry of stars it appears motionless, utterly immobile. Only when put into context with the wormhole can one gain an intimation of its tremendous, ferocious propulsion. Soundlessly, unswervingly it hurtles through the void.

As it approaches event horizon, it enters the phenomenon's electromagnetic field. Lead-cased radiation shields move mechanically into position. Gradually, gravitational forces comparable to those which spun the universe into existence take hold. Quantum mechanics begin to apply. The energies involved reduce the mighty spacecraft to an infinitesimally insignificant fleck of metal. Its hull begins to shudder and vibrate. Its nose-cone begins to glow red-hot. If anyone had been watching, it would have seemed to him that the vessel's outline is blurring and elongating as it crosses the Schwarzschild radius and steers straight for the vortex's black throat. For a moment it becomes a hazy distortion on the borderlines of perception, then it is gone, sucked into the wormhole.

Nothing remains to mark its transition.

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Dr. Dr. David Salinski.
Astrophysicist, Level 5.
6689 Hawking Drive
Born 17.08.2395 - Deceased 05.05.2426
Family: brother, one.

It's not every day that a man gets to read his own obituary. Choking on my coffee, I drop the cup, spilling the dark, steaming liquid all over the morning news. The hot beverage drips on my lap, leaving no stain on the liquid-resistant paper. I hardly notice the scorching sting. According to this, it seems I officially died yesterday.

My hand moves semi-consciously to the back of my head - somewhere back there is where my VFS-chip sits, monitoring the neural electrical impulses of my brain. Only when they disappear is it supposed to report my demise to the Population Control Agency. It's the PCA which publishes obituaries.

The Vital-Functions-Supervision Chip - VFS for short - was introduced roughly sixty years ago. Everyone has one now. At the beginning they were only supposed to electronically notify the agency when someone had died. Now they're used for anything from identification to locating an individual in an emergency - very versatile, they have become. In any case, the damn devices are supposed to be infallible and foolproof.

*

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The employees of the PCA are barely more than grey suits with plastic badges. That is to say, they're auditors. The representative of their species before me now is a pasty-faced fellow of indeterminable age.

"There's been a mistake made," I stress in no uncertain manner. "I'm alive! That's why I can yell at you right now."

"If you could just identify yourself, Sir..."

I draw a deep breath. "How are identifications generally made?"

"By means of one's VFS- chip, Sir."

"Precisely. And do you see a certain difficulty in this regard under my circumstances? I need to talk to one of your superiors. The matter of who I am should not be that difficult to clarify. There are only twelve Level-Five astrophysicists alive today. Would you like me to calculate a few equations for you?"

It takes a lot of shouting before the bureaucrat is finally persuaded to put a call through to someone a few floors higher up. Shouting generally has as much effect on these people as a light spring shower on deep-sea fish. The man whose office I am ushered into is phenotypically

indistinguishable from the one at the counter downstairs - except for the words 'Level 3' on his badge. At least he has access to the computers which can shed light on the matter, though. It turns out that my VFS-chip has malfunctioned and deactivated itself. The interruption of the signal it sends led the PCA to assume that I had deceased. It'll be three weeks before I can have a new one installed - only Level 5 surgeons have the skill to install or remove a neural chip. The operation is a complex and difficult one - plenty of people who didn't agree with the system when it was introduced and attempted to have theirs removed secretly found that out the hard way. The next open appointment with a Level 5 is twenty-one days from now.

The bureaucrat's last words to me before I leave his office are to please not go dying before that date. My demise would not be registered and that would mess up their records.

There are dozens of forms to be filled out before I can go. The young woman assigned to assist me has neither the flustered air nor the studious efficiency so common to this place. Her manner is refreshingly untailored.

I think I've seen her here before: small and mousy with green eyes behind thin-rimmed glasses. Hardly anybody wears glasses anymore - laser operations are paid for by insurance. She blinks quite a lot. It's difficult to say whether her red hair is curly or simply messy. It's bound up carelessly behind her neck. Red hair and green eyes are also rather rare nowadays.

Her name stands on the plastic badge hanging crookedly on the front of her jacket: Lilly Jordan. Handwritten, not printed like everyone else's - that says quite a lot about her right there.

"So, Mr Salinski" - Mr not Dr, I note - "I will need your mark here, here and ...yes, here."

I press my thumb to the slots indicated. When I look up I find her staring straight at me through those antiquated glasses.

"I've seen you here before," she says.

I shrug and grunt something non-committing.

"You come here and yell about something about once every two weeks."

Is it really that bad?

"Last week you called Administrator Connelly a pompous, bean-counting ass." She continued.

That might have been overdoing it a bit. Hell, the fellow deserved it, though. I've got nothing against numbers - I'm half a mathematician for God's sake! - but these people can't see two feet into the world for all the numbers that get in the way.

Her comment demands some sort of reply, though.

"Maybe I should apologize to him," I grunt.

"What for? 'Pompous ass' is in his case so mild as to become a complement."

I look at her with more interest. I've never met anyone in this agency with anything even remotely resembling a sense of humour. She's not smiling, though, but rather looks utterly serious.

Or is that twinkle in the corner of her eyes another way of smiling?

"I'll need two more marks," she says, pushing another couple of documents my way.

"Here ... and here" Glancing down at them, she adds: "Thirty-one - that's young for a double doctorate."

"I'm a quick learner."

"I'll bet." She glances at the documents again. "I see you work at the IST. What's it like up there?"

I glance down at my watch. This is taking longer than it should. "Listen, I've got to get back to the Institute. Perhaps we can chat some other time."

"How about this evening? I get off work at seven."

That takes me completely by surprise. The offer had not actually been for real.

"Ah... I work till late ...everyday," I stammer. "I only have free on weekends. Saturday in a month I might have some time ... or perhaps in two."

"Next Saturday's sooner."

I've never met anyone so utterly outgoing in my life. What the hell is she doing in this agency?

Fifteen minutes later I find myself on the corner outside, even in hindsight not completely cognizant of precisely how I've come to have a date for coming Saturday afternoon.

I walk along Delambre Avenue and cross Jacobi Drive. Then it's down Volterra and into Henkel Boulevard. Everything in this city is named after a scientist. In this particular quarter the street names are dedicated to famous mathematicians. New Byzantium - the name always seems rather inappropriate to me for a city which stands in central Europe. It was built upon the rubble left after the second American-European war. Since the construction of the skyport it has grown to be the third largest metropolis on the planet - an anthropocentric mini-cosmos of its own. Sprawling over a quarter of the continent, it has long since swallowed scores of other cities whole. I don't have far to walk, though - all the important agencies are located practically side by side in the city centre.

There are not many people out in the streets at this time of day. Most people work only six hours a day, but everyone works. Things will change later as the streets become individual hives of hovercraft activity.

Giant buildings flank my every step, enormous as oblivion. Every single line is succinct and stark. most of their facades reflect the sunlight back at the sky. Nowhere is there blight or blemish. All surfaces are sheathed in platinum and silicon - a glossy veneer to cloak the hermetic, soulless sterility lying, as absolute and unanswerable as an abyss, underneath. The colossal constructions are beautiful, I guess, in their geometric proportion and symmetry, but so utterly uniform. Homogeneity is the watchword in architecture nowadays. Nothing distinguishes itself in any manner whatsoever.

Except the agency for Interstellar Space Travel, perhaps - but only on the outside. The IST is a huge double-winged construction with three giant domes on the roof, out of which long multi-mirror photon telescopes point like accusing fingers at the sky. Two giant statues flank the single entrance to the building: men with sweeping wings protruding from their shoulders, arms folded across their chests and faces turned upwards. Birdmen ... angels ... I've never been entirely certain as to what they are supposed to represent. I think they hail back to a time when this agency followed a higher calling. As such they always give me a sort of hollow feeling in my stomach. Over thirty thousand people work here - I know the names of maybe six of them. The rest

are pretty much faceless shadows drifting along the endless corridors between the computer cells and laboratories.

The building is also known by the name of 'Adjani Institute'. Adjani Ramasani was born roughly two hundred years ago the eighth child of a poor family in India. Today he is generally recognised as the greatest mathematical mind of the third millennium. He first hypothesised the two theorems of wormhole transition which changed interstellar space travel forever. A dozen institutes scattered across the globe have been named after him.

He deserves the glory. It was he who first trail-blazed the path to another galaxy. It was Einstein who so long ago first conceptualised the theoretical existence of wormholes in the first place, of course, and Kowalski who proved mathematically at the end of the twentieth century that the phenomena could be self-generative and stable, but it was Adjani who made practical application feasible. It was only on the foundation of his work that wormhole transition became what it is today.

Just before I reach the institute, the handheld resting in my jacket pocket begins to hum and vibrate. I take it out and flip up the tiny holoscreen with my thumb.

The name 'Joshua' appears in green 3-D letters. My elder brother is a journalist. A pretty good one, actually, and as such, is always inconveniencing the wrong people. His name is basically synonymous with trouble and his calls usually mean the same for me. I really shouldn't answer them, but somehow I always do. It seems blood is thicker than common sense.

I flick a finger at the holographic symbol nominated 'accept incoming'.

"Hi, your holiness."

Joshua's impossibly infectious grin appears on the tiny screen.

"I wish you wouldn't keep calling me that."

"Ah come on, man. The worship of science is basically the religion of our day. That should make you some sort of god or something. Or maybe a papal figure - with similar authority."

"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven," I mutter.

"Something like that. Once you guys publish something, it becomes creed. We have no other heroes."

He's always on at me about things like that.

"How was Malaysia?" I grunt.

"Hot and sticky. How come one of you geniuses can't come up with something against mosquitoes? Now that would be something truly useful."

"How long are you going to be around this time?"

"Probably a while. I'm on to something big this time, little brother - I'm talking Pulitzer-size big. I can't discuss it on the handheld but I might need your help on this one."

"You just watch yourself, you hear?"

"Will do. See you around, your holiness."

The little screen goes blank.

In the meantime, I've reached the institute. I enter the building and pass the department for time displacement compensation, heading for the stairs leading up to the top floor. I always take the stairs and not the elevator - it's my little act of rebellion. Ancillary staff in white overalls pass me by without our paths having really crossed. There is hardly any sound in the entire building, only the

occasional soft rumble of the motors mechanically moving and recalibrating the giant telescopes overhead. My office is a little larger than most others in the agency - a nod to my being pretty far up the food chain, I guess - but it still always seems cramped and confining. Like a box around my brain. I get a new computer basically every three months, top of the line - only the people up at the Global Government Agency have better. It's here that I spend all day every day calculating wormhole trajectories: extremely difficult, complex calculations, but endlessly, mind-numbingly repetitive.

My only interesting work I do at home.

* * *

The numbers on my huge 3-D holoscreen glow green in the darkness - endless strings of algorithms and equations. They are enhanced by geometric space-time topology representations. Their evanescent glow is the only light in the apartment I share with no one else but this computer - I think better in the dark. The digits roll before me as I move my fingers. They look so definite, so infeasible - such perfect symmetry. Yet I know they must be flawed - what they add up to cannot be correct. So as almost every night, I seek the mistake, going back over every minor calculation, every single sum. And once again, I cannot find it.

Deep into the night I sit in front of the screen, the opalescent green numbers reflected on my face in the darkness, staring at the impossibility of what those numbers are telling me.

It's three o'clock in the morning when the recollection hits me: I have a date tomorrow afternoon.

* * *

"So what's it like to work up at the Institute?"

"Quiet. Nobody ever raises their voice in that place. We hardly talk to each other at all, come to think of it."

"Sounds lonely."

I shrug. A shrug is basically my standard reaction to people's comments or observations - that or beginning to talk like a science lecture book.

"We have our mathematics."

"That doesn't sound very convincing. I think you actually hate your job as much as I do."

She's right about that, but she can't possibly know exactly why.

Arm in arm we stroll over Von Braun Bridge. It is closed to hovercraft traffic on weekends. Beneath us, young couples skate in graceful circles on artificially frozen ice. On the banks of the river other kids play beach-volleyball on sand imported from South Africa. The recreation quarter is large and has 'distraction' written all over it. It always seems so synthetic to me, but there is nowhere else to go. Up ahead are the tremendous sandstone domes and arches of

the Louis Pasteur Theatre - the only building made of stone in New Byzantium. The plays they stage up there imply little, denote nothing. It is manufactured like everything else and does not aim to inspire. Nowadays art is pretty much equal to existentialism.

"How long have you been in New Byzantium? No, wait a minute; I should be able to figure that one out by myself. You probably turned up at the PCA to complain something like ...oh, I would guess one week after arrival - maximum. That would make it six months."

She got that perfect.

"I was transferred here in December from the Skylab."

"She raises an eyebrow. "The Skylab! Impressive. Not many people get to go up there. What's it like?"

"A giant steel donut in orbit. I spent two years on that damn thing - government funded research."

"So I guess you must be some kind of genius."

I shrug. "I've always had a knack for maths."

"Show me something."

Her tone is bantering, not challenging.

"What's your personal identification number?"

"186452."

I don't even have to pause for breath. "That, multiplied by itself, is 3.4764 to the power of ten. Its square root, rounded to three decimal points, is 431.801. Its cosines is 0.8829..."

"Stop, stop! Enough already." She punches my arm. "I believe you. Although..." she pouts attractively, "you might be having me on. I'm probably the only person on this planet who is actually physically allergic to mathematics. I break out in cold sweat if I have to count further than five."

"So what are you good at?"

"Calligraphy."

"In that you're one up on me then. I have trouble writing my own name."

She laughs, a pleasant sound - easy, natural, so different from the short, controlled, perfectly timed chuckles of my colleagues.

She took my arm shortly after our meeting on Rutherford Plaza. Arm in arm, we've been wandering through the recreation quarter for the best part of two hours now.

It's strange: anybody looking at us would probably think we've known each other for ages.

Yet what's stranger still, is that I almost feel the same. Which, in itself, is infinitely inexplicable. You could hardly find two such divergent individualities. And yet the sensation stands - indefeasible as an equation that, in defiance of all mathematical logic, comes to a correct conclusion.

My contribution to the conversation for the first half hour was so marginal as to hardly weigh in the scales. I quickly realised that she wasn't about let it rest at that, though. With her effortless style of banter, she could easily hold up her end of the exchange without assistance for an indefinite length of time, but she actually seems genuinely interested in almost everything. The effect is utterly disarming. She can get inside your defences without even trying.

But that's not all there is to it. Superficially, one could probably be forgiven for confusing her easy sincerity with airy light-headedness - the type I detest - but the calculation is not so simple.

It's as if her unstudied openness is a vehicle for something deeper.

And here's where my analytical instincts fail me. It is not a sensation I am accustomed to. I cannot describe it, let alone measure it, but it is there. It lies somewhere beneath the seemingly so simple surface. It's something I am hesitant to probe or touch too closely.

And yet it somehow seems to call to me.

"So what exactly do you do up at the Institute?" she inquires.

"Well, I used spend all my time charting infrared emissions - a kind of galactic mapmaking, I guess you could call it. Now I calculate wormhole trajectories."

"That's the angle at which a spacecraft has to enter the wormhole in order to fly through, right?"

"Exactly."

"I've never entirely understood that."

That's the signal for the astrophysicist in me to take over.

"Wormholes are creatures of classical GTR and represent non-trivial topology changes in the space-time manifold. They come in two different varieties: Lorentizan wormholes which can be explained by Einstein's theory of general relativity; and Euclidean which belong to quantum field particle physics. They make the light speed barrier irrelevant; allow travel time over large distances to be reduced by orders of magnitude. They..."

She interrupts me vehemently just as I am warming to my subject - with a punch on my shoulder. That's the second or third time she's done that - it seems to come naturally to her.

"English, please!"

I think for a moment. "They're a tunnel."

"A what?"

"A tunnel. It's called the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, but that's all it really is: a tunnel between a black hole in this and a so-called white hole in another galaxy. You can travel through like riding a hovercraft."

"It's that simple?"

"Simple might not be exactly the right word. The first problem is that time slows down as you approach event horizon. The second are the gravitational forces within the phenomenon itself, the so-called tidal forces. They are immense - infinite, to be exact. For the longest time astrophysicists believed it was impossible to fly through a wormhole. Adjani's theorems proved different. He hypothesized that if you approach the singularity - that's the wormhole's throat - at precisely the correct angle and velocity, the different forces cancel each other out for a fraction of a second - just long enough to slip through. Of course, the variables are legion, so no mistakes are permissible."

"What happens if you do make a mistake?"

"Try to imagine every molecule in your body evaporating at the speed of light."

She glances at me quizzically. "You don't turn up to work drunk, do you?"

"No." Although I'd like to sometimes.

"Then I think I'm safe."

"You? Have you put your name down on the list?"

She nods and sighs. "I'd do anything to get away from here."

She is looking over the river toward Levi-Civita Skyport.

From here one cannot actually see the skyport itself with all its giant cargo and assembly halls - only the gargantuan spacecraft which towers over all around it as it stands erected against its launching structure, pointed straight up at the heavens. Ugly protuberances bulge from its gleaming façade and a small forest of antennae protrude from its nose cone. There are two giant mechanical arms on either side which always remind me of crab claws. A small army of maintenance men in orange jumpsuits swarm its surface like ants.

The Daedalus 3-16. For sixty years it's been state of the art - no one has found a way to improve it. It's the only spacecraft capable of wormhole transition. It is mechanically mass-produced by the hundred in Durban, South Africa - on one single city-sized assembly line. Within this one would be little more than half a million plastic liquid-nutrient pods, waiting for the passengers to board and be put into artificial hibernation. It need carry no fossil fuel. Once launched by means of the earthbound antimatter-accelerator at its base it will cruise at an unimaginable velocity on a preordained trajectory. The spacecraft has zero orbital manoeuvring capability - which, of course, is why my job is so important. The giant vessel cannot change course after take off. If I miscalculate that trajectory by so much as the millionth part of a decimal point, the ship will miss its mark by light-years.

Every six weeks one of them launches from this site. There are twenty-three other such sites situated around the globe - which means that every two days or so one of those behemoths is thundering into Space. They all have the same destination: the worm hole or, more precisely, that which lies on the other side.

In all the Space our millions of probes have thus far managed to explore, only one planet has so far been discovered which is autonomously capable of sustaining human life. We have robotic mining colonies on half a hundred moons by now, of course, constantly quarrying the raw materials we need for our cities and spacecraft, but have found only one single world in the mapped universe which fulfils all of the life-optimisation criteria. We astronomers know it as SC-243, but since then the name 'Arcadia' has become far more popular. It lies in the Triangulum galaxy, roughly 1.7 million light years from our own, a distance which naturally made colonisation utterly impossible - until we discovered it, lurking at the dead centre of the Milky Way like a giant spider in the centre of its web, its gravitational force holding our spiral galaxy together: the wormhole.

Fifteen years later Adjani developed his theorems of wormhole transition, a discovery which allowed us to develop a method of flying through the phenomenon to where it opened on the other side - in Triangulum, and thus the Arcadia project was born.

The first colonisation team was sent forth just over a century ago. They reported back paradisaean conditions, perfect for colonisation. The bill proposed by the Global Government Agency to people this new world swept through legislation with overwhelming popularity. Since then fleets of those giant spacecraft have been flying settlers to Arcadia half a million at a time. There are upwards of seventy cities up there by now. Its population is approaching roughly half that of the earth. Even photon-transmissions which travel inexpressibly faster than the spacecraft take six

months to make it back to Earth and the amount of energy required to send such a signal is immense, so communication takes place only twice a year. The GGA publishes the transcripts in newspaper form: the Arcadian Times.

"Do you think I have a chance of one day making the passenger list?" Lilly asks me.

"I don't know." I truly don't. There are so many people who dream of voyaging to Arcadia, even though it is booking a one-way trip - by definition nothing can return through a worm- or black hole. The waiting lists are endless.

"There are three moons up there, they say. Imagine what that must do for poetry on a warm summer's night. You know, I envy you."

"How come?"

"Studying Space must be the next best thing to travelling through it. I dream of Space sometimes."

"It's only matter in motion."

Swivelling on my arm, Lilly looks up at me. "You know, I don't believe you mean that. There's something I hear in your voice when you speak of Space - even when you're describing it in mathematical idioms."

"Scientific interest."

"Nope. Something more than that. Science can be the search for beauty - I think it might be for you."

"I think you're confusing science with art."

"The search for truth, then - it's basically the same thing."

"I don't know about that."

"I do. Truth. There might be answers up there." She sighs. "I know I can't find them down here."

And something goes click.

That is it! It's there - in her voice, in the sound of that sigh. In her. Recognition comes rushing in, tingling through my cognisance like electrical impulses through a neural network. The kinship. That which I feel calling to me. No answers down here. It is why I have been staring at the stars all my life and what makes her want to touch them. It is what can make a man launch a leaky boat onto an ocean because that's where the horizon is. Only for people like us there is no ocean.

So here we stand. Both of us utterly incapable of articulating it, but both so heavily incumbrant with need. Both adrift in a world of such sterile perfection. One which lacks nothing material, where want does not exist on paper, but which is so void beneath the shiny surface. Empty up unto the limit of mortality. I search and she believes, but it both comes down to the same thing: our way of silently railing against stasis and inertia, against emotional and mental anaesthesia, trapped between savagery and helplessness in face of the implacable austerity of existence.

The solution to the equation. The reason why I feel like I know this woman.

But the thought which seems the most trenchant, spiralling in my brain like a vortex, is that she saw it in me before I saw it in her - and I've spent years trying to extirpate it with academic and scientific precision. Or at least to disguise it. It should be buried beneath a mountain by now.

A sudden idea takes me. I release her arm and grab her hand.

"Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"Surprise."

The interior surface of the giant dome is pristine white and - to the human eye, at least - perfectly smooth. It stands three hundred metres high at its apex. Its innards are utterly empty - until I push a button.

A billion tiny stars burst into sudden evanescent existence - a vast panoply of astronomic objects. It is a holographic display - with it I can exhibit any part of the known and mapped universe. I can zoom in or out. At my discretion I can display hundreds of galaxies - disk, spiral or elliptic. I can let nebulae many light years in diameter appear the size of my fist. Or, in reverse, I can let someone wander across a single planet's crater-pitted surface. This time I choose something in-between. Stars appear as tiny pinpricks: red, yellow or white according to their temperature. Comets and giant clumps of ice, known as dirty snowballs, streak through the air, trailing a luminescent tail. Giant clouds of gasses the size of small galaxies glow with empyrean fire. Auroras are kaleidoscopes of soft colour. Meteor showers and other stellar debris show up as grey smears in the air. All set against the deepest velvet black. Everything is in movement - nothing stands still. It always feels as if the entire dome is wheeling.

"I don't believe it. My god, it's too beautiful."

Lilly stands in the centre of the dome, arms outstretched, eyes turned upwards, slowly pirouetting. Quasars and pulsars pass through her body.

"This is what I see when I dream of Space - only ... it's even more dreamlike."

A touch of a further button makes soft music cascade gently through the dome - Belthausen's 'Space Aria', composed in the 21st century. Its cadences are supposed to reflect the movements of the celestial orbs across the heavens. It is underlaid with the chime of bells which are supposed to echo infinity. We generally use it only when intending to impress potential donors. Lilly laughs and claps in delight. I watch her for a minute and then, hypnotically drawn, transported, join her out under the dome.

She raises her hand. There is an aurora glowing insubstantially like a fluorescent miasma at her fingertips.

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp," she breathes. "Or what is a heaven for?"

"That sounds nice."

"Robert Browning," she says. "Do you read much literature?"

Only if it's written by someone with a pair of Dr's in front of his name. I don't tell her that, though. Instead I point out some of the more interesting anomalies in the display: a free-floating methane dwarf, something in-between a star and a planet; a supernova, the fiery furnace of a stellar giant in its final death throes; a binary star, two heavenly bodies eternally encircling one another.

I can feel her standing next to me even when not looking at her. I've held hundreds of lectures in here, but none in which I felt so strangely jittery.

As usual when nervous, I keep talking like an automaton to suppress the sensation.

"We estimate that the universe came into existence between 15 and 20 billion years ago. We can trace it back to the tiniest fraction of a second - 10^{-43} to be precise - a period we call Planck time. Ever since then it has been expanding. What you see here is a segment roughly two hundred thousand light years in diameter. You can see our galaxy and the next nearest, the Large Magellanic Cloud. If you look over here, you can find..."

A finger laid across my lips discontinues my address. She is standing in front of me now. She has removed her glasses. Her eyes are not green in the darkness, but black, a thousand tiny lucent motes of light reflected in them.

"The universe can seem small to some people," she whispers.

She is coming closer.

Belthausen's sendaline music tinkling down like energy-charged particles around us, we kiss among the stars.

* * *

An apartment with a balcony is the only luxury I allow myself - but it is an expensive one, as is the case with anything that takes up space and is not entirely essential. These days, space is the most precious commodity in this or any other city. I sit on my costly balcony and gaze out into an artificial galaxy of tiny lights.

The accommodation quarter I inhabit is roughly two hundred square miles in size. With constant construction at the edges it is expanding incessantly in imitation of the universe itself. Everything in this part of the New Byzantium is built vertical: mile-high towers of glass which, at the push of a button, can become opaque, and then - by pushing the same button - be made transparent once more. Each one is a city-sized honeycombed beehive all unto itself. Only the population control agency knows precisely how many people live in each one of them. Yet somewhere out there in that manmade forest is one person who has crystallised into an individual - set herself apart. The fact that she is out there in it changes the entire city, as if something were invisibly radiating outwards from the fix-point 'Lilly' like a black hole's gravitational force, subtly transforming all.

I have had relationships before - not recently admittedly - but there were people who came and went. Yet they were little more than diagnostic experiments, or hygienic exercises, perhaps - to cleanse myself of that febrile feeling of physical and emotional lack.

This is different. This is utterly apart from me - it comes entirely from her.

In one telling blow she has placed herself indelibly on my mental map.

And now she is booked to leave this planet.

The call was waiting on my machine when I returned from work, late as usual. Her voice sounded troubled ... no, distraught. The message wasn't long, but it had the impact of a meteorite strike. Words to sunder the sky.

"You're not home, David. Please call me tomorrow morning. The passenger list for the next ferry-flight was published this afternoon. My name is on it. I don't know what to think. I..." Her voice breaks off for a moment. "I... Just call me tomorrow, David. Please?"

I've listened to the message over a dozen times. Every time the words sound inchoate, garbled, as if spoken in another language. But their meaning is inescapable - it lodges itself somewhere deeper down, as unconditional as amputation. The writing is on the wall.

So now I sit on my balcony and stare out into overpopulated emptiness. That fact that everything stands so still - that nothing is shaking or trembling - seems like sophistry.

Sometime later - I've lost all track of the passing of time - my computer beeps from within. Incoming call. I rise and hurry indoors at once. Perhaps it is her. Maybe she is calling to say it was all a mistake. The name blinking on the screen, however, is my brother's.

I almost don't answer it. I am not at all in the mood for conversion. For him to call so late at night must have a good reason, though. I flick my finger at a button and the holographic image of his face materialises in the air - glowing ethereal and ghostlike in the near-darkness. It looks strangely drawn.

His voice when he speaks sounds pretty taut as well

"David," he says. "I need you to listen to me. Don't interrupt: just listen, and for God's sake hear me!" No, his voice isn't tense at all - it is stretched to breaking point.

"I've been following a rumour for months. It's the story I told you about, the one that brought me back to New Byzantium. I've been sniffing around the skyport for days. It wasn't easy, but last night I finally managed to slip by security and get a look around in one of the cargo halls. David, those giant supply crates they are loading onto the spacecraft are full of nothing but toxic industrial waste."

"What are you talking about? The settlers need those supplies for the voyage."

There is a heartbeat's pause before my brother replies. "I know."

"Joshua, what are you trying to tell me?"

"You know what I'm trying to tell you. You know what this means. You've known it all along. You've been struggling with it for years. You just won't accept it because of what it implicates. You've done the maths. Trust your own numbers. Come on, man, I'm your brother - say it to me. Speak the words."

There is no hell deeper than this. My tongue feels swollen in my mouth, my own words thick and gelatinous, as I say: "Adjani's second theorem of wormhole transition is fundamentally flawed."

"Which means?"

"That travelling through a wormhole is mathematically impossible."

"Exactly." Joshua is obdurate - he's not going to let me off the hook. "And that means ...?"

"That all those people ..." I can't say it.

"Were either torn to pieces or crushed to the size of a subatomic particle. They are all dead, David. By my count: upward of six billion since initiation of the Arcadia programme."

"That can't be! My calculations are incorrect. After all, hardly anybody truly understands Adjani. It's too complex. I've made a mistake somewhere. I..."

"You understand Adjani. You're better than him and you know he was wrong. There is no Arcadia colony on the other side of that wormhole. Those spaceships are flying into extinction."

My breath catches in my throat. I can hardly force the next words out through suddenly bone-dry lips. "Lilly is booked on the next flight."

There is a short silence from the screen. Then, my brother's voice, soft, sympathetic: "I'm sorry, David."

"We have to stop that launch!"

"I don't think that's possible. I'm working on a way of making all this public, but there's no way that'll happen in two days time. I need more proof."

"Then we have to get her name off the passenger list!"

"Now that is definitely impossible. The lists are put together by the Global Government Agency. They..."

"There's one of their buildings right here in New Byzantium!" I interrupt.

"Which is utterly impossible to get into. I'm a journalist: don't you think I've tried? There are no guards to bribe, no passes to fake. Security and identification is linked directly to the VFS-chip in your head. If you enter that building without the proper authorisation, an electrical impulse is triggered. You'll drop dead on the spot."

VFS- chip?

"Hold that thought," I tell Joshua. "Meet me outside the GGA."

*

*

*

It's never dark in the headquarters of the Global Government Agency. Long banks of fluorescent white light running along every ceiling burn day and night, but their light is cold and the energy level is kept low, so it is never very bright either. I've been here twice before - on invitation, naturally. Perception always seems a little distorted in this building. The lines in the endlessly long corridors don't seem to meet in the distance and the angles feel discordant, jarring. Even when in operation, the sheer size of the giant complex creates an emptiness which is like a palpable burden. At night, that emptiness is all but overwhelming.

Getting into here was simply too easy. Joshua was right: there are next to no guards and he has a certain proficiency with electrical locks. He had to wait outside, of course - unlike mine, his VFS-chip is still activated. The central computer mainframe is on the ground floor. This monster is the largest and fastest of its kind on the planet. Its power seems to hum under my fingertips as they flash across the operation panel.

They feel so secure with their chip-identification system that access to the mainframe is unrestricted. I find the next Daedalus passenger list without difficulty - half a million people.

As I run my eyes down the endless column of names and the affiliated designations, a pattern, an ugly regularity, emerges: there is nobody with skills or facilities higher than Level 2 on this list.

"Can I help you?"

The doors open and close so silently here - I didn't hear them enter. Three men now stand several steps behind me. The pair flanking the entrance could be clones of one another - the same broad shoulders and chests, and faces which are blank as they are stony. Archetypal security officers. I hardly notice them, though. As is the case whenever he walks into a room, the man in the centre draws one's attention as if by electromagnetic attraction.

He is tall and thin, practically cadaverous. His face is little more than a skull with skin stretched tightly across it. He is dressed in the white coat of a scientist. He actually holds several academic titles, but it has been long time since he has done any scholarly work. This is Dr. Proxima Excelcet, member of the highest echelon of the Global Government Agency, known only as the Committee. His rank is that of Chairman, Level 5. He doesn't live in New Byzantium, but he comes here often. I myself have met him on several occasions - none of them particularly pleasant. To see him smile is for a swimmer, helpless in deep water, to see the sleek black shadow glide silently beneath him.

"Dr. Salinski!" His voice is as smooth as an oiled hinge. It is always impelling in its own way, every cadence and syllable meticulously designed and structured to evince conviction. Right now his tone is supposed to convey mild surprise, but none of that shows on that skeletal face. "It's rather late to be up and about, isn't it?"

Not to mention stealing around in the dark in a building I am not supposed to be able to enter. There's no point in beating around the bush.

"There are fundamental flaws in Adjani's reckoning," I tell him straight out.

The Chairman's face doesn't even twitch. "Of course there are," he says.

So Joshua had been right on that point, too:

"You know," I state flatly.

"Oh, please! Adjani's theorems are just so much mathematical mumbo-jumbo. His genius lay in being able to make that impossible to detect." He smiles at me - that feral, viscid grin of his which always makes my skin crawl. "Well . . . almost impossible, obviously."

"For the love of God, why?"

Excelcet steeple his fingers. He takes a deep breath as if beginning a pre-rehearsed lecture.

"As early as the mid-nineteenth century it was recognised that population growth would be the defining factor of our species' possibility of long-term survival on this planet. Think, Dr. Salinski: we have not had major war in almost two hundred years. Fatal illnesses have been all but eradicated. Child mortality rates are approaching zero. We have an average life expectancy of over ninety. Ever since quotas as a birth control measure were abolished owing to immense public pressure 150 years ago, the global population should be ballooning. And yet it has remained constant at ca. 12.4 billion for almost a century now. Have you never wondered how this was accomplished?"

"But . . . all those people!"

"Didn't suffer - don't let that inconvenience you. Life support systems switch off about fifteen minutes after takeoff. There's no sense in wasting resources, is there? The wormhole is just to make absolutely certain none of those ships turn up once more to haunt us. Besides, there are no individuals on those lists society will truly miss, trust me."

I can feel my fists clenching at my sides. "Who puts the lists together? You?"

Again that corpselike smile. "As a matter of fact, I actually do happen to head the selection committee. Listen, it's simply Darwinism taken one step further. We like to call it 'not-so-natural selection'." He can apparently sense my anger, for he stops smiling, sighs and says: "Hear me, Dr. Salinski, the Arcadia programme is a regrettable necessity. There is a limit to the number of people this planet can sustain. It is simply a question of space. Even since antimatter energy production has solved most of our resource problems, there is a ceiling to how high the global population can climb without us not having room to sit down. This method is efficient and economical. The 'cargo' we load on board is in addition a useful method of eliminating awkward evidence divergent to our claim that non-recyclable waste is no longer produced in our society."

"There is one individual I'll miss on your goddamn list," I press through clenched teeth.

He frowns. "Really? A mistake must have been made. Normally the family and friends of important personages are not put on the list - apart from a few undesirable elements, of course."

"And am I now an 'undesirable element'?"

"Come, come, Dr Salinski, there is no need for that. We can remove your acquaintance's name from the passenger list and there need be no ... misunderstandings on either side. We can't waste a scientist of your calibre - Science is the bedrock upon which our civilisation is founded. That, and the public's trust in science, of course. In fact, we would be much obliged if you would refine Adjani's theorems a little - until truly no one can understand them completely enough to disprove them. You will receive the highest accolades of your profession, of course. You will probably go down in history as the greatest scientist since Adjani."

"The greatest scientist since Adjani..." The words sound bitter on my tongue - worse: like vitriolic acid. I am silent for the space of a few heavy heartbeats. "You know..." I continue slowly, "I've just remembered a quote I once read - it was about scientists and their calling. It went something like: 'There will come a day when your every Eureka! at some new discovery will be answered by nothing but a universal scream of horror.'" Come to think of it, Lilly, I have read a little literature. "That was written by a man you probably would have classified as an undesirable element. He was talking about the abuse of science. I wonder: who has more blood on their hands, you or Adjani?"

Excelcet seems neither impressed nor perturbed. "An old question. Who bears the responsibility for the consequences of a discovery? The scientist or the one into whose hands he delivers his findings? You know what? There's no difference - it's the same thing. The same end. You should listen to Bacon, the founding father of your field: knowledge is power. Now innocence is a fine thing, but it's also unfortunately equal to impotence. In reverse, that means that power is guilt. It's a simple equation, Salinski: knowledge = power = guilt. Deal with it.

You're a scientist, for heaven's sake, that means you have both eyes and a brain. Wake up and face the truth! Science is solely to serve mankind. And man is nothing without civilisation. The civilisation which our programme was designed to ensure the continued existence of."

"The truth..." I roll the word around in my mouth. "You say science is to serve mankind. Perhaps the calling of science is to serve the truth." I smile in memory. "Somebody once told me that."

I hold the image of Lilly's face before me. So I can say: this much, at least, I know to be true.

The Chairman simply snorts. "You, above all people, should know better than that. Science doesn't deal with truth, it deals with fact. And the facts are that there is other way to ensure the long-term survival of our species. I'm sorry you can't see it that way."

He takes a step backward. "Gentlemen, if you would be so kind?"

The security officers hold needle-guns in their hands now - vicious, ugly little things. The slightest pinprick from one of those tiny toxic darts will cause instant paralysis and death. The weapons are quiet and lethal; neat and efficient. Unostentatious. Just the sort of thing you would expect from people like these in a situation like this. They are trained at my throat.

This has gone far enough.

I raise a hand. "Hold on a minute, boys. You wouldn't want to commit murder on Global Holographic Broadcasting would you?"

Excelcet looks slightly irritated. "What are you babbling about?"

"You know every detail about me, Proxima." I use his first name as a challenge. "You tell me: Of what profession is my brother?"

"He's a second-class journalist. And quite a troublesome little insect, I might add."

"No, he's an outstanding journalist. Not many people could get air time on Global Network at such short notice." I point at a microscopic speck in my left eye. "It's downright amazing to what size nanotechnology can reduce these things. You've been featuring rather prominently on Breaking News, my friend. Pity you couldn't see yourself - I'm sure you cut a fine figure."

This is the moment I've been waiting for.

"You've held quite an elegant lecture on socio-economic theory, Proxima. Now let me share a few of my thoughts on the matter: you've built a world where everything works. Like clockwork, in fact, requiring a minimum amount of input from anyone. That means that nobody has to think. But when people wake up, they'll do so with a vengeance. Then continents will shake, my friend. As you mentioned, there have been no wars in over a century - Earth's citizens have had a long time to store up a lot of creative destructiveness. I think your civilisation is in for quite an upheaval."

I smile.

"Call it Salinski's First Theorem of Social Revolution. My second theorem is based on the historically empiric observation that dethroned dictators often find the remainder of their short lives rather eventful. I would start running if I were you. I don't know that people will have much sympathy with members of an agency which has institutionalised state-sanctioned mass murder on such a scale."

Take that, Mr Chairman. I'm actually a little proud of that speech, seeing how little time I had to prepare. I can't suppress a grin, thinking of the deactivated chip in the back of my head.

Not bad for a dead man!

But wait ... hang on a minute. Excelcet is smiling! He shouldn't be smiling. He ought to be halfway into apoplexy by now.

As if on cue - a perfectly timed and orchestrated little farce - the door to my right slides open with a hardly perceptible electric hum. A figure comes staggering through. His arms are

twisted wrenchingly behind his back and secured with thin wire. There is blood on his wrists. There is blood on his lips. Behind him are two further security officers armed with stun-rods.

Joshua looks at me with bloodshot eyes through the sweaty strings of hair which hang before them.

"I'm sorry."

I hardly hear him.

Time becomes discrete, each single second separate and sharp.

In the doorway behind Joshua, a fourth figure has materialised. Familiar, yet different. The glasses are gone. The hair is straight and not curly. The way she stands, she seems taller than I remember.

"Hallo, David." says Lilly.

She is dressed in white. It shouldn't, but it suits her. She turns to Excelcet and there is no subservience in her attitude.

"I told you he wouldn't be persuaded."

It's strange: sometimes when your whole world is wheeling elliptically, it's the small details which stand out the most. On the badge clipped to her jacket pocket it says: Behavioural Scientist: Level 6. There's no such thing as Level 6!

"Not until I came along," she says.

What, so she can fucking read minds now?

"Only yours. After all, I analysed your records for six months. Your thought patterns are like a road map to me now."

"Who are you?"

My voice sounds foreign and unfamiliar to my own ears.

"Whoever I want to be. It took me quite a while to determine precisely what type would appeal to you. She didn't exist, so I had to create her."

"Feel flattered, Salinski," Excelcet injects. "Not many people warrant such attention."

"We knew you were good," Lilly explains, "We needed to know how good. Every other astrophysicist of note published on nice, safe topics, most of it founded on Adjani's theorems. You published on quantum uncertainty. That made you suspicious. Deep down, you're a romantic at heart, David. That, in synergy with your mathematic capabilities, makes you potentially dangerous."

"The one thing we can't allow is for society's faith in science to be undermined," Excelcet interjects. "You should understand that by now."

I don't look at him - he doesn't even feature on my peripheral vision.

"Lilly Jordan. Is that your real name?" My lips are moving of their own volition - they must be: I'm too numb to move myself.

"Do you really want to know? You knew Lilly Jordan - you never met me." She gives a little shrug - the gesture is excruciatingly familiar. "I'd like to hang around and chat, but I've got a busy work schedule and I've already spent more time on you than I can really afford. Goodbye, David."

There should be anger: a coruscating need to rage, to do violence. This deserves incident. But there is only emptiness. My hands hang at my sides like strangers.

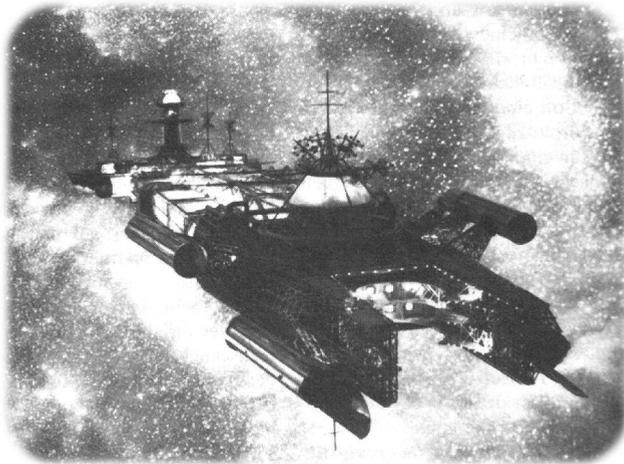
There is no potency left within me.

I don't see which security guard pulls the trigger, but I do feel the little prick on the side of my neck. Darkness washes in. I can feel my limbs and shoulders growing infinitely heavy. This isn't right. Those toxic darts work as quickly as electric nerve transmission. I should be dead by now.

"Such an end would be inappropriate." It seems Excelcet can read my thoughts now too. "Whatever else, you do deserve our professional respect." I hear the crackle of electrical static. He must be speaking into a communicator: "Yes, this is Chairman Excelcet. Code clearance: Delta Blue. Book two more places on the next ferry flight. I've got another couple of passengers for Arcadia."

The last sounds I hear drifting through the enveloping mist come, appropriately, from Lilly.

"A good scientist should do a little fieldwork. Rejoice, David, you're going to be the first astrophysicist to find out first hand for absolute certain whether or not wormhole transition really works."



LOVING EMBRACE OF THE UNIVERSE

(inspired by Frida Kahlo's painting of the same name and by the movie Frida)

17 years old,
at the height of discovery,
both with your inquisitive mind
and your freshly blooming body,
when an old publico,
racing down the streets of Mexico City,
almost transports you into the beyond.

This experience,
traumatic as it might seem to spectators,
failed to get the better of you;
your pride and energy,
spirit and good humor
flow together, forming immeasurable joy.

With your loving care
you embrace your sister
and your father;
with your lustful body
uncountably other bodies more.

At times unable to move
more than your fingers,
your eyes, and a brush of paint,
your clothe canvas into your world of exuberance and pain.

For 25 years you bear your husband's extravagancies -
fleeing into alcohol as a momentary shelter.

Your body: shuttle cock between dance-floor and sickbed.
In many a way your heart shatters.

And yet, in the end: a loving embrace.

THE CREW



ALEXANDER FLORY

I got the inspiration for 'Saturday Night Fever' while working as a body double for John Travolta during the seventies. However, at the time the scope of the story proved too demanding and only after thirty years of intensive field research did I feel ready to tackle the problem and produced this brilliant piece of writing.

My field research has not yet been completed and I'm still working on the Multimeter, but my 'Fragrance of the Night' perfume can be bought via Internet at www.mastrsoftheuniverse.de.

... still unsteady, still unreliable in attending CW towards the end of the semester, still trying not to be annoyingly autobiographical (but increasingly succeeding!). horrible sf writer, love stories always end in failure and/or death (like the one included here). driving 150 km/h on the autobahn with a car that normally only goes up to 130 numbs pain. i just found that out recently. at 150, the music doesn't hurt my ears anymore when i listen to it loud. that's the kind of experiment i spend my time on. the rest of the time i read, write, listen to more music, ride horses and feed my cat.



CHRISTINE RITZ

species: human, female
origin: swabian alps (telling accent)
age: 23 (as claimed by subject)
diet: feeds on weekly Creative Writing-sessions. Will occasionally accept servings of Essighaus-chips.
observed patterns of behaviour: usually blends in with other members of CW.
beware: small but dangerous!



NINA SECKEL



OLIVER PLASCHKA

Plus ça change... still the way it used to be. To truthfully reflect this, another Inspector Gerard story in this issue.



RUTH KIRCHER

ruth likes: chocolate.
ruth doesn't like: having her picture taken.



UTE GROSSKOPFF

I started my first novel at the age of nine. Unfortunately, after the prologue I didn't like my own story any longer. Frustrated by this experience, I dropped my plans of becoming a famous author and stopped writing until I met Peter Bews and his Creative Writing Class. But I really don't know if I'll ever try to write longer pieces than short stories again...



CAROLINA S. PFLÜCKE

"Sabrás quien eres cuando te estés muriendo."

You know who you are when the game is over.



DANIELA SCHNEIDER

Danny – 11th / 9^h semester, English & German; Sandhausen native & resident. ATF activity: Aside from every student's default hobby (reading & writing), mine's also crumpling up tiny little strips of aluminium foil to tiny little balls while watching Twin Peaks or, erm, Star Trek. This here story: There aren't any typos – all misspellings and grammar mistakes are thoroughly intentional, due to Julie being so... dense. All cultural allusions should be authentic, some, however, only from Julie's POV (cf. Mr. McGregor's first name). Exceptions are "BioTechs," which doesn't exist, and the sheep baby, which really exists out there, but which is a Tom Arma creation. Also, Björk wasn't Irish last time I checked, but would you expect Julie to know? BTW, "Rudy" is a favorite among young Kentuckian Methodists. Other than "Trainspotting," which isn't.



MATTHIAS REISSMANN

Natural born alien killer

(unknown game character)



MARJOLIJN STORM

Current addictions: hagelslag, Peter Ustinov, The Osbournes, La Folia Folio, Colonel Clifton, Arthur Rackham, It Ain't Half Hot, Mum

Current hobby: feeling sad about leaving Creative Writing



MATTHIAS MÖSCH

Thanks to the CW people for all their good stories and to Peter for putting so much energy in this course. I hope Hartmann doesn't turn over in his grave.



ANNA R. LOHMANN

Age: 24 Heroes: Monty Python, Tom Waits
Role Model: Edmund Blackadder Current favourites: - books: David Sedaris Naked, Jonathan Ames Adventures of a mildly perverted young writer, Spike Milligan Puckoon, Pete McCarthy McCarthy's Bar, Philip Roth The Human Stain, Nick Hornby How to be Good - songs: Catatonia I'm Cured, Kings of Convenience Winning a battle, losing the war, I don't know what I can save you from, The Pixies Where is my Mind, Krezip I would stay, Molotov Frijolero,

The Wallflowers One Headlight, Coldplay Don't Panic - films: Down by Law, The Full Monty, Blues Brothers, Some Like it Hot, Night on Earth, La vie est une longue fleuve tranquille, High Fidelity, To Be or Not To Be



DALE ADAMS

Born in Singapore, have Australian nationality, grew up on board a ship, now teaching for a while in Canada (Don't ask)



ANDREAT. ARIMAN

I write, therefore I am. For more details, please refer to an earlier edition on In Our Write Minds. Or read Paul Auster. Or, rather: do both.

IN OUR WRITE MINDS VOL. VI

True Love from Outer Space - The Live Experience

January 15th
Romanischer Keller

Our Space of Outer Love
(under constant development- next update ahead)

<http://www.listen.to/writeminds>

Little Space, Much Love (and mostly Inside when cold)

Every Thursday 18.15-19.45 AS 112

Keep watching the skies!!!

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Cover Conception: JENS

Thanks to: 1001 HELPERS
& ALL MEMBERS OF
THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASS

Dedicated to: LUCY

AUTUMN 2003
VINEGAR HOUSE BOOKS



