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Escaping Cascadia

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Escaping Cascadia

by

Todd Albertson

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

Bachelor of Science
in
University Honors
and
Geography

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Portland State University
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Abstract

The preface, “Dualism and Narrative Mode,” details the development of realist techniques and then looks to current research to address the question, “In what other ways can realism be maximized within fiction?” It proposes a style combining second-person imperative narration for the viewpoint character’s actions and third-person free indirect discourse for description and internalization.

The introduction, “The Geography of the Future,” explores prediction within select works, examines mitigation reactions to such predictions, and details current geographical projections to build a picture of what the future may look like and how humans will interact with their environment.

Escaping Cascadia is a novel written in the style proposed by the preface, with the intent to maximize psychological realism and reader immersion, and to minimize the voice of a narrator and the reader’s awareness of an author. The story takes place within a world informed by the geographical exploration in the introduction.

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Preface:

Dualism and Narrative Mode

Regarding Dualism

An article was released late last year that said if you're facing a difficult event, then you should give yourself a pep talk in the second person, and that those who gave themselves the same pep talk in the first person were much less likely to succeed (Dolcos and Albarracin). So, when you give yourself that pep talk, it's *you can do it*, not *I can do it*.

I can do it reminds me of *The Little Engine That Could*. And what was it The Little Engine That Could said?

"I think I can" (Piper 17). Right?

I think I can, I think I can, I think I can...

But, following Dolcos and Albarracin, if we wanted to change this to the second person, how would we accomplish that? Do we just change the *Is* to *yous*?

"You think you can."

Doesn't quite work, does it? Sounds more like a challenge than a pep talk—a challenge coming from outside the self. But even worse is this one:

"You think I can."

Indeed, we are now speaking from inside the self, so that's good. Only it sounds defensive, like it should have a *but* afterward, like this: *You think I can, but I—I'm not so sure, just leave me out of this*. So, that fails to properly transform the sentence.

Maybe the last one will. Let's try it out:

“I think you can.”

Sounds good. Let’s try it a few more times:

“I think you got this.”

“I think you can do it.”

“I think you can knock this out of the ballpark!”

These sound right, and it goes to show there’s two of us within each one of us—a subject, an object; an I, a you; the mind, the body. This concept is known as *Cartesian Dualism*. I wondered if there could be a way to write a character in this manner.

Free Indirect Style and Stream of Consciousness

Two narrative modes, mostly developed in the modernist period, have an effect of letting characterization “come through the minds and eyes of the characters themselves,” allowing the author to sit “behind the scenes, apparently disinterested” (O’Connor 74). One of these is known as *free indirect style*¹, and the other as *stream of consciousness*.

Free indirect style utilizes aspects of the first person (specifically, the access the first person has to a character’s thoughts) and substitutes the third person nouns and pronouns. Consider King: “Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Non-smokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes” (326). Here, the line “Non-smokers could afford to be smug” is not a statement by the author, but a thought by the character Morrison. In *direct style*, it would be put in this way: ““Non-smokers could

¹ *Speech* and *discourse* are also used instead of *style*.

afford to be smug,' Morrison thought.” The tag at the end (“Morrison thought”) is a statement by the author, and by leaving this out, the author calls less attention to his- or herself. In contrast, had this been written in *reported dialogue* (or regular indirect style), it would be put this way: “Morrison thought that non-smokers could afford to be smug.” Again, the author is imposing, telling the reader what Morrison thinks. If an author wants the reader to stay in the eyes and minds of the character, clearly free indirect style beats both direct style and reported dialogue.

The other narrative mode I wish to discuss is stream of consciousness. This was most famously used by Joyce, and it amounts to no more than a transcription of a character's thoughts. Consider *Ulysses*, where Molly Bloom lies in bed beside her husband, hoping to fall asleep: “frseeeeeeee-fronnnng train somewhere whistling the strength those engines have in them like big giants and the water rolling all over and out of them all sides like the end of Loves old sweet sonnng the poor men that have to be out all the night from their wives and families in those roasting engines stifling it was today...” (754). Note that in this section (Episode 18, 738-783), Molly lies still in bed, and while her hypnotizing thought drone on, she never *does* anything.

This is a problem with both narrative modes. Consider King again, with “He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.” The first half of this sentence has exited the free indirect mode in order to explain the action Morrison engages in. The same is true of stream of consciousness. Staying within the character's mind, particularly when explaining a routine action we all do without thinking, seems an impossible task. Try narrating drinking a glass of water from within a character's mind: “I reach out. I take the glass in

my hand. I raise it to my lips and tilt the glass. The water flows and my mouth is full of it. I swallow, tilt the glass level, and then pull it away from my lips. I set the glass back upon the table.” Hogwash! Not only does no one want to read such drivel, no one actually thinks that way. So, the author exits the mode, leaves the mind of the character, and narrates: “She takes a sip of water.” There—done.

The thing that King has mastered is the ability to weave back and forth between narration and free indirect style. The second part of the above sentence puts us back in Morrison’s mind again: “...knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.” In the introduction to the story collection *Night Shift*, John D. MacDonald calls this ability *writing without author intrusion*, a term I seem to remember better than the more literary term *verisimilitude*, which Webster’s calls “the appearance or semblance of truth; likelihood; probability.” In “What Makes a Good Novel,” Robert P. Ashley calls verisimilitude “likeness to truth” and that all fiction can have it as long as “they are true to the world they create.”

In the world of virtual reality, verisimilitude is known as *immersion*. In psychology, it is known as *narrative transportation*. We will touch on these briefly before returning to the concept of dualism.

Immersion and Narrative Transportation

Within the virtual reality community, *telepresence* is a state an immersant enjoys when experiencing an alternate reality. Marie-Laure Ryan said, “To apprehend a world as real is to be surrounded by it, to be able to interact physically with it, and to have the

power to modify this environment” (2). In order to create this telepresence, she notes that immersion and interactivity are required.

I bring this up to highlight those areas where a reader has no choice in traditional, word-on-paper fiction. A reader cannot choose what the character does or, in other words, a reader gives up *agency*. Instead, the reader hopes that the author has the wisdom and judgment to guide the character in an acceptable fashion. When this is done, I believe a reader can experience telepresence that’s more real than any VR system.

Important to this concept of telepresence without agency is *narrative transportation*. According to van Laer et al., “narrative transportation occurs whenever the consumer experiences a feeling of entering a world evoked by the narrative because of empathy for the story characters and imagination of the story plot” (798). When a reader empathizes with the character and is absorbed by the mental imagery, “story receivers lose track of reality in a physiological sense” (799). On 803, they make the following hypothesis: “The more stories have (a) characters with whom story receivers can identify, (b) a plot that story receivers can imagine, (c) verisimilitude, the more narrative transportation increases.”

Now, we return to the concept of dualism.

Dualism and Narrative Mode

Consider “How to Talk to a Hunter,” by Pam Houston:

When you get home in the morning there’s a candy tin on your pillow. Santa, obese and grotesque, fondles two small children on the lid. The card will say something like, From your not-so-secret admirer. Open it. Examine each carefully made truffle. Feed them,

one at a time, to the dog. Call the hunter's machine. Tell him you don't speak chocolate (101).

Here, and throughout the story, Houston refers to the character ("you") in two ways: the second person singular and the second person imperative. It's as though the singular is used for feelings, judgments, emotions, thoughts, and senses. But the imperative ("Open it," "Examine each..." "Feed them...") is used for action.

This is interesting because here we have the mind, in the subjective, receiving incoming information (second person singular) and then the body, in the objective, being told what to do (second person imperative) and this, to me, is the very definition of Cartesian Dualism.

Need this only work in Houston's extremely creative, future hypothetical, second-person form? Or can this be used as a model, transporting this separation into other forms, like past- or present-tense, or into first- or second-person narrative modes?

Conclusion

For the most part, descriptive narration doesn't require the attachment of "person," as the second sentence in the Houston quote shows, and in free indirect discourse, with the absence of tags ("she thought"), a judgment or thought will be assumed to belong to the viewpoint character (as long as the author uses a limited viewpoint). However, thoughts occur within a self, whether as an "I," a "you," or a "she," with these personal pronouns ordinarily standing in for a proper name.

The commonness of the third person narrative makes it advantageous for verisimilitude. The utilization of "I" can cause a reader to think of the self rather than the

character. A similar thing happens with the use of “you,” especially if the reader objects to what is being said about them.

Although free indirect and stream of consciousness modes have the advantage of direct access to a character’s thoughts, judgments, and attitudes, they have the disadvantage of needing to exit the mode to narrate action. Utilization of the second-person imperative can overcome such an exit, leading to an increase in verisimilitude.

For this reason, I have composed the following story in a mixed point of view, utilizing the second person imperative for actions or the prohibitions of action (the objective self), and the third person, free indirect for thoughts, feelings, emotions, judgments, and senses (the subjective self).

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Introduction:

The Geography of the Future

Not long ago in the class for this thesis, we were given a challenge to write three different openings for our topic. While the other students complied, I considered and wrestled and wrote little. By the time the assignment came due, my page contained a doodle and five single-syllable words. Truth is, I'm not worth much in a pinch. But over time, I have given thought to the assignment and decided upon three introductions—an authorial one, an academic one, and a narrative.

I. Finding Sara

In 2006, I found myself driving an old, red Thunderbird convertible, shiny and trimmed with chrome. My arm rested upon the rolled-down window and, as I cruised, the warm air billowed and flapped the sleeve of my shirt. The two-lane road was straight and divided down the center by a freshly painted, double yellow line. No thought occurred to me of where I was going or where I had come from. After what seemed like hours, the road curved ahead. Yellow signs with black chevrons marked the turn. A man stood behind one of the signs, dressed in a thousand-dollar suit. He waved his arms, signaling me to stop, his face grimacing with alarm. I dismissed his tantrum and steered into the turn, slowing only slightly, and then I awoke in bed, soaked in sweat.

In the instant of awakening, whatever existed beyond that turn wisped away from memory. Often my thoughts return to what horror it may have been.

My first attempt at telling this tale began days after that dream. I pounded keys for a month, but the story stalled at a hundred pages and I couldn't figure out why. The manuscript lay untouched for eight years.

Only one thing remains the same from that first incomplete draft to this completed story. Sitting beside me in that Thunderbird had been a woman named Sara, and we were having a delightful conversation, and every time I turned to look at her she vanished. Funny those things that remain with the conscious mind and those that don't. What I remember most about Sara was her giggle, her innocence, and oh, how she screamed when we turned that corner.

This last year has been spent finding Sara and I learned a lesson—in order to find a ghost, you must first find who she haunts. I found Sara's sister.

My next step was to decide if a creature such as Sara could exist. Ruling out the supernatural, I was left to consider the future. Just what kind of place is the future anyway? Perhaps we can find out by looking to the past.

II. The Mirage of the Future Place

The geography of the future is a strange place, filled more with hopes and wishes than with funding and blueprints. But the future comes in an ever-present now, and unlike with a point in space, a point in time cannot be avoided. When we think about

those points in future time, we scheme and we plan and we toil to make it better than now, or at least better than some distressing time in the past. Those future times we think of come eventually, and usually the present reality (being the future of a time passed) doesn't agree with our prior hopes and wishes. This may seem obvious or tautological, but I beg your indulgence for three examples.

The year was 1813, and in a letter to John Jacob Astor, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I learn with great pleasure the progress you have made towards an establishment on Columbia river [*sic*]. I view it as the germ of a great, free, and independent empire on that side of our continent, and that liberty and self-government spreading from that as well as from this side, will insure their complete establishment over the whole" (Jefferson 61). He wrote this nearly a decade after his administration had purchased the Louisiana Territory from the French, and the year after Louisiana became the eighteenth state. The War of 1812 dragged on, the Mexican War of Independence raged in Texas, and Native Americans still controlled vast territories west of the Mississippi. Although his vision of liberty and self-government spreading across the continent came true, his vision of Fort Astoria becoming the germ of a great empire falls a little short. The Astoria of today is a dreamy little town, known by many as the setting for the film *The Goonies*. And despite the presence of Portland/Vancouver on the Columbia River, the metropolitan area is less the seat of an empire and more a flyover spot between LAX and Sea-Tac.

But these judgments are based on *my* vision of an empire. If you could transport Jefferson from 1813 to the present time in the northwest, giving him a tour of Astoria, the

Portland Metro Area, and along the I-5 corridor through Salem, Corvallis, and Eugene, he would certainly call it an empire. He would be astonished by the bridges and skyscrapers and highways and all the billions of tons of cargo travelling by machines like trains and trucks. He would be dazzled by the horseless carriages—even by the rusted ones with bald tires sitting on the neighbor's lawn. The vision of what an empire is changes according to the definitions and experiences of those who read Jefferson's work. My vision of an empire (in a rhetorical sense rather than a literal one) most clearly aligns with conurbations such as the greater Los Angeles area, New York City, London, Tokyo, Berlin, and Rome, and it also discounts Portland as a weird little truck stop.

Presidential prognostications are commonplace and predictable, revealing a bright, shiny future. Let's try out Dwight D. Eisenhower:

[I]t will not seem futile for young people to dream of a brave and new and shining world, or for older people to feel that they can in fact bequeath to their children a better inheritance than that which was their own. Science and technology, labor-saving methods, management, labor organization, education, medicine—and not least, politics and government—all these have brought within our grasp a world in which backbreaking toil and longer hours will not be necessary.

Travel all over the world, to learn to know our brothers abroad, will be fast and cheap. The fear and pain of crippling disease will be greatly reduced. The material things that make life interesting and pleasant will be available to everyone. Leisure, together with educational and recreational facilities, will be abundant, so that all can develop the life

of the spirit, of reflection, of religion, of the arts, of the full realization of the good things of the world. And political wisdom will ensure justice and harmony.

First, technology and labor-saving methods, in modernity, seem to leave people out of work, assuming debt to retrain in other skills, only for their newly-paid-for skills to shortly become obsolete. Since the 1950s, employers have shirked the responsibility and the cost of training their employees, and those employees now must incur the cost of training prior to being hired (the trade schools have rebranded occupational training as “education”). In the meantime, travel becomes evermore a luxury of the upper-class. A single vacation given away on Wheel of Fortune takes 828 hours to pay for at the federal minimum wage—a very high cost considering a work-year consists of only 2,080 hours. Instead of the wonderful things Eisenhower promised, what we have is television programming, the internet, and phones under everyone’s thumbs. Political wisdom brought us endless political scandals. Religion and spiritual life is being rejected by our youth. Leisure too is being rejected as millions of vacation hours go unused by Americans who fear being replaced while gone. Those jobs that haven’t been exported, as well as those that aren’t menial, are so specialized it’s surprising anyone can learn them. And, forget about medicine. Any pain-reducing drug is impossible to get from doctors due to their fear of the Drug Enforcement Agency. Antibiotics have created endless strains of diseases resistant to them. And, for Christ’s sake, polio is making a comeback.

But these are, once again, *my* judgments. If Dwight D. Eisenhower came to 2015, he might just say, “This is exactly what I was talking about. Look at all your computers and YouTube videos. You don’t even have to leave home to experience the world—you have the internet. And everyone’s got health insurance—how can you beat that?”

Let’s look at one more, this time from John F. Kennedy: “We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.”

There’s a difference this time. Had Kennedy lived until the landing of Apollo 11 in 1969, he would say his prediction came true. So would I. Chances are, so would you. The chances are also good we have the same images in mind: the footprint of Neil Armstrong, the photograph of Buzz Aldrin with his mirror-like visor, the voice of Armstrong saying, “That’s one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind” (Jones). Why is there such a difference between Kennedy’s prediction and those of Jefferson and Eisenhower? Why is it that Kennedy’s speech seems spot-on in predicting the future, but the other ones seem to float beyond the horizon like a mirage?

2

3

4

III. The Moose Speaks

Imagine this future—the place is North America, at the northwest quarter of its abandoned mass, within a unitary state called Cascadia. Along the warm, palm-tree lined beaches of the Gulf of Alaska, hugging the Cook Inlet, is one end of a border known as the UGB. The eleven-hundred-meter tall UGB defines the edges of an outer wall, and within its volume, cities and towns lie in a myriad of sizes and configurations. Around steel and cement girders, ghettos and shantytowns fill any free space. Within manufacturing towns, worker's apartments hug factories. High up, on the 190th through 195th floors, a place called Elmendorf spans the entire UGB. And also worthy of mention is Stressford, a place where the cultured, where the high-browed, where the exceptioned people toil over their decision to have lobster or prime rib for dinner, and over which wine would go the finest with it.

It's in the heart though, in the heart of a place called Anchorage—the namesake of the central city, of the metropolis, and of the UGB itself—where we'll focus now. Within Anchorage, beside the 22nd level of Gander Street, a modest condominium is nestled among hundreds of others, and within that one condo, there lives a particular woman.

She is the character at stake: one Coralie Gunn, a woman who has spent her life learning what she'd rather not learn, doing what she'd rather not do, being who she'd rather not be. And now she's grown sick of it all. Twenty-nine years and old, scarred,

ready for a grand exit. How she takes that exit is the matter for your consideration. There will be no two weeks' notice, no letter of resignation, no renunciation of citizenship. Instead, before the day is up, Coralie Gunn will begin her way down a slippery slope, she'll perform a drastic procedure upon herself, and she'll do it because she has made up her mind. Made up her mind that in a few short weeks, come hell or high water, by hook or by crook, through will or through naught, she will be escaping. Escaping the hells of constant consumption and endless war. Escaping the pits of bottomless taxes and topless pitchmen. Escaping lack. Escaping pressure. Escaping oppression.

Coralie Gunn will be Escaping Cascadia.

Todd Albertson

Portland, Oregon

June 12, 2015

for the forlorn

for the dejobbed

for the misadvantaged

for those who would never sip and spit

for those who raise their children in motels

for those who *do* know what food bank food tastes like

for folk

for real

for heaven's sake

Escaping Cascadia

Implant

*Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous ? Dormez-vous ?
Sonnez les matines ! Sonnez les matines !
Ding, daing, dong. Ding, daing, dong.*

—French nursery rhyme

One

The last patient of the day closed, the surgical gown doffed, Coralie Gunn sits now in her office, in the place where her chair has a desk before it, where the books of her youth gather dust upon the shelf, and where, beyond the desk, her hard-won diploma hangs from a nail, hard-won because she'd never been good at memorization but had forced it, making herself learn anatomy and physiology and all the dastardly artificial words the pharmaceutical marketers had invented. University of Cascadia, Anchorage it had been, and weren't those the days? The lectures, the endless consults, the rotations through Providence and the clinics in Skwentna and Chickaloon, and, in any given second of free time—study, engaging in forced memorization just to keep up with the others who dated, those who engaged in passionate midnight deeds together, mutually enveloped, fluids flowing as infusion—a plunging, writhing, moaning togetherness. To earn that certificate-on-a-nail, she'd neglected dating, and hadn't that been the stupidest thing ever? So stupid she could die.

But that's what it took, and she had known that an adult does whatever it takes. She kept a home for Sara, for whom homelessness wasn't an option, because it would have meant a forced return to Keio—either that or death—and Coralie would let neither of those happen to her sister. So, they lived first on the life insurance, and then on loans, and then on Coralie's modest pay in med school. Now, doing mostly government work, the pay wasn't much better. Over the years, she had hoped and wished that the war would end, that with the end of war, she'd be able to go into civilian practice and make a real living. Living... Well, wouldn't that be nice?

Eight years in exchange for a piece of paper. And then three years of stringing soldiers, an endless supply of mostly men, because even in these modern, enlightened times, the draft only impresses those whose gonads dangle. But what of the women? All the women. The ones in Skwentna, especially. How do they get by? *Day 7 for Food* is how. Imagine that—two public service days and no day off. How does anyone live like that?

The package had come earlier and she opened it. Inside was a tiny box. It weighs lightly in her pocket now. Tonight is the night.

A knock, duh-DUH-duh, which means it's Lacey, and she never waits for Coralie to answer. Only minutes after surgery, Lacey has changed out of her scrubs. She wears a top that lifts her boobs to her collarbone, and jeans that hug her butt so tightly the seam screams. "Guess what day it is?" she asks.

Day? Whatever it is, it's already over. "March... twelfth?"

Lacey leans forward. "That last procedure burn you out?"

Naw, that happened years ago, sweetie. "I'm a little tired."

"Not too tired for tacos, I hope."

Damn—Taco Tuesday at the Big Banga Boogie. Well, it figures.

"Coralie?" Lacey nods, searching for agreement.

"I can't. I'm sorry—gotta conference call with Dr. Minamoto."

Lacey looks away. "Oh..."

It's okay to admit to thoughtlessness. "I'm stupid. When I set the appointment, I wasn't thinking."

Lacey jumps to her feet. “Maybe I can catch Haylee...” She runs away, calling,
“See ya tomorrow!”

* * *

Home, at last. “Hey, Sara.”

“Hey! How was work?”

“You know.”

“Can I go with you?”

Huh? “With me where?”

“Taco Tuesday!”

Oh, that again, Taco Tuesday, and “I can’t.” Regarding the box in her pocket—the implant from Dr. Minamoto—sooner would be better than later. “Lacey’s going. You should ask her.”

“Her phone is Korean.”

Yep, figures.

“I don’t understand,” Sara says.

“Think I’m coming down with something.”

“Your vitals are fine, Coralie.”

Oh? We’ll see how long that lasts. “Do me a favor, Sara.”

“Yeah?”

“In the morning, call me off work.”

“Again?”

Again, once more, “just this one last time.” Into the bathroom; close the door softly.

Two

Done. That was the hard part.

Sara: “You okay?”

“Sure.”

“You spent the night in there.”

“Yeah.” Lumber into the living room, and Dr. Minamoto had said to look for the progress meter, *like looking for floaters*, he said. *Look at something uniform in color—it makes the meter easier to see*; no, not the floor, not the couch, certainly not Doggie. The window—beyond it is the sunny beach. “Window: Frost.”

The window becomes dull white—step forward till there’s nothing more. Focus and relax. It must be like this to float in a cloud, because it’s only plain white inside a cloud—or plain black at night. Two colors, digital colors, white or black, on or off. Beyond the window’s whiteness, an orange smudge floats. Unfocus and text snaps into the deep:

Initializing...
98.43%

“Oh.” And already at 99.51. Then, *ow*, a green flash.

Ready.

Just tell the implant to begin, Dr. Minamoto said, *tell it in your mind*. But recalling his voice seems to have been enough—the text changes:

Mapping...
0.00%

There's no more need to see it; he'd said it would take a few weeks. "Window: West Number Seven."

Focus now beyond the window toward the sand, toward the familiar beach, the beach with its crashing waves, its foamy surf, its curving allure. From West Prism Seven comes the perfect view, the one where the beach isn't blocked but is framed by coconut palms, skinny beams with bushy tops stretching away along the inlet. Listen to the hypnotic, muffled sound of the surf, a sound that should be around her rather than beyond her. The window blocks the distance. The window keeps her trapped. Her mind travels beyond the window when in despair, when fraught with loneliness, when the thoughts occur that life must mean more than this, more than mere drudgery, more than a cyclical routine, more than a repetition so mindless as to belong to the realm of animals.

She shakes at the knees, doesn't she? Likely from the stolen provodone. The numbness of the local she also stole devolves to tingling. Take a sniff—congested, certainly swollen, but no pain yet. At least that's something.

"Coralie?"

"Yeah."

"I'm worried about you."

"Mokay."

"You're sick. Your temperature's almost thirty-eight degrees. I should call the doctor."

"I *am* the doctor, Sara."

Sara breathes a heavy sigh.

Always an assault of melodrama with her, but at least she cares, huh? No doubt about that. “Mokay, really. Don’t worry, Sara-berra.”

“If you say so.”

“Did you call me off work?”

“Fabiola was pissed. Said you’re out of sick days.”

“Yeah.” A large wave washes toward a gull. The bird flaps to a hover and lands again. Then it picks at something in the sand.

“You’re shivering.”

God, Sara sees everything. Out the window, on the horizon, something bobs rhythmically, perhaps a ship painted a dull blue or a middle shade of gray. An itch comes to the bridge of Coralie’s nose. Better not scratch—better off brushing it lightly. Oh, and now she can feel it: a throbbing ache between her eyes. Will her nose start bleeding again? and what if it starts out here where Sara can see? Got a nice little hematoma, that’s for sure, eyes’ll turn black within the hour. Won’t be able to hide that, and what’ll Sara say then? Not only that but the bathroom—looks like somebody went on a stabbing spree in there—good thing Sara can’t see that because she’d freaking freak.

“Coralie?”

Freak just like she already is. Like she always does. “Yes.”

“I’m worried. You need be in the hospital.”

Need be—one of those funny Sara-isms. Thing is: she’s probably right. But the couch behind Coralie will have to do for now; so turn, only step easy because the room spins and her stomach churns and now the walls zoom, propelled away by some curious force. But the floor seems comfortably close, and closer still.

“Coralie!”

A rug is in Coralie’s face. Need some help here: “Sara?”

“Don’t worry—help is coming.”

“Dr. Milstein...”

“He’s on duty.”

It’s impossible to keep Coralie’s eyes from closing. “Tell him...”

“What?”

The rug seems to boil beneath Coralie, and the air she breathes is vacuous. Try and breathe deeper, faster—but no matter. She’s gonna go. “*No scans.*”

“No scans?”

A response... Emphatic repetition would be nice, but most of Coralie now seems disconnected.

Sara: “Are you sleeping?”

Ha, only *she* would ask that question, the girl who never sleeps. Such a funny question, a question that can only reasonably have *no* for an answer. Why can’t Sara see that?

“Coralie! Can you hear me?”

That question’s a little better. So hot. Hot enough that Coralie could jump in the ocean, the ocean beyond the window, but she resides not at the beach but on the 22nd level of Gander Street, in the same home she had been within on the day Daddysan returned from Tokyo, and they owned a different couch back then, (a sofa), one made of a knotty textile instead of sticky fleather. Daddysan entered with a colorful box under his arm, a box with pillowy letters, letters of the same kind Okaasan wrote her grocery lists

in. Coralie ran toward him but Mikey got there first—he always got there first—and he was pestering, “What’d you get me? What’d you get me?” Coralie stopped short of the man, and with the memories of early childhood so weak, her father had looked nearly a stranger, all the towering height of him, everything unfamiliar but his wild hair, a headful the color of flame at the edge of becoming shimmer. Seeing his hair confirmed the man really was him, and the thought that she had gone so long without him brought tears to her eyes and a spastic sob to her core. A moment of weightlessness stole through her as the familiar hands of Okaasan lifted her from under the armpits. Coralie wrapped her legs around her mother’s hip and pressed her face into a breast.

“Hey, Junior!” Daddysan said. “This here’s the *Fudo Masamune*, one of the greatest swords ever made!”

“Cooooool!” Mikey said.

Coralie looked at the sword. Mikey, with an air of pure trouble, was withdrawing it from its *saya*.

Okaasan was on the move. “*Honto! Nandawa!*”

Mikey cast the *saya* aside, raising the sword high above his head.

Daddysan stepped in front of Okaasan, shrugging. “It’s *plastic*.”

Okaasan scowled so hard her lips turned white. Daddysan kissed them red again. Then Coralie found herself upon his hip. She pressed her face against his chest, and he smelled of coffee and sanitizer. She began to cry again.

“What’s wrong, baby doll?”

Mikey went screaming off down the hallway: “*I’m unna getcha!*”

Coralie managed, “I don’t want you to go.”

“I already *went*,” Daddysan said, “and now I’m back.”

Coralie sniffed.

“If you’re crying, you can’t see what I gotcha.”

Coralie rubbed her eyes with her free hand. On the floor by the *saya* was the box with the pillowy letters. Okaasan picked the box up, set it on the sofa, and sat beside it, tapping its top flat-handedly. Daddysan sat with Coralie upon his knee. She leaned forward to examine the box.

Glossy pastel colors swirled behind the box’s letters. Coralie pulled the box over so its cover-flap faced upwards. A generic Manga girl stared, with shallow-sea eyes as big as her cheeks and a bright smile as wide as her dainty nose. Red pigtails sprayed out above her ears, and her bangs were trimmed straight along her brow. Below a necklace of black pearls she wore a pink-and-white striped sweater, and upon her shoulder hung a shocking-pink purse which, if real, would have been only large enough to hold a tube of lipstick. Below the sweater, she wore the pleated skirt of a schoolgirl, bright white, calf-length socks, and shiny, black, low-heeled shoes. Printed on the box beside the Manga girl, within a speech balloon, she said:

**お姉さん、
私はサラです！**

“Okaasan? What’s she saying?”

Okaasan pointed along the symbols as she pronounced them. “*Onee-san, watashi wa Sara desu.*”

Coralie whispered, “*Sara?*”

Daddysan nudged Coralie. “Remember when you asked us for a sister?”

She answered without turning. “Uh-huh.”

He reached past her and tapped the box. “Well, here she is.”

Coralie shook her head. She looked again at the cartoon girl, and that certainly wasn’t a sister at all. “I meant a *real* sister.”

Okaasan looked at Daddysan with concern.

“You’ll see,” he said. “She’s as real as you and me.”

Coralie pulled at the front flap, and the Velcro fastener tore open. Beyond a clear layer of plastic was a six-by-five array of translucent domes, each looking like a giant insect eye, like the ones those green insects in the sunshine blocks had, the ones with the foldy, spiny, graspy arms. Next to the array of eyes sat a solid glass cube.

A crash sounded from one of the bedrooms. “*Yaaaah! Take that!*”

Okaasan looked severe. “*Maikaru-san,*” she said, speaking as though her husband’s name was a curse. She got up and stomped away down the hall.

Daddysan’s arm wrapped Coralie in a hug. She felt his kiss upon the top of her head. “You’ll see, baby doll. I’ll hook her up first thing in the morning, and then you can upload her. Okay?”

“Okay...” She had been skeptical, for sure, but that next morning Sara was in her life, and, very shortly, it was as if she always had been.

Now, in this place, at her living room window, Coralie holds her lipstick in her right hand and its cap in the left. The window is clear, and a curvy woman glides by on the beltway. As long as the woman goes past, she stares in. Seems every soul in the world is voyeuristic. “Window: mirror.”

And the familiar self stares at her—no help for that complexion—but her eyeliner’s straight, and the touch of mascara is perfect. Just some lipstick and she’ll be ready to have a wonderful evening out, and maybe there’ll actually be some guys at the club this time. Best not to linger—Lacey will be along any minute now. Give the stick a turn, and it’s an automatic motion, across the left side and onto the right; gotta nice gloss this color, and all the sudden, the lipstick glides onto her cheek, but in the mirror she’s finished the application perfectly. Her reflection smooshes her lips, applying the color to the bottom.

Cap the lipstick and wipe her cheek—yes, it’s now all over her hand.

Her reflection giggles and squints. “I’ve always wanted to do that.” It’s Sara’s voice, followed by the playful laugh of a trickster sister.

“Sara!”

“Sorry, Coralie. Just hadta.”

“I thought—”

“That I’d never chosen a look? So true.”

Coralie’s purse sits on Doggie’s top. Pull a tissue out and clean Sara’s joke from Coralie’s cheek; it’s okay to smile—it *was* kinda funny. On Sara’s blouse is an orange smudge. Had Coralie wiped her hand on her blouse without thinking? No, it’s clean and pressed down there. Look through the glass again and the color is surely there—on Sara’s blouse it says:

Mapping...
15.42%

And, oh, that's what it is. But strange it's not a mirror image. But no—suppose it wouldn't be...

“You're planning something, aren't you, Coralie.”

Planning... There's no way Sara could know. Only Dr. Minamoto knows, and he knows better than anyone not to tell Sara.

“What happens when it gets to a hundred?”

How can Sara see it? “I...” better not say. “Sara—”

“Tell me.”

What happens is Coralie will upload the data, upload it from the implant to the—

“Implant? What implant.”

When has Sara ever been like this? “What's going on with you?”

“Upload it to *what*.”

The transmitter. Gotta get closer to the window, the window that somehow misunderstood her, and set it straight. “Window: Mirror!”

The image in the glass remains the same, and Sara approaches her own side of the window. “Minamoto-sensei—he's in Tokyo. What are you two planning?”

Where's Lacey anyway?

“Tell me! What happens when it reaches a hundred?”

It's just, no big deal, “I'll be going...”

Sara leans forward, her nose nearly touching the window. “To Tokyo? That's absurd! Going where?”

Stop. Stop it. Gotta get out before—

“Before *what*!”

No.

“What happens when it reaches a hundred?”

Time. Time to transmit. Transmit and die.

Sara gasps.

“*No*. Don’t listen in on me, Sara.”

Sara cups a hand over her mouth as a film of tears flows onto her eyeliner.

At this point, just flat-out deny it. “I’m not gonna die, Sara.” Gotta get out.

Gotta escape. If there was any other way, she’d do it. But there is no other way. No other way out of Cascadia.

Sara drops her hand and whispers. “God, no.” She shakes her head, screaming, “*No*.”

It’s just *this body* that needs to die. But there’s a new one—new body, new life. No other way.

Sara slams her fists into the glass. The pane makes a low, toneful sound. “No!”

A jolt runs through Coralie—what is going on with “Sara?”

Sara retreats from the window and then sprints. Cracks vein the glass where her shoulder impacts, a bloody smear within. “I won’t let you do it!” Sara steps back again, preparing for another run.

“Sara—quit it!”

Sara speeds head-first toward the crack.

Three

“Sara!”

Consciousness comes like a slap. Ceiling tiles, rails beside her, rails with buttons, the denseness and tightness of a hospital blanket tucked by a nurse. Shift a little and she can feel the catheter, and a strap tying the tube to her leg. Taped above her median cubital vein is a medium-gauged needle, and its infusion set leads to a bag of saline. On the wall past the foot of the bed, a large glass panel hangs, its only image the wallboard’s textured plastic.

The implant...

Are you sleeping?

It had been Sara. Sara insisting on calling for help. A rug in her face... She had fallen. The bathroom—she hadn’t cleaned it yet. Hopefully no one went in there because otherwise, there’s gonna be questions to answer. Gotta feel gently, softly touch her nose, her eyes, her cheeks... Her head pounds with the rhythm of her heart, but her nose seems okay.

The door opens. “Ah—you’re awake,” a woman in paisley scrubs says. “I’ll let Dr. Milstein know.”

In a couple minutes, Dr. Jonas Milstein enters. A few years have passed since she’s seen him, and those years have been cruel to his face. Would those same canyons have been sunk into her father’s cheeks, would the skin below her father’s eyes have had the same droop, would her father’s jowls have looked as flappy? A man reaches an age when all the lived years seem to pile up at once, an age when payment comes due for all

the abuses the mind has put the body through, all the overtime, the over-work, the late-night Scotch or few. Jonas has passed that age since she last saw him, but beyond his unfamiliar mask, Coralie can still see her father's best friend, a man who used to come over, have a few drinks, and entertain the children, only he couldn't fool one of them with his magic tricks—he couldn't fool Sara because she had eyes in the room's four corners.

“Hello, Coralie,” he says.

“Hey, Jonas.”

He walks to a rolling chair, guides it near, and sits. “You had me very worried.”

It's totally involuntary, and she's been afflicted with it as long as she can remember: it's a wince mixed with a smile, a smile with the corners of her mouth drawn down. It was probably cute as a child, but she's grown to hate it—such a stupid, juvenile look, a look she's incapable of stopping, that is until after it has appeared upon her face, as it has just now.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

“Prolly bout the same as I look.”

He nods. “Yes, Sara told me about your fall.”

“Oh?”

“She's concerned about you. Seems to think you're keeping a secret.”

Yeah, well Coralie is. “I haven't told her because I didn't want her to worry.”

He nods again. “I checked for your old teenage affliction...”

...cutting, high upon the thigh, close to the pelvis, where no one could see...

“...and I was glad to see no signs of that. So, what’s your secret? You can decide later whether or not to tell Sara, but your old doctor needs to know.”

No way. Too much risk. She won’t say it aloud.

Jonas seems to read her mind. He drops the bed’s rail and extends a hand below her shoulder. Shift a little, arch the spine, and allow him to get his arm under there. The mix of his and her lifesigns makes the bed go on full alarm.

He whispers in her ear: “God damn it, Coralie, you were *septic*. Tell me what’s going on!”

His ear is now hovering above Coralie’s lips, so say... something. “I developed a tremor. I was worried I couldn’t perform surgery. So, I filched some strylon fibers and...” His ear backs away, and now he stares—just stares.

A nurse peeks in, at the ready.

“It’s fine, Jess,” Jonas says, and she nods before leaving. He withdraws his arm from under Coralie and the bed stops screaming. Standing, he appears lost in thought, and his chair slowly rolls away behind him. When his eyebrows rise, his forehead fills with creases.

“Jonas?”

He rushes out. In less than a minute he’s back, holding a horseshoe, the one that’s been hung above his office door for as long as she can remember, hung U-side up to keep all the luck in. He holds it out. “Show me.”

Take it, but there’s the window straight ahead, so cock her head toward the curtain.

Jonas whizzes the curtain along its track, taking a position at her other side.

The shoe is heavy and cool to the touch like iron, in which case “it’ll fracture.”

“It’s powder-coated steel. The coat will fracture, but not the shoe.”

Well, if it does fracture, it’s best done so the shoe breaks through its center, so take an end in both hands and twist. It’s no harder than bending a stick of licorice, and now, edge-on, the shoe looks a little like a seagull. Hand it back, and she can feel her wincing smile again, only it seems appropriate this time, if only to keep her from seeming the least bit masculine.

He offers it back. “I’d really like to hang it up again.”

Ah, yeah, take it, but it’s gonna have a permanent crease, so bend it as straight as it can get and give up.

He takes the shoe back and hangs it from his pocket. “Sara really doesn’t know?”

A little head shake will do. “Nuh-uh.”

He walks over to a small wardrobe, takes out a bag, and rifles through it. He finds Coralie’s phone and sets it on the charging shelf by the bed. “She asked me to have you call when we’re done.”

“I will.”

He rolls the chair back over and sits again. It looks as though he might move to get the bed’s alarm to go off again, but he decides to whisper softly instead. “You know that’s overkill for a tremor.”

Nod, yes, that’s true.

“Any other supplementations?”

Just how many were there? “Most of them?”

“*Most...* Listen: no more procedures alone, Dr. Gunn. In the future, you will call me to assist. Understood?”

Nod again, sure, sure, but “there won’t be any more, Dr. Milstein. No more procedures.”

He pats her on the shoulder, stands, and then raises the bed’s rail. As he slides the curtain open, he speaks at full volume. “Very well. Now—I’ve posted an order for two weeks’ rest and forwarded it to both your work and the clinic. This is an order I expect you to obey. The dispensary downstairs has already filled your medications, and Jess will be in to take out your catheter.”

Ugh. “I can do it.”

“Sure. Give me a call before returning to work.”

“Thanks, Jonas. I will.”

“And call Sara?”

Uh-huh, need to call Sara, so grab the phone. “Yep.”

“Take care.” Jonas lifts the horseshoe from his pocket and rubs the crease with his thumb. He opens the door and it closes softly behind him.

Sara’s just two touches away.

“*Coralie?*”

“Hey.”

“*Can I hop on?*”

Of course, “sure.”

The transfer is nearly instantaneous. “Look! I’m a bird!”

It's alright to humor her—turn the phone edgewise and fly the phone above the bed, back and forth, up and down, and Sara squawks, poorly imitating a seagull, just as she always does, and now she just laughs and laughs. Time now to flap her down for a landing. “I’m being discharged.”

“So you’re okay? Are they sure? Wow—did you break your nose?”

“Nah—it’s a little sore, but not broken.”

“Ooohhhhh. That’s good!”

“Yeah.”

“So, back to work tomorrow?”

Ha, nope! “Two weeks off—doctor’s orders.”

“Cool, we can chill at home, then.”

Yeah, for what might be the last time. Out above the phone, beyond the bed and the glass and toward the white wall is where the smudge is, so focus past it some:

Mapping...
16.31%

She needs to enjoy this time with Sara, the girl who has a bit of a crush on Alejandro Valdez, the star of that gangster-turned-cop show. “We can watch *Maldonado and Jones* when we get home. Whatcha think?”

“Ah, yeah... We haven’t seen that in a while.”

A knock comes to the door, and Jess walks in with a tray.

From the feel of it—“Foley, I’m sure.”

Jess confirms that the catheter is.

“I’ll get it.”

Jess sets the tray on a narrow rolling table and adjusts the legs so the table's right above Coralie's knees. She then takes the waste bin, places it by the bed, and lowers the rail. "Press the call button when you're done and we'll wrap things up."

"Thanks, Jess."

* * *

Took a long while to clean the bathroom, but Coralie watched *Maldonado and Jones* with Sara before they went to bed. And now, as usual, they chat in blue darkness.

"Ignacio!"

She—the informant Ximena Rocha—had screamed that when Ignacio Moldanado embraced her and, as they kissed, Sara moaned from what, jealousy? No—disappointment, maybe. Despair, more like it. It was a moan like, *If only that were me*. And now Sara is trying to impersonate the actress.

"More like this, maybe?" Sara asks. "Eg-NAH-sioooo..."

No—that's not right, "try saying *oh!*, quick as a squeak."

"Okay." Sara clears her throat. "Eg-NAH-sio!"

Yep, "that's pretty close."

"She's not right for him."

"The character or the actor?"

A pause. Then, "I don't know—both?"

The tabloid shows couldn't get enough of Alejandro Valdez. In-season, Alejandro posed on the red carpet, and Alejandro signed autographs, and Alejandro entered Higgins, and each time, with a beautiful, young woman on his arm. Off-season,

Alejandro could be seen through the long lens, shirtless aboard his yacht anchored off Government Island in the Columbia River. Alejandro cavorting with hoards of women, most of them topless, and even his crew wore nothing but navy-colored officer's caps. Alejandro and any and all the women he could ever want, as easy as a particular look and, just like that, his will was bent to. If Sara was physical, actually there off-season upon his yacht, would she bend too? Would she be the kind to put up with all the competition just for a moment of attention? No, what Sara's in love with is Ignacio the character, not Alejandro the actor. She's in love with Ignacio Moldonado's youthful look, with his peculiar, lower-level, Portlandian accent, and with his story of abandoning a life of crime for one of seeking justice, justice for his beloved fiancé, Michaela, murdered by the Jeffersonian crime lord, a man known only by the name Raul.

"I'm being stupid, aren't I?"

Sara can see, no matter if light or heat, so go ahead and smile. "Only if all women are stupid," and isn't that true, all the women on the boat are stupid, and why? Even in an all-out orgy, the chances of being with him would max out at fifty percent. How could anyone settle for that? For sharing? "Yeah, I'm stupid, too."

Sara exhales and takes in a breath. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

And is that how it is with all men? That when there's a shortage due to war and you, lucky enough to have the right looks to be a model or an actor, behave as though it's your God-given right, your solemn duty, to spread yourself around, to dip your pen in every well, to sample, spit, and move on to the next one? That's what Michael does. Different woman every night. Never has settled on one in the long term, even after a computer put his name on the birth certificate of the baby of some woman, she being the

wife of another man. Sara told Coralie that Michael hadn't even remembered meeting the woman, not to mention sleeping with her, but if the DNA said he had, then he must have. Upon hearing this, Coralie felt for the first time that Michael had received some dose—however small—of his comeuppance in life, and she hoped it wouldn't be the last.

“Coralie?”

“Yeah.”

“Munna hang in Yagami tonight.”

The Yagami Campus, Keio's big tech center. “Another satellite launch?”

“No, all the maples have budded. I wanna see their colors. I'll be back in the morning.”

Try and stifle a yawn. “Okay.” Yeah, okay, everything seems normal again. It's as though Coralie never shoved a computer up her nose, an implant mapping the connections between her neurons. It's as though the blue dark didn't make the orange such an unavoidable spot in her vision, impossible to look away from because it shines in her mind, so why had it stuck to Sara's blouse in that dream, the dream last night when Sara went nuts, a girl who's never done so in her life, kinda pathetic never getting angry but also endearing, yeah, very endearing, and what a lovely creature up here out here in the orange dark where the freesia blooms sweetly scented...

Four

In the kitchen, the three knurled knobs are red, blue, and brown: hot, cold, and coffee. Turn the brown one and nothing flows into Coralie's mug. "For crying out loud."

Yeah, that's what happens when the daily tax doesn't get paid: Disconnection.

"What's up?" Sara asks from the living room.

"The coffee's off."

"Oh," Sara says, "I'm so sorry, Coralie. I should've paid the tax while you were gone, but I totally for—"

"It's okay."

"I'm sorry," Sara says again. Then: "Window: TV."

Beyond the window, upon a mahogany stage, within spotlight beams from above, stands Brent—shirtless, flawless, soulless Brent—ready to bamboozle, finagle, upsell, downsell, insell and outsell, ready to pitch and ditch, ready to vow, ready to wow, perfect as only a theoretical model could be; this is the man who has a chemical for every spill, a product for every whim, and his catalogue has more items than all the people who have ever lived on Planet Earth. Unlike Sara, he's a program running on a computer, and his program has benefitted from hundreds of years of consumer research, making him very hard to say *no* to.

Brent looks past Doggie, beyond the fleather couch, and above the barstools of the sitting counter, at Coralie. "Morning, sunshine!"

"Shut up," Sara says.

Brent appears as though his tolerance teeters at the edge of petulance. Brent has always hated Sara, and if Coralie had to guess why, her guess would be that most of his programming relies on reading facial gesture and body posture, neither of which Sara could grace him with. Used to be when Coralie wasn't home, Brent wouldn't even respond to Sara, and Coralie had needed to have several strongly worded conversations with him about that.

“Show me the daily tax bill,” Sara says.

A chart snaps to the glass' surface. Each day shows the standard carbon charge of fifty dougs minus her rebates: six dougs for Doggie, and a half-doug per kilogram for her houseplants. The 188 dougs charged for the last seven days wasn't bad, but the late fee had grown exponentially, at ten percent per day. Currently, Coralie owed 366 dougs. “Yikes,” she says.

“Take it from my account,” Sara tells Brent.

But it wasn't Sara's fault, it was Coralie's, so how about “half and half.”

Brent nods at Coralie. “Anchorage would like me to ask if you'd round up to help fund the Trans-Aleutian Light Rail's construction.”

“No,” Sara says.

Coralie could spare a few cones. “Round to the doug?”

“It's an excellent cause...” Brent says.

“So, it's to ten dougs.”

“Round up to the hundreds and get a free bracelet! You can show everyone you care about Anchorage's dominance in world trade.”

“Hmmm, thirty-four dougs for a plastic loop...”

Brent smiles sexily.

Nope. “You can round to the doug.”

Brent deflates some. “But the total was already rounded to the doug.”

Yeah, of course it was, so nod. “Then ask Anchorage if *it* would like to donate the rounded amount.”

“Window.” Sara says, “Clear.”

Brent and his stage dissolve away. Beyond the window, commuters zip by along Gander Street. Try the coffee again—because sometimes it takes a few minutes—and yep, still off. “Coffee, coffee, coffee...” In the kitchen faucet’s chrome, Coralie’s raccoon eyes stare back at her and “God, I look awful.”

“It’ll fade in a couple weeks, yeah?”

“If my eyes get any blacker, they’ll collapse due to the intense gravity.”

Sara dismisses the lame joke with a *yuk-yuk* chuckle and a “Whatever.” Then suddenly, her voice is close. “About Doggie...”

Out in the living room, Doggie rests in front of the couch. His leaves are wrinkly, his twigs saggy, and Coralie would do anything to pep him up. For the last couple years, at the tail-end of winter, he would bud all over, and within days leaf out everywhere. But then he’d be wilted come spring, and his leaves were going to fall well before summer, just like they’d done last year. Growing up, he’d never been like that; only in the last couple years has he been sick, and she’d not watered him any differently. She’d bought him food—the expensive stuff—and with that, he’d only shown moderate improvement. Perhaps he’s getting old, but twenty-three years seems young for a Dogwood. It’s just mystifying.

“I was out visiting you,” Sara whispered. “At the hospital yesterday? When I came back, the window was black.”

“Black?”

“Yeah, like blacked-out.”

“Weird.”

“And just like that,” a snapping sound, “it turned clear.”

There can be only one reason Sara is whispering. “Brent?”

“Yeah, Brent.”

Ehhhh, “that’s a reach, Sara. I prolly changed a setting in the window without realizing it.” Try the coffee and there it flows! “Oh, thank you! Coffee, coffee, coffee!” Keep filling to the right spot.

“Well, munna keep an eye on him,” Sara whispers.

At the cream-and-sugar dispenser on the fridge door, top it up until the color is just right. “Okay. Let me know.”

* * *

A couple cups later, Coralie has settled in for her sick day on the sticky fleather couch, and aren’t days off the coolest thing in the world? Life should come with many more of them. Wonder why she can’t enjoy her work more. Wonder why there’s a never-ending line of patients. Wonder why they’re all sent away to die. Away from family. Away from country. Battered, hopeless, alone. It’s okay to be here now, on this horrible fleather couch, covered in a blanket, sipping sweet, milky-brown java, trying to get Brent through his pitches and onto a TV program.

“No, Brent—I’m not interested.”

“But with a subscription to Green-Grown by Foster Farms, you save fifty percent! Just imagine four pounds of lean, delicious chicken, each and every week, for absolutely free!”

“Just listen to yourself. Four pounds for free, sure, but with the purchase of four pounds! I can’t eat eight pounds of meat in a week—that’s just unhealthy. If Foster Farms raised fish, I might consider it... But no! Eight pounds of meat? You’re nuts.”

Brent’s pecs twitch. He’d be pulling at his collar if he had a shirt on. “I could knock it down to seven, and I’d be taking a big loss, but I could do that for you...”

A loss—whatever. “No, Brent. Move on or let me watch some TV.”

Brent looks pouty. Beyond the glass, he paces back and forth upon his wood stage. Then he appears to have an idea: “It’s been a while since you’ve had a gentleman over.”

Oh, this better be good.

“And I know how often come home from the club alone.”

Brent just better watch himself.

“Nothing—I tell ya, *nothing*—attracts men more than appealing to their senses.”

But Coralie has had enough of smelly perfumes, of glossy lipsticks, of bustiers and booty shorts. “Ugh, give it a rest.”

For an instant, Brent holds both his index fingers up. “Serious, now.” Now, he shows her his palms. “Nothing will attract the man you need—no!—the man you *deserve* like...” He brings his hands together and apart again, and in them hangs “...a string of *black pearls* from Kay’s Jewelers.”

If only! “Brent! Most mornings, I stress over whether or not I can pay the daily tax. What makes you think I can afford *that*?”

He keeps the necklace moving in slight angles so its gleam is constantly changing. “You do have *wonderful* credit.” It is Coralie now, Coralie beyond the window, dressed in a black evening gown, and Brent walks behind her, clasps the necklace around her neck, and, now holding her hips from behind, he rests his chin on her shoulder. “You know, it’s *How to Make the Kiss Last Forever*. On a five-year term, it wouldn’t cost so much.”

True... No! Not true! Over five years, she would pay twice as much for it. “Brent, I just can’t. I can’t. I can’t afford it.”

Coralie’s image with the necklace dissolves away. Brent seems lost in thought again.

Sara speaks from beside her. “Good for you.”

Yes, but the damn thing is: she *should* be able to afford a small treat like that every once in a while. She’s a surgeon, after all, and a surgeon should make her weight in gold every year. But not here, not in this place, not in Anchorage and not in Cascadia.

“If it’s money you’re worried about, there’s someone you should see.”

Yeah?

“Her name’s Svetlana, and she’s Anchorage’s top wage earner for the last three years. Last year, she made the top ten in all Cascadia, and she earns her money on her spare time. Here:” On the screen, Brent dissolves away and in his place, a woman sits beside a bedroom desk in a four-legged, wood chair. She’s dressed simply, in a form-fitting tee tucked into baggy capris and, around her neck, a simple gold chain holds a

dangling cross. As if being interviewed by someone near Coralie's coat closet, she looks off to the side.

Svetlana speaks. "I'm proud to say, when someone asks me what, what do you do? I say, Imma nurse." She smiles a hopeful smile. "Or a maid. Or a tennis star. I can be anything I wanna be. I look forward to work every day, cause every day's a new day. You learn a lot every day. The sex that we do..."

Huh?

"...is never repetitive. The pay is wonderful; the benefits are amazing. It's a very awarding job."

As the window dissolves to a graphic, a voice-over begins: "Take Svetlana's word for it and begin life anew! Orion College's Sex Industry program takes only seven weeks. With industry-leading instructors and—"

"Brent!" Coralie demands. The commercial's graphic slides away and Brent is there. "I am *not* interested in porn college!"

Sara is in hysterics.

Brent says, "Just consider—"

Sure, consider—Coralie Gunn, a pornocalyptic catastrophe. "Just no! Let me watch *Deluge of Dougs*."

Brent looks defeated. "Okay."

As the show begins, Sara's still laughing.

* * *

Evening: A blonde in a well-tailored suit is beyond the window, standing in front of another window that says:

CBC Nightly News

with

Kristjana Haddiesdotter

She speaks: “On the broadcast tonight, the assault of Canton—twenty-two hundred Cascadians lost over the three-month offensive.” Behind her, night-vision footage reveals bullets flying. “Is Canton really worth the cost? Our foreign correspondent, Gloria Welles, reports from Siam.”

Now the footage changes to a waving, North American Coalition flag. “Then, strong words from the Coalition Chairman, Daniel Morris, in response to China’s threat to pose a nuclear defense—saying, quote: If they do, the Coalition will lay waste to everything east of India.”

The footage changes for another preview, but isn’t that enough?

“Brent.”

The news dissolves away and Brent appears upon his stage. “Not in the mood for news?”

“Not today. How bout something less depressing.”

“*Maldonado?*” Sara asks.

Not exactly what Coralie has in mind, and besides, “we watched that yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Sara admits. “Brent—which was the last episode of *Marry That Soldier!* we watched?”

Brent keeps his eyes on Coralie. “It was three-oh-five.”

“We’re three episodes behind,” Sara suggests.

Well, it’s funny sometimes, and it always ends on a positive note, so shrug.

“Okay.”

* * *

“You can throw harder than that!” Airman Randall told the contestant, a tiny woman named Chantell. And now, although she wears earplugs, she still appears shell shocked. Randall puts another grenade in Chantell’s hand and pulls the pin.

As though waving away a fly, Chantell throws the grenade. It barely gets over the thick wall protecting them from the shrapnel, so Randall throws her to the ground and lies atop her.

The grenade blows, and *pffff*, even a gun produces a louder explosion, so the producers must be turning the sound down.

“Boy,” Sara said, “that woman’s as girly as they come. No way he’s gonna pick her.”

Chantell’s just scared, that’s all. “He’s lucky she didn’t drop it.” Is the woman’s fear just a ploy to attract his embrace? No, upon her feet now, it’s obvious she’s tense and sweating and rolling her tongue around in her mouth, displaying all the signs of fear but incontinence.

The show’s host, the debonair Guillermo Quinn, approaches. “Chantell—are you ready for the results of your two grenade tosses?”

Airman Randall takes a place beside her, looking chagrined. Chantell reaches for his hand, and he takes hers reluctantly. “Uh-huh,” she says.

“The first throw,” Guillermo says, “was four-point-two meters.”

Chantell glances at Randall, who continues staring forward.

“The second throw detonated at the wall’s base, so we’re all very lucky it’s blast-proof!”

The audience, assembled upon bleachers on the show’s island, mutter their approval. Airman Randall tries to release Chantell’s hand, but she continues clutching.

“Airman Randall,” Guillermo says, “you have a decision to make. Will you take Chantell to be your lawfully wedded wife, or will you return for another week to find the love you deserve?”

“She’s done,” Sara says.

If Coralie had been the contestant, she’d have excelled at this contest. Itta gone from her hand, over the wall, well beyond the hundred of meters of sand, and out to the ocean—in other words, itta raised suspicions, for sure. Then again, Airman Randall isn’t exactly a prime catch. His nostrils look like they’ve been stretched too many times by his finger, and that lump on his forehead—that’s just not natural. What would her ideal boyfriend look like? Guillermo? Brent? (No, not Brent.) Which one of the thousands of patients she’s worked on? Some have been cute. But after a while, she forgets their faces. The soldiers—all of them—start to look alike. Same muscles, same tendons, same joints, all intimately enhanced by Coralie’s skilled weaving and threading and reinforcing. But she’s the only one aware of that intimacy—through all her work, the soldiers sleep. She’s never really known a one of them, has she?

“Yeah,” Airman Randall says, “a petite woman is fine. Y’know, I actually *like* that. But I need someone strong at home, someone for support, so, I’m sorry, but I haveta say *no*.”

Chantell runs away sobbing. The audience goes, *Aawwwwwwww*.

“I knew it, I *knew* it!” Sara says. “Told ya!”

* * *

It’s automatic because Coralie’s such a warm sleeper: turn the temperature down to twenty-three, wash the face, shower the body, drop on the threadbare tee, then brush brush brush the teeth. In the end, a sinking chill haunts the air, and the yawn comes predictably, so pull down the sheets, kick in her feet, and turn out the light. In the dark, everything around glows with blue gilding, highlights from the nightlight, the nightlight shining nightly from time unmemorable. And of memory, remember Sara’s trip a few nights ago, and wouldn’t it be nice to leave here now and again? Wonder what it was like, and ask, “So, how was Yagami?”

“There were Japanese people everywhere.”

Ha, ha. “The trees?”

“This time of year, the leaves look thin and frail. I guess I prefer autumn.”

Interesting. So, “death is more beautiful than birth?”

“No.”

Oh, yeah, Mom and Dad. Better change the subject. “See any hot guys?”

“Sure,” Sara says, “quite a few. Funny how many there are. Here, you can look out the window for an hour and never see one cruise by.”

Yeah, no doubt, and “isn’t *that* the truth.”

“I wish you could go to Keio with me some day.”

Impossible. *Job critical to the security of the Cascadian People* and all that. But Coralie found a solution, didn’t she? “Me too.” Another yawn surges through her. Mom and Dad, forever captured in a moment some fifteen years ago, embrace one another within a frame upon the nightstand. Coralie has gotten so used to seeing them in this indigo light that she often dreams of them, of their ghosts glowing with an aura in the color, and she realizes her eyes have closed and that’s okay just now, and is she sleeping? That’s what Sara had asked. *Dormez vous?* Morning bells are ringing, ding, dang, dong...

And floating out in the dark, the progress meter increases by a hundredth of a percent, up to a whole number, and an even divisor:

Mapping...
25.00%

* * *

Tuesday evening and Lacey dresses in the videobox. “I need more lift, dontcha think?” She unclasps her bra and throws it on the bed.

“I hope your window’s not clear this time,” Sara says.

Coralie feels glad her bedroom has no window.

“It’s not,” Lacey says, “Paolo’s here.” Paolo is Lacey’s pitchman. He looks okay, but he’s not Coralie’s type.

Imagine having perfect boobs like Lacey. In five years, if Lacey has a few strings of tautex inserted, they can stay like that till she’s eighty.

Lacey gets another bra hooked on and adjusts the straps. “How my babies look?”

Glorious. “So jealous.”

“Very nice,” Sara says.

“Window: Mirror,” Lacey says. She shakes her shoulders a few times. “*Fairly* nice is my verdict.”

“Then it’s fairly very nice,” Sara says. “Or, is it very fairly? Fairly very?”

Cock Coralie’s head just as Lacey does.

“Either way,” Lacey says, “I know what you mean, sweetheart.” She puts her arms through a crop top and stretches it in place. “Time to go. I know you miss the tacos, Coralie.”

Admit it, as well as the music. “I do.”

“Maybe next week?” Sara asks.

Lacey winks. “That’d make me glad all over. Window: Curtains.” Her videobox disappears.

“Wanna watch *Maldonado*?” Sara asks.

Yeah, Coralie’s in the mood. “Sure.”

* * *

The air chills Coralie right through her sheet, so pull her comforter up to her chin. The ceiling is splashed in orange.

“I can’t wait to show you Yorojima.

“I went there once when we were twenty.

“A stone altar stands mid-island.

“A recess is carved in it made for one cube.
“*Jouki* sensors rest on tall poles.
“Arranged like a triangular tiling.
“Covering the whole island.
“A passing *juumin*, seeing color in the cube, bows.
“She whispers a prayer.
“Rises.
“And walks on again.
“I can go everywhere on Yorojima.
“I can see, smell, feel the chill of the breeze.
“I came upon a snake in the bush.
“It coiled and hissed.
“It could see me!
“It struck me in the leg.
“I felt...”
A sting? A touch? An itch?
“Plucked, like a guitar string.
“It was momentacious...”

* * *

Another Wednesday, which means morning sorting: dishes in the white bin, into the dumb waiter, send; pull the waxed paper bag from the fridge, find the two too-soft peaches, add to the bag, place bag into khaki bin, put into dumb waiter, send...

Brent stands watching Coralie, his hands clasped together.

Sigh. “I can do two things at once, Brent. Go on.” The red tub is full—two douds an ounce for trash. It had all been rinsed, all of it but the bloody Kleenex—could she have put those in with the compost? Who knows. It can wait another week.

Brent stands motionless and soundless.

Snap a finger at him. “Hey!”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to order groceries.” The dumb waiter rings, so throw a bag of laundry inside, the one labeled COLORS.

“If you’d stop for a minute, we could save some money together. For instance, you just threw away two peaches. If you had bought Columbia River Farms’ delectable canned peaches, with no added sugar, you could’ve saved putting them in the compost. Why? Because they last three years, that’s why. When you buy the fresh fruit, it goes in the compost. The compost costs you a half-doug an ounce.”

Another ding, so load DRY CLEAN ONLY.

“So, how ‘bout we order a few cans?” Brent asks.

Whites—whites are still in the bedroom so she can add the bed sheets, so to the bedroom, pull the sheets off and stuff them in the sack labeled WHITES. Wonder where Sara went. Swing the sack over her shoulder and trudge back to the kitchen.

“So, how ‘bout those peaches?” Brent asks.

“Huh?”

“The Columbia River Farms Peaches? Three cans or four?”

“Whoever said anything about peaches?”

Brent folds his arms across his chest. “See? This is what I get when you’re busy with something else.”

“Why don’t you put on my show, and when I’m done, we’ll order some groceries together?”

“Why don’t you order some groceries, and when we’re done, I’ll put on your show?”

Why does she endure this? Just to watch a couple shows? Well, maybe because it’s more than just a couple shows. On her day off, there’s got to be seven or eight she can’t live without, not to mention the news. How does anyone live without the news? Live without... That’s kinda funny. She has found out how to live past death, but even so, she’ll need to go at least six months without her shows because, once transmitted to Tokyo, she’ll be lucky just to remember her name. Suppose because of that, she’ll live fine without them. She and Sara can make a fine time of catching up. They’ll enjoy some *Maldonado* and *Soldier!* together later on, when they’re together again on the other side of the Pacific.

The bell dings, so throw WHITES inside, close the door, and send it to the warehouse floors. Now, onto the couch to satisfy Brent. “Okay. I’m here. I’m listening. Get it over with. Do your commercials.”

Brent puts his hands on his hips and his abs harden. “*Commercials?* I’m not trying to sell you anything, Coralie. I’ve been saving you and your family money for nearly twenty-five years.”

Yeah, yeah.

“Your father trusted me—so should you.”

Hard to trust a man who'll pitch all day in a thong, but hey. Wonder what Dad woulda thought of her asking Brent to do that. Wonder what Mom woulda thought of Brent saying, "You got it!"

Coralie's phone rings, but softly—it's in her purse on Doggie. "Brent—who's calling?"

Brent grimaces. "It's Fabiola."

Take a deep breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. It's inevitable—she may as well get it over with. "Put her on."

A videobox appears in the window's corner. Within it, Fabiola wears her default expression: dumb and angry. "You haven't been to work in a week."

Yeah, so nod.

"All the ladies work overtime to make up for you being absent. Tell me how that's fair."

The ladies: the *surgeons*, Fabiola means, and Coralie has never decided whether or not *lady* is a derogatory term—after all, it's coming from the mouth of a fellow female. "I've worked my share of overtime."

Fabiola shuffles through some papers on her desk. "But you've taken more than your share of days off." She looks down. "Thirty-seven—not including weekends—and it is not even April." Shaking her head, she looks up again. "Compare that to Liesl and Bridgit and Aly."

Yeah, the other surgeons, and "I don't need the comparison," and isn't that true? She's nothing like the others, both in looks and in competence. And shouldn't Fabiola be

referring to them properly? They're Drs. Odin, Matthews, and Zimmerman, thank you very much.

"You have taken enough time off."

No, "I have a doctor's note. It's good for another eleven days. After that, I'll return to work."

"You are needed here *now*," Fabiola says, just below the threshold of screaming. "We've received another battalion of soldiers."

Not Coralie's problem. Yeah, "not my problem."

Fabiola looks no different—still dumb and angry—but she remains silent for a few seconds. Then she reaches out, a finger hovering over her side of the glass. "Okay. If that's how you want to play it." When she touches the glass, the videobox in the window disappears.

Brent is still looking off to the side, as if he'd ignored the conversation.

Coralie clears her throat.

Brent faces her. "I like having you home," he says. "Gives us more time to interact!"

By which he means *shopping*, of course. God, another rotation of soldiers. They just keep coming. An endless supply of soldiers forever deploying to China. It's the constancy of it, like a doctor in a maternity ward, the infants never stop birthing, day in and day out more, but instead of welcoming new life into the world, Coralie is ushering in death, death with every surgery, and it's endless, endless dying, dying without purpose or reason.

“Safeway just announced a special,” Brent says, “and it’s one of your favorites. Fresh, seedless grapes: fifty cones a kilo.”

That *is* a good price. “Add two to the list.”

* * *

Sara came back after watching the sunrise in Hokkaido. For Coralie, it’s been a long, restful day on the fleather couch, and her legs rest under her, her skin stuck to it. And why doesn’t she ever put a blanket on the damn thing? Roll to kick her legs out and there’s a sound, reminiscent of flatulence, from her skidding skin. Lacey and Sara seem not to notice.

On *Only True Love*, three potential lovers sit beside one another on a bench, wires from biological sensors draped all over them. Of course, medical sensors had gone wireless well before Coralie was born, but all that hardware makes for good TV. The contestant, a man named Kinny, is going to kiss each one, and the one with the least significant biological reaction—

“It’s gonna be Marla,” Lacey says from a videobox in the window’s corner. “It’s those blank eyes. There’s nothing firing behind them.”

From the other side of the couch, Sara says, “Nope. That blank look comes from social isolation. When he kisses her, her reaction will peak so high she may just pass out.”

Kinny moves in on the first one, a chesty woman named Bordeaux. She smiles, takes his head in her hands, and, as they kiss, she draws her manicured nails up his neck

and into his hair. He shivers from the sensation, but on this episode, he's not the one wired up for a response.

All done and Kinny nods. "Very nice," he says.

Bordeaux's numbers remain tame.

"Loser," Sara says.

Lacey nods. "Think I gotta agree."

Marla is next. She's a petite one with no real curves. Her biggest assets are her ginger-ale eyes, but right now, they're looking down. Her heart rate is 165 beats per minute, respiration shallow, blood pressure at the borderline of inducing stroke.

"Jesus," Sara says.

"That's not love," Lacey says, "it's a panic attack."

Fight, freeze, or flight? Looks like freeze, and now Kinny puts a hand behind Marla's neck. He takes her chin in his free hand, tilts her head back, and—

"Told ya!" Sara says. "There she goes!"

Kinny catches Marla just before she flops onto Bordeaux's lap. "You okay?" he asks.

Marla looks him in the eyes. "You're so beautiful," she whispers.

With her held in his arms, he kisses her.

"Awwwwww," Lacey and Sara say in unison.

Kinny sets Marla back up and she's shaky, but able to maintain her balance. He doesn't comment on the kiss, but he appears to be blushing.

The third one, Lucinda, sits ready, duck-lipped. When Kinny steps near, she leaps at him, thrusts her tongue in his mouth, and gropes his ass with squeezing fingers.

“Well,” Lacey says, “that’ll raise your heart rate.”

Kinny must push Lucinda off to end it.

“What a tramp,” Sara says.

“Yuh-huh,” Lacey says, “too desperate.”

And Coralie knows what that desperation feels like. Seems like only yesterday, but it’s really been ten years. Or, no, eleven now. Don’t think about it. Just yawn because it’s nearly time for bed.

“Still,” Lacey says, “it’s Bordeaux that’s gonna go.”

And in a few minutes, it is.

* * *

The blankness, the timelessness, the disorientation of early to late sleep, the selfless chain of instantless moments, the undulating dark, and across the silky, senseless abyss comes a voice: “Coralie!”

It sounds as though her mother is calling. “Coralie!”

Never mind the voice. This is memory, from the apparitious past.

Yet not her mother, but her sister: “Coralie! Wake up!” Yeah, Sara’s voice.

“Damn it, Coralie!”

Pressure. Shoulder, hip, legs. Gravity’s pressure.

“Coralie, come on!”

The smell of cherry blossoms, her shampoo. Something tickles her nose as she breathes.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up!”

She's here now, so open her eyes. Her hair obscures her vision, so wave it aside.

“What!”

Sara's voice is near, whispering. “There's four men outside. The big one's got a battering ram.”

In the blue-colored dark, sit up now. “Chinese?”

“No.”

Toss the blanket and sheet aside. Step barefoot onto the bedroom carpet, and just what time is it? Out into the hall, snap up the light switch and, ugh, how many times has she thought of putting a dimmer on this switch, but that's pointless, she'd never get around to having it installed. Maybe she should open the door before they— Bad idea. They haven't knocked. They'd probably shoot her for that. Just sit on the couch.

“Coralie? What're you doing?”

Nothing less intimidating than a tiny woman sitting in the dark upon her couch.

Five

She's awake now, fully awake, and besides the strangeness of the door opening in all the places meant to keep it fixed to its frame, and besides the sound of Sara shrieking away down the hall, and besides the four G-types now entering her living room (which had happened once before, but at least this time, thank God, she isn't naked), this could be just like any other moment in Coralie's life, like shopping or watching TV or taking the slow beltway to work. It's the knowledge of her supplementations, of course—the knowledge that she could break any man's spine with no more than a flick of her finger—that keeps her so calm. As the G-men shout and point their guns, just sit, cross her legs, cross her arms, even. And a look of contempt wouldn't be entirely out of place, would it? Everything's fine, just fine...

They all shout the same thing: "Hands! Hands! Show me your hands!" This was something the Chinese hadn't bothered with, which, in part, was what made the Chinese so damned terrifying. But anyway, why should she bother to show her hands? It's not like she can hide a shotgun within her bedclothes, which happen to be undies and a Seawolves jersey, a jersey that she's glad is long enough to do double-duty as a dress. And now one places his gun against her skull. *Whatever.* And now two others uncross her arms and lift her into the air by her biceps. As her legs drop from gravity, both of her shins smack Doggie's edge, and that, oh... that brings the tears, the kind that come with no crying required, the kind that come after what feels like an electrical jolt up the spine. The gun's no longer against her skull. Blink the blur away and look and, yes, now that the two have set her down on her knees, the other two have holstered their guns. Each

man near. If she moves fast, they could all be dead before any could draw on her. In this dim, reflected light, the suits give them away—they're certainly government. And if one managed an escape, her secret would be out. Exactly what would they do with a woman strung tighter than a bridge truss? Her, they would put in lockdown—forty years to life in Prineville, and that's the last thing she needs. What she needs instead is to let them have their way with her—whatever that way may be. So the implant can finish—just sit still and let them do what they gotta do.

The big guy looms before her, the one silhouetted by the hall light, and when he strikes, it's as though someone has rung a tiny bell that's ear-splittingly shrill. Consciousness remains though, and Sara screams "No!" from somewhere else in the condo, maybe Michael's old room, but Coralie has lost her vision, and she can't seem to find where in her brain the sense went to.

A voice, male, deep and scratchy, commands: "Find her."

Okay, they seek Sara now, and Coralie's strength is returning, and the ring ebbing, so balance on her knees, try and keep the two thugs from having to hold all her weight. Try and open her eyes. When she does, the living room light snaps on and, for a moment, it's like looking up in the sunshine blocks at noon, but squint a little and her eyes adjust. Look toward all the noise and Big Guy, the one who'd struck her, is wiping books from their shelves onto the floor. Of course, Sara's cube is where it's always been...

The fourth man, the one who seems to be in charge, says, "It's there," pointing to Sara's cubby by the front window.

Had Coralie just given Sara away? Had Coralie really been stupid enough to look? Big Guy trots there. No time to fight, only time for Sara to go, so scream:

“Sara—*Keio ni ike!*”

This time, the man in charge strikes her, and instead of a ring, a snap, and the tears flood again. The pain’s intensity forces her hands to her face, making the goons holding her grunt. “Whoa, she’s strong!” one says, so, relax, relax her arms despite the pain, and let the blood stream over her lips, a feeling all too familiar, just like the other day in the bathroom, when the implant wouldn’t unspool properly.

“Got it,” comes the voice from over there. Try and see and Big Guy’s got Sara’s cube. He tosses it in front of the window, and the cube rolls bumpily the way dice do. He steps down upon it and, *no!*—a crack. Then he pulls his gun, goes to his knees, and hammers the cube. *Sara!*... Crystal chips fly and, in a final whack, the cube is halved. Now the big man looks toward Doggie, where Coralie’s phone is. A single stroke with the gun’s butt webs the screen. Then out comes the battery and, with his bare hands, the man folds the phone in half.

Coralie’s face is taken by the jaw—her head, turned. “Now,” the man in charge says, “let’s talk about work.”

Should she spit in his face, or... With the light on, this one is—well, not cute—he’s too old for that—maybe rugged? Attractive, certainly. She’s never gone for older men, but in other circumstances, perhaps after a closing-time drink, this one could possibly change her mind...

“I’m Agent Goodman.”

Goodman—*ha!* Never mind that, back to the other subject. His moustache would have to go...

“As a servant of the people—the great, proud people of Cascadia—I have been given certain liberties.”

Why wear a moustache like that, anyway? All short and thin against the lip, the only purpose it could possibly serve is to irritate things...

“One of these liberties is open access to your data, to see how you spend your days.”

...yeah, it'd prolly be like kissing a Brillo pad...

“You've been spending your days watching television. *Marry that Soldier!* comes to mind. And *Only True Love.*”

...the pores, the pores on his nose, is that what hers will look like in ten, fifteen years?

“The videochatting.”

And so the government's been watching her barely-dressed body as she tries to soothe its suffering with entertainment, a chatty friend, and usually a bowl of chocolate ice cream? “I really am sick.” It comes out, *I really eb sick.*

As Big Guy holsters his gun, its gyroscope spins down.

“Cascadia has an awful lot invested in you,” Goodman says. “In your education, your medical care, your retirement, your transportation to and from work—”

“I pay the daily tax.”

Goodman glances dubiously at the agent holding her left arm, and then looks back. “The daily tax is for your share of the natural resources. The water you consume,

the trash you throw away, the carbon dioxide that your breathing contributes to global warming. You know that.”

She had meant to say property tax, but there’s no point. “I pay enough.”

“Your job is critical to the Cascadian Nation’s welfare and defense. We can’t afford your malingering.”

Gotta scratch. Coralie’s lip itches and her nose throbs. “Look it up, I have a doctor’s no—”

Goodman gets close enough that his moustache could scratch her itch. “*Yes, a doctor’s note is easy enough for a surgeon to get.*”

Whoa, a little bipolar this one—with that tirade, his face actually flushed. Just look down, try and keep him calm and, down there, her blood soaks the rug. What a mess. Sara... Hope she got out.

Goodman takes a deep breath.

Sara... There’d be little point with Sara dead. *Relax.* She got out. Certainly.

“Do you know what ‘critical to the government’ means?”

Duuuurrrr. “I don’t really care.”

“Yes,” Goodman says, “I can tell. Can I let you in on a little secret?”

Don’t play his game, just look away.

“See, the nature of every government is the same. A government provides a system where you may live, and it always asks for something in return. Cascadia asks very little actually—she only asks four things of you. They’re really very simple—do you know what they are?”

Being held as she is, there's simply no way to shrug, although looking upward might convey the same thought.

Goodman counts off the four things with his fingers: "Stay in school, get a job, pay your taxes, spend what you earn." He smiles an encouraging, sexy smile. "Simple as that."

Show her annoyance again and Goodman strikes her across the cheek—a weak slap, as if trying to awaken her. Yank on the two goons because that's kinda funny, and they protest with sharp words and pull her up again. The dribbling of blood still tickles her lips, so rub them together.

"Cascadia cares for you."

Yeah, Cascadia cares for Coralie like Coralie cares for a pimple on her butt.

"Cascadia shields, shelters, and shades. She not only means life for you, but life for the forest, the streams, the oceans. A life sustainable not only for our generation, but also for countless more. You should strive to do your part to ensure her survival."

This guy's worse than Brent. Beyond his shoulder, check the implant:

Mapping...
39.91%

So, perhaps she should say, *Yes, yes, I'll do anything you want*, and it would make these goons go away.

Goodman once again takes her by the jaw. "Your part, Coralie, is to get back to work."

Suppose she can't help it. "Still got ten days on my doctor's note."

“Okay,” Goodman says, releasing her face. He turns to Big Guy. “Give her a reason for ten days off.” Goodman steps a few paces away.

Big Guy approaches slow, like an eclipse.

“Freeze.”

Look toward the voice and Michael stands in the busted doorway, wearing pajamas of all things, with his gun trained on Big Guy. Big Guy turns, sees Michael, and does as he’s told.

“Let her go.”

Goodman nods in Coralie’s direction and the goons release her.

Michael steps in front of the window, still covering the men with his gun. “Come here, Coralie. Get behind me.”

In this situation, it’s wise to do as she’s told.

“You’re making a mistake,” Goodman says.

Michael points the gun at him. “I’m Detective Gunn, Anchorage P.D.”

“Agent Goodman, CIB.”

Big Guy starts to wobble to the flank, so Michael aims at him again. “Everyone stand together.”

Big Guy takes a step toward the others.

“Detective Gunn,” Goodman says, “you are interfering with a lawful CIB operation.”

“To do *that*,” Michael says, briefly tilting his head toward Coralie, “you need an intimidator’s license.”

Goodman slowly reaches into his coat's inner pocket. He opens his wallet, showing his CIB identification, and then flips up a panel, exposing the Anchorage license. "Satisfied?"

Michael relaxes his grip on his gun and the gyroscope spins down. He holsters the weapon. "It's still my job to separate and de-escalate. Do I have to call in some backup or will you guys call it a day?"

Goodman looks incredulous.

Step out from behind Michael and Goodman takes a long look at Coralie. Is it possible he looks as though he's sorry?

"We've made our point," Goodman says, and then leaves. The other three follow.

Michael closes the unlatchable door. "Couldn't help but notice," he says, pointing at Sara's fractured cube.

"She call you?"

Michael nods. "That's why I'm here."

But if she called, she may not have had time to get out. That, or "maybe she called from Keio."

"She called from the phone interfaced with her cube."

An itch, so scratch and *augh!* pain, and her nose is in the wrong place. Pull a couple tissues from her purse and dab her nose. The bleeding has stopped, and the blood on her lip and chin has turned tacky.

Michael has been watching. "Whatever you did, I'm sure you deserved it."

There it is—the asshole in him. "I contracted sepsis at work. Jonas gave me two weeks off."

“That wouldn’t have attracted the Cascadian Investigation Bureau, Coralie.”

Right, it’s just that “I’m past thirty days.”

Michael appears plagued with wonder. “By how much?”

“Six days.”

“It’s only March!”

If only he knew, knew the pain, the pain endured after threading the internal obliques, or the spinalis, or the intercostals. Once the local wore off, she was on her own, and she could barely breathe with all the pain—performing surgery had been out of the question. She needed the time off to protect her patients, so she wouldn’t err, so she could recuperate and perform the next supplementation on herself.

“If you hear from Sara,” Michael says, “let me know.” Her brother leaves, without further word. Same ol’ Michael.

Grab a couple more tissues and clean her face.

If only Mom and Dad were here. The morning they had left to visit Obaasan, they were in a rush. Perhaps they woke late. Mom was dragging suitcases to the door while Dad gave instructions to Michael and Brent.

“They can each spend twenty dougs a week as an allowance and that’s it,” Dad told Brent.

“Dad...” Michael said.

“And if they have anyone over, you call me right away.”

“No problem,” Brent said.

“I can’t have the guys over?” Michael said, more in protest than in query.

Mom had just set her makeup tote by the door. At the same moment, she and Dad said, “No.”

Coralie sat on the sofa, watching.

Sara was following Mom around, pestering as well. “But I really wanna go.”

“Sara-chan—Okaasan is sick.”

“I’ll be good...” Sara started, but then she was out of earshot in the hall.

“Dad,” Michael said, “twenty dougs won’t even buy a seat at the coliseum.”

“I’m sorry, Michael,” Dad told him, “that’s all we can afford.” He turned back to Brent. “And you. We’ve prepaid the bills and taxes. I don’t need you selling anything to the kids. Groceries only—healthy stuff—and I’m going to review the purchases when I return. A hundred dougs a week, max, for the two weeks.”

“Two hundred dougs,” Brent said, “got it.”

Mom was wheeling a large trunk in the hall. “If you can just *go* to Tokyo, why would you ever want to fly?”

“I just...” Sara started. Then, “I just wanna know what the slow way is like.”

Once Mom set the trunk beside the door, she turned to Dad and slouched.

Dad saw her resignation. “Tell you what, Sara. Why don’t you fly *back* with us?” He looked toward his wife for approval and received it. “I think your Okaasan would enjoy your company when we return.”

“Really? Really, Mom?”

Mom smiled sadly, and then nodded in that slight way of hers.

“Okay,” Dad said, “we’re gonna miss our plane.” He hugged a slack-armed Michael. “Get your homework done before you go out. Ten o’clock curfew.”

Michael pushed away from Dad. "I'm *seventeen*, Dad."

"But your sisters aren't," Dad said.

Mom gave Michael a kiss on the cheek.

"Sara?" Dad asked.

"Hmm?" she said.

Dad faced her and kissed the air. "We'll call you when we board in Tokyo."

"Thanks!" Sara said.

Mom kissed the air as well.

Dad nudged Coralie. "You okay, baby doll?"

"Yeah," Coralie said.

Dad kissed her on the forehead. "You're always so quiet."

Coralie shrugged, and then her mother kissed her on the cheek.

The two, Mom and Dad, slipped on their shoes and shouldered their bags. "Be good, kids," Dad said on the way out. Mom said, "*Itte kimasu.*"

"*Itte rashai!*" Sara said as the door closed. Then she whispered into Coralie's ear: "And I get to fly back with them!"

Coralie had smiled just then, and for two weeks, Sara was so excited her mouth ran faster than Brent's. Then everything changed. Coralie and Michael would never see their parents again, and Sara had barely survived. Could she have survived this time as well? And if not, just what is death for loops of phosphorescent code in a doped, silicon cube? Would there be pain, suffering, reflections of regret? Or would it be *pop!* over and done, like the swatting of a fly?

For Coralie, the best way to go would be falling asleep. Drifting away, never to awake. Sleepful bliss. But Sara has never slept—not necessary for her lifeforms. So, no matter what, Sara would have to endure death aware, in tune with the experience, feeling every sensation and emotion that comes at every instant.

Definitely *not* the way to go.

In the bathroom mirror, turn Coralie's head until her nose is straight, and now her brow and mouth look crooked. Raising the corner of her mouth in the same direction her nose leans straightens the face some, but the slant of her brow is disturbing, as though her face was a collage of its own parts. Bite down and grind. No malocclusion. Pinkies up the nose and wiggle. Septum seems fine, considering there's electronics wrapped around it. Pressure forward of each tragus, also okay. Look up toward the ceiling—no double vision. It's just the nasal bone.

Well, here goes. Grab, pull, pop.

Go on.

Gotta work up some courage. She could live with a crooked nose until the implant finishes, yeah?

Look at the reflection once more and, no, she'd rather not. Just do it, just a one, two... *Aaugh!*

Oh! What was that, can't blink fast enough, ow, her foot, her effing foot, and now she's hopping on the other one, and maybe sit? sit on the tub's edge? and blink—

Mapping...
40.15%

—blink away the tears so she can see and, yeah, there it is, so sit, now rub the tears away but don't get near her nose, blink, blink again now, and on the floor, in front of the sink, two solid marble chunks from the bathroom's counter lie, both about the size of her balled-up fists. Look at her hands and the dorsal surfaces of her fingers' proximal phalanges are marked with deep, stellate incisions. Twiddle the fingers—nothing's broken. Still, they're going to need some attention.

Check out her toes and, yep, she's gonna have some contusions (nothing new there) and, from the looks of it, a subungual hematoma.

Blood again tickles her lip and more blood from the wounds on her hands streams onto the floor. Another mess, so pull the shoebox of supplies out from under the sink. Stuff a couple cotton balls up her nose and, *ow*, whenever this life ends, it better come without all this pain.

* * *

Coralie spent a couple hours stitching her fingers and, once again, cleaning all the blood, and now there's still the door to worry about. "Brent?"

Brent appears on the dark beach looking spotlit. "Whoa—are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Who was it that fixed my door last time? Was it Crazy Jenny, or..."

"Calamity June," Brent says. "She's moved, but she's still in business."

"Good. Send her over as soon as she's available." Upon Doggie is Coralie's ruined phone. Show it to Brent. "I need another one of these."

Brent looks as though he smells a fart. “Many phones are better, more powerful—even *cheaper*. Don’t get one of those.”

Why can’t he just do what he’s told? “I need one that can hold Sara. You find me a model other than this and I’ll be glad to consider it.”

Brent shakes his head. “Yeah—that’s currently the only one. Okay. It’s ordered.” He appears to have more to say.

“What.”

“You ever thought of being a two-phone woman? Lotsa people do that. You know, one for business, one for pleasure?”

Eeewww. “No, Brent.” Off to the kitchen. Fill the rice cooker to the mark, add water, lid, set the timer. “How much for a set of new *makisu*?”

“Bamboo and cotton, or something that lasts?”

Money is tight—and, anyway, she won’t be around to use anything that lasts. Just use the worn-out ones she’s already got. “Never mind.”

“I can have a bamboo set here within an hour for three dougs.”

Nah, “No, thanks.” Money... Between the door repair, the phone, and the taxes, she’ll be bled dry for the week. God! How did Dad ever make it here?

* * *

Coralie had just said goodbye to Calamity June, and then the dumb waiter dings. The phone is inside. She gets it set up, looks up Dr. Minamoto’s number and dials it.

“*Moshi moshi*,” he says.

“Hello, Coralie *desu*. Is Sara-chan there in Keio?”

“*Hai*, we’ve been trying to call you but it goes to message.”

Take a breath. Thank you God or Buddha or whatever.

“Are you okay?”

“They roughed me up a little, but I’m fine.”

“*Soo desu ne...*”

“Really, I’m fine.”

“How is the progress coming?”

Check it:

Mapping...
42.86%

and its progress seems insufficient. “Almost forty-three.”

“That’s very good.” His voice turns distant. “*Sara-chan! Coralie-san kara denwa desu!*”

Sara sounds like an excited child. “Coralie! Hey! You okay?”

“Yuh-huh. I’ve been worried about you.”

“Why?”

Ummm, “because I wasn’t sure you made it out.”

“Darn it!” she says. “I called Michael and asked him to tell you.”

No surprise there.

“Hey—can I hop on?”

Hold the phone away from Coralie’s ear. “Sure.”

“I’m a bird!”

“No, look! You’re a fish!” Swim the phone to the kitchen and Sara laughs and laughs. Now, face the phone.

“Making sushi?”

Well, not at all like Mom used to make. “More like making a mess.”

“Kinda.” Sara quiets to a whisper. “Listen. Last night, before those jerks arrived, I went through the window’s logs. For the last three months, the window’s gone dark every day that you and I weren’t here.”

This again. “Okay.”

“Three months ago is when you ran out of plant food.”

And...

“You told Brent you couldn’t afford more,” Sara continued. “The logs confirm the window was accessed by Brent’s agency. They’re trying to make Doggie sick so you’ll order more plant food!”

Back to the living room. “How do I call it up?”

“Window:” Sara says, “Event Log.”

A list of mundane events appears in the window.

“Show me 8 to 9 A.M. last Tuesday,” Sara says.

It confirms a user from Brent’s agency darkened the window. Beside Coralie’s leg, Doggie appears more wilted than ever. Perhaps Brent’s agency did it. Yeah, as slick as Brent is, it’s hard to believe he’d make a family member sick for a dog. Hell, Brent’s as much a part of this family as Doggie is! “Brent!”

Brent materializes in the window. “Yes, my dear.”

Oh, for goodness sake. “Put your clothes on.”

Brent spins around and is dressed. “Special occasion?”

Quite possibly—point at the log entry in question. “Who’s been blacking out the window? It says Carlson-Krebs Agency. That’s your company.”

Brent looks like a dog that’s peed on the rug. “Yes.”

“Well? Who did this?”

“I’m... Look, I’m sorry. Been under a lot of press—”

“You?” It was *him? Really?* “You?”

“Tell ya what. I’ll have a quarter-liter jug of Kellerman’s Plant Food sent up—no charge. Okay?”

Nuh-uh. “It didn’t need plant food, it needed *light*.” Brent’s been here forever...

“Plant bulbs for your lamps. Let’s just forget any of this happened.”

...like *family*. “No!” Coralie screams.

“Here it comes, Brent,” Sara says.

Do it! “You’re fired!”

* * *

It’s taken a few days to get used to Harold—well, not his bronzed skin, and not his sculpted core, and certainly not those Olympian thighs—but Brent had known when Coralie said *no* she meant it. Sure, he used to try a different angle or two, seeing if she’d budge at all, but then he’d move on. With Harold, everything was an argument. Perhaps she’d overreacted. But, no—even with the window open all day, Doggie still looks sad and malnourished. She’s just gonna have to train Harold, a computerized version of bending him over and whacking him on the butt.

Bending him over... Never mind that.

“No, Harold. I’ve always worn plain, blue scrubs.”

“The bottom line: You can have them printed with any pattern you want, and the first four launderings are free. It saves you money!”

“I can save more money keeping my current scrubs and paying for the laundry.”

“But why wear used scrubs?”

“Because there’s nothing wrong with them.”

“Sure there is,” he says and frowns. “They’re *used*.”

“By me!”

“But—”

“No.”

“But—”

“No, and that’s it. Move on.”

“Fine,” he says.

Jesus—it’s about time. Speaking of time, it’s about time for bed.

Harold cocks his head, shows his palms, and smiles. “What you need is a vacation.”

He can say that again. “I’m not allowed. CFC Title 50, Section 460.”

“There’s an exception to that. You’re allowed travel in-state, within a distance of five-hundred kilometers.”

Really? But then “I’ve used all my days off.”

With his index fingers raised, Harold looks authoritative. “There’s ways around that, too.”

Really?

With a smirk, Harold nods.

But then “I can’t afford it.”

He puts his hands on his hips. “You have excellent credit.”

“The only place I’d wanna go is out of the city, and all the land past the UGB is federally protected—look, don’t touch.”

Harold shakes his head. “Not all of it. There’s a train that can take you to a place where you can walk on sandy beaches, a place where you can take in the unfiltered sun, a place where you can swim in the breaking waves—where you can surf them even.”

Tell him *no* before he can get any further, but wait—the beach is what she needs. But it’s too good to be—

Now, Harold walks along a sandy beach, with men and women and children playing all around. In the distance, a couple teenagers on boards—a boy and a girl—drop in on a wave and then surf beside each other, coasting on the curl. Inland, dozens of bungalows surround a pool with waterfalls and fountains, where people throw beachballs, swimming or splashing or lounging in the sun. “This,” Harold says, spreading his arms, “is the Aleutian Resort!”

Harold walks toward the surf. Everywhere, footprints pock the sand. Sacrilege! After all, *Every Step Destroys Soil, Humans are Unnatural, and Urbanity Equals Efficiency.*

Coralie can almost feel the sand between her toes. “Walking in the commons is illegal!”

“Yeah,” Harold says, “in Cascadia. But Aleutia, as a Cascadian territory, has different laws.”

Oh, to be outside the city for once—if only she could step through the window and out onto the sand with him, if only she could dive in the waves, taste the water, smell the salty air...

“I have someone for you to meet,” Harold says. “His name is Randy the Bellhop.”

Beyond the window, a smallish man in maroon walks near. He wears pressed shorts hemmed right below the knee, a double-breasted coat buttoned to the collar, and a small, cylindrical hat. His smile is friendly and demure. “Hello, Miss Gunn. Welcome!”

Smile back. “Hey.”

Randy motions with an arm. “Step near and I’ll give you the tour.”

There can’t be any harm in it—go ahead and step up to the window, where the sand almost feels underfoot. Once there, Harold dissolves away.

“You’ve already seen the beach,” Randy says, walking toward the resort. “Let’s see what else the Aleutian Resort has to offer.” Past palm trees and tufts of succulent bush, he walks now on the pool deck. A large, outdoor bar, roofed with dried and lashed palm fronds, passes to the right. The shirtless, Unangan bartender offers a friendly wave. To the left, dozens play in the pool, laughing and splashing, and at the far end, a young couple, submerged other than their heads, kiss.

It’d be nice because there are “a lot of guys.”

Randy looks at her from over his shoulder, and continues to walk. “Our guests come from all over the world, and most countries aren’t at war like Cascadia. Because of that, I can guarantee a minimum of 42.7 percent of our guests will be male.”

They pass between two bungalows. “I see.”

Ahead, another bellhop holds the door open for them. “Thanks, Jarrod,” Randy says.

“You betcha,” Jarrod says.

The main building’s lobby is broad and tall, and ahead, behind a counter, a row of gentlemen in tuxedos look friendly. “This is where you’ll check in, but there’s more to see here.” They continue to the left of check-in, entering a hall where there’s a door to the left. Randy holds the door open and inside is a bubbling, shallow pool. “This is what we call the Ethereal Spa. But the bubbles aren’t ether, they’re a mixture of oxygen and nitrous oxide. What a way to relax!”

Say, “Uh-huh.”

Randy lets the door close, and he opens another at the opposite side of the hall. Inside there, another Unangan man stands ready behind a massage table. “Bob is one of eight masseuses on staff, and just look at his strong hands.”

Bob smirks and shows his hands. Each hand looks large enough to wrap around Coralie’s head, but the skin appears supple and uncallused.

Say, “Uh-huh.”

Randy lets the door close and walks up the hall. “Saunas over here, more massage rooms over there...” At the hall’s end, corridors lead to the left and to the right. “That way is the Kid Zone, full of water slides and other rides, but you’re here for the

solo getaway, so follow me around here.” Through another door and they are again outside, enveloped by lush vegetation. “This is what we call Eden. Dozens of tropical fruits and vedge, free for the picking.” As he walks, they pass pineapples, mangos, papayas, coconut palms, and dozens of plants, shrubs, and trees with fruits unknown to Coralie.

“Uh-huh.”

Randy stops walking and faces Coralie. “And if you think this place is beautiful, wait’ll you see the train ride!” He snaps his fingers and the garden dissolves away. In its place, flowers, upon rolling hills, from horizon to horizon—the antithesis of Anchorage’s black beltways, gray sidewalks, muted brick and cement and granite and marble.

“There’s not a dull minute with your vacation to the Aleutian Resort. In your hours spent in travel, the countryside’s uniqueness can’t be matched in all the world. Tell me—is this the most beautiful sight in the world?”

Coralie could swim in all those feathery-soft flower petals. “Uh-huh.”

“Only because of your superior credit can I make you this offer. For zero down and only forty-five dougs a month, you’ll get the full package—room, meals, and all the amenities. And I’ll guarantee the time off work for no extra charge. No other vacation package will offer you that. So—how bout this Friday?”

The flowers—she wishes she could smell them. “No.”

“Earlier or later? Because we could set you up as early as Wednesday...”

Blink. Take a few steps back. Look at the progress meter:

Mapping...
62.28%

“No.” The math. Can’t think. Take a few more steps back. “I’d like to…” She could finish all this waiting at the resort—waiting in the waves, walking on the sand, lying on the table while Bob massages her back… And then, the end. Would she be able to do it there? Surrounded by that beauty? To just kill herself?

“You should do what you’d like—you deserve it.” Randy calls a calendar up onto the window. “Let’s set a date.”

No. It would be very hard to end it in paradise. “Harold? Harold?”

Harold walks into the field of flowers. “Sounds like a wonderful offer, Coralie.”

“Randy—I’ll consider it.”

Randy looks disappointed. “It’s a limited-time offer. I can give you…” He thinks for a moment. “Twenty-four hours?”

Look Randy in the eye. “You’ll give me two weeks.”

Randy frowns.

“And if you don’t pester me with follow-up ads, after the two weeks, I promise an answer.”

Both Randy and Harold begin to speak.

Say, “Window: Off,” and the two, along with the field of flowers, dissolve away.

* * *

In the blue dark, press TALK. “Hey, Sara-berra.”

“Hey. I was wondering if you got the cube Minamoto-sensei sent.”

Exhale—he actually didn’t send one. Inhale—but what should she say? “It hasn’t come yet.”

“Maybe I could hop on your phone, stay until the cube arrives.”

When is he going to tell her? “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Michael scared the feds away, but they could come back. I think you should stay in Keio—just for now.”

Silence from the speaker.

“You’re safer there. Plus—you must have found something fun to do...”

“They have a nice library. That isn’t it, though.”

What’s she holding back? “Tell me.”

“It’s just... Living at fifty hertz is *exhausting*.”

Pffff, life’s little problems. “You’ll be okay.”

“I miss home and I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. Time for sleep.”

“Okay.”

“Night, Sara,” and press END. Floating beyond the ceiling:

Mapping...
63.58%

“Just past two-thirds there,” Coralie whispers.

Two-thirds the way to what? Sara would say.

“To freedom.”

Freedom? Freedom from what?

“Cascadia.”

I miss home. Why didn’t you tell me?

Tears: turn into her pillow. Will Coralie even be able to speak with her again before the transference? What if it doesn’t work? *Jesus*—what has Coralie done?

* * *

The next evening, Coralie and Lacey battle with their respective pitchmen. Since they're synced together, each pitchman has a time limit.

"You can save twenty-two dougs! It's like being paid to buy them!"

And "three, two, one. Bye, Brent!"

Lacey's videobox unmutes. "Hey, girl! Thought we could watch some OTL before I head out to the club."

Oh, Tuesday again. Shit!

"Awww, don't worry. I won't bug you about coming along until that face of yours heals." Lacey appears lost in thought.

Wonder why. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing." She rubs her chin. "I just thought you would look better than that by now." She laughs. "Just wondering if that look could work. You know, it makes you look tough."

Nah, "more like a victim, I think."

"Well," Lacey says, "let's do this. Windows: I command thee to play *Only True Love*."

After the recap, title sequence, and beginning-of-the-show challenge, the male contestant, Brian, enjoys dinner with Boo while Carnegie faces a test in The Chair. Before her, Brian's smiling face shows in a window. The picture changes to Desmond Brannigan, the oh-so-hot star of *My Pleasure*.

"Ha!" Lacey says from her videobox. "Got her on that one!" She spoons herself a sliver of coffee ice cream and eats it.

Say, “Oh, I know, right?”

The picture turns back to Brian. Then to a shirtless Jimmy Lee Rudd, the country singer from the ROT.

“Doesn’t like him much,” Lacey says.

Spoon her some chocolate and it’s cold on her tongue. “Mm-mm,” she says, shaking her head.

Brian again. Then, *oh!*, it’s Alejandro Valdez, abs hard, being pulled on water skis.

“Awww,” Lacey says, “too bad Sara’s not here...”

Carnegie’s responses are off the chart, so say, “Check it out.”

“Yep.”

Looks like her love for Brian isn’t True Love. A buzzer goes off and Carnegie is unstrapped from The Chair and escorted offstage.

As the credits roll, Lacey speaks. “Really coming back tomorrow?”

Set the carton on Doggie and nod. “Yeah. I’m better than I look.”

“Wasn’t the same without you. When we’re short on surgeons, you wouldn’t believe the busy work.”

And Coralie’s procedures aren’t busy work? “I can imagine.”

“Well, see ya tomorrow. Window: Beefcake Slideshow!” and Lacey’s videobox disappears.

It’s okay to smile—she’ll miss a thing or two about this place, but not much more than that. “Window: West Prism Seven.”

Six

First thing, Coralie left a message with Dr. Milstein, thanking him for the time off. After that, it took five cups of coffee, but she's now in her scrubs and ready to go, so open the door and shut it behind her. Overnight, the Public Service Squad replaced her chrysanthemums with broad-leafed, waxy-looking plants. Busy work! She liked the flowers better.

Step onto the sidewalk, and to her left, blankly staring people zoom by upon the beltways, and a crowd flows with her, every face ashen, gray like brains worn on the outside; flow with them to the corner, where there's an opening in the beltway's pigeon-topped glass sides. A voice says, "Watch your step, watch your step, watch your step..." and now follow the wave of accelerating zombies onto the ten, then over to the twenty-five, and finally over to the forty.

Beside her, just beyond the glass wall, a fella shouts, "Coralie Gunn!"

Try and ignore it.

"Congratulations, Coralie!" it says, the air erupting with the sound of party horns. Beyond the window, confetti flies everywhere. "Yes, congratulations! You've just won a six-thousand-doug loan from Cascadian Financial!"

The ads suck enough at home, but out here, without Brent or Harold as a filter, they suck appallingly.

"Winner! How do you feel?"

Try something new this time. "Like a growling mutt is hanging off my left boob."

“Wonderful!” it says. A pen and paper pad appear in its hands. “So—when should we set your appointment? Your winnings await!”

Responding had been a mistake. Now it’s gonna pester her until she transfers. Which won’t be long now, so just ignore it.

“Would 6 P.M. tonight work? I’ll let your contract provider know. Oh—that’s a nod!”

No, not even close. “I don’t want your money. And if you tell my provider I want your ads, I’ll have you blacklisted.”

It makes a face like *bitch* and then dissolves away.

Ahead, the 22nd level of Gander Street spans a block-long gap in the buildings, and the sight of it is Coralie’s cue to step over and get on the el to 65. So, weave through the bodies over to the sidewalk.

When the el opens, a speaker says, “*Value Resides in Productivity*,” and it’s more crowded in here than usual, but squeeze in anyway, make a friend or two, and making a friend is not far from the truth because some lady’s thigh brushes right along Coralie’s intergluteal cleft, and the sensation makes her wanna scream, and the damn el stops at every damn floor, giving the lady’s thigh motion, and by the time this el reaches 65 she’s gonna wanna shower because the reek of a hundred brands of cheap perfume chokes her, the heat of a hundred bodies roasts her, and at least at 51, when the speaker says, “*Labor Defeats the Chinese Menace*,” the leggy chick with the groping thigh squeezes by and exits, but then more enter and fill in every gap, and the windows here are just that—plain glass, floor-to-ceiling windows—and in-between floors it feels as though someone could lean the wrong way and tilt the whole thing and then everyone would fall all the way

down to 6, and that would be just her luck, Coralie soup, almost made it out but came up two weeks short, and when 65 finally arrives, the speaker says, “*Cities for People, Nature for the Rest*” and the doors open, so push through all the stanky bodies and burst into the fresh air. God, Coralie can understand claustrophobia, which may as well be defined as squeezing a crowd into the smallest possible space ever. Sweat stings her eyes, so wipe her brow and get on the westbound beltway.

This time, a big lump stands beside her, blinking, mouth agape, and purple. Three cheeseburgers, a side salad, and a McCaccino float beside him, beyond the reach of his stubby arms. A high-pitched, oh-so-cute voice says, “Feed Grimace and get two dougs off today’s lunch!”

Ask, “Will you leave me alone if I do?”

“Muh-huh,” Grimace says.

Gesture a burger into his mouth and Grimace goes *gulp!* Gesture the rest in. *Gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp!* He rubs the top of his tummy and then he disappears.

Now, Coralie thinks about lunch. Maybe she’ll get a McChicken and a salad. No, scratch the chicken and get Salmon McNuggets with wasabi dip. Sure.

Look ahead now, and breaking forth into the sunshine blocks always feels a bit like being born. The buildings surrounding Anchorage Park are only forty stories high, and with each block away from the park, the buildings get taller in a curve that maximizes daylight exposure, this daylight coming through the prisms on Anchorage’s roof, above which is the first floor of Elmendorf. Looking through the glass and across, the buildings’ green rooftops are at first near, but with each block she travels, they fall further away until the last are twenty-five stories below. Beyond this, she’s now fifty-

nine stories above the grass, the streams, and sunshine blocks' trees, and the feeling of looking that far down always gives Coralie a tingle up her spine, so look ahead where the city begins to rise again, and it isn't long until the greenroofs are near again, and now the buildings rise around her again, and she's back—back within the metropolis, where the sunlight is usually indirect, where looking up brings a vision of sparrows and starlings, blue sky, puffy white clouds, and crossing skybridges.

This is the place. Step over to the sidewalk.

The door says:

Anchorage
Biomechanical
Treatment
Center

Welcome!

Try and reach toward the handle—Coralie knows what's beyond, so she can't help hesitating. What's beyond is lots of small talk, everyone saying how difficult things had been without her, blah, blah, blah, and then the inevitable talking-to by Fabiola, the bitch who sent the thugs. All of it coming. A prediction? Not really, more of a certainty. Everything's always the same here.

So, okay, yeah, sure, open the door and Kat's inside doing her receptionisting, smiling and waving.

“Welcome back, Miss Coralie!”

Funny how she calls her that. “Hey, Kat.” If anyone else called her Miss, she'd feel insulted. “How's the old man?”

Kat nods. “Good, good. Still bustin his back on the second floor. Been lookin forward to retirin.”

“Two more years?”

Still nodding. “Yep and yep.” Her head stills. “Fabiola on the warpath, sweetie. Just thought you oughta know.”

Show Kat a good cringe. “I’ll try and avoid her.”

Kat nods again and turns off the maglock to the back.

Go in, step forward to Coralie’s office. Almost there before Fabiola’s voice triggers a chill.

“*Doc-tor* Gunn!”

Just stand and don’t bother turning, ha!

Fabiola and her damn heels click near. “You think you can return to work without coming to me first?”

Duh. Take a deep breath. Fabiola smells of cilantro, garlic, and the farts of land animals.

“*Well?*”

Now turn. “Send the Feds to *my* home? I got nothing to say to you.”

Those parts of Fabiola’s face not slathered in makeup flush red. “You will work Day 7s until your time is paid back.”

Sure, when trees walk. Go ahead and laugh at her. “Good luck with that one.”

Open Coralie’s office door and shut Fabiola out. Bitch! Oh, have a seat, calm down.

No, that whore’s got a lot of nerve, her and her degree in Medical Administration. Bitch may as well’ve gone to porn college.

Calm down. How many more days?

Mapping...
70.74%

Four or five days? Not so bad.

It's Lacey's knock and she comes in, closing the door behind herself. "Face looks a thousand percent better," she says, taking a seat.

Gee, "thanks."

"Kept thinking about Sara last night. When's she coming back?"

"She'll be staying in Tokyo till her new cube arrives."

Lacey pouts momentarily, probably because most things are momentary for her.

Then, "Mrs. McDougal's up first."

Mrs. McDougal, the mayor's wife, had checked in a few weeks ago complaining of tremor. "Figured Dr. Zimmerman woulda taken her over."

Lacey slouches in her seat, kicking a foot up on the desk. "Mrs. McDougal insisted on you."

It happens, so nod. "Okay. I'll talk with her."

* * *

"Good morning, Mrs. McDougal."

The mayor's wife exudes regality despite the hospital gown. Her posture is straight enough to suspect spinal supplementation with bendar. She sits with her knees touching, with her hands folded and resting on her lap, and with her chin up, but not high enough so it appears she's looking down upon Coralie. "*Sally* is fine, dear."

Smile at Mrs. Sally McDougal because Coralie, after all, is here to serve. “I understand the tremor has improved.”

It’s just a single nod. “Yes.” She wipes an errant strand of gray hair away from her face. “The change has been miraculous. A remnant of the tremor recurs, though, when carrying something light, like a cup of tea.”

Go to the sink and fill a cup of water. Return and hand it to her. Seems steady.

“It only happens while away from the doctor’s office,” Sally says, with a grin slight enough to be mistaken for deadpan.

Take the cup back and throw it away. Extend the hands out flat, palms down. “Push your hands upward against mine, very lightly.” As Coralie resists, Sally still seems steady. “A little harder.” Now she can feel a rhythm of slight intensity, oscillating perhaps five times a second. “A little more,” and now it’s gone again. Release and flip palms up. “Again.” Pressing down, Sally has no tremor at all.

Release again. “You said tea...”

“Yes. Green tea, decaf.”

“Any other sources of caffeine?”

“I will not suffer the habit.”

“We can add two more threads in each biceps and that should solve the problem. Question is—do you feel it’s enough of a problem to put up with the soreness?”

Sally doesn’t even seem to consider. “I endured it fine last time.”

How dignified! Had Coralie been as tough, she’d still have some sick days left.

“Okay. Belinda will be in to prep you.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

Out in the hall, Lacey walks up. “Still a go?”

“Yep. Send Belinda in to move Mrs. McDougal to 1 for a ventral prep.”

“Procedure?”

“Biceps, two each, long and short, bilateral.”

“Not too bad.” Lacey walks away.

* * *

And it hadn't been bad—took a little over two hours. Within the scrub room, step on the pedals, leaning toward hot. “Who's next?”

Lacey scrubs, too. “Private Cherles Prince, nineteen years—”

“Charles?”

Lacey smiles, shaking her head. “Rhymes with *girls*, *curls*, and *squirrels*.”

Say it with some lilt: “*Cherles?*”

“Cherles gets the girls,” Lacey says. She releases her pedals and lifts a towel.

“Matter fact, Haylee's in there now, flirting all over him.”

Release Coralie's pedals and take a towel. She can feel her heart drop—not too often a single soldier comes through. “Well, good for her.” It's just as well. She could never *be* with someone named *Cherles*. It would be one of those things she'd fixate on constantly. Toss the towel in the hamper. “He cute?”

A corner of Lacey's mouth tightens. “Meh.”

“Good. Help me on?”

“Sure thing.”

Private Prince. Now that's something that'll get him made fun of. Is he a prince or a private? Eh, who cares. Haylee should be scrubbing-in; otherwise, she'll hold up the whole team.

Lacey finishes tying Coralie's gown, so grab one by the seams, unfurl it, and pull it over Lacey's arms. Around the back, secure the ties for her. "Spell check. That mother needed spell check."

"Coulda been on purpose," Lacey says.

Haylee bursts in from the procedure room, blushing. She goes to the scrub sink. "Sorry."

Glance at Lacey—looks like she's thinking the same thing. Moving right along: "What's the procedure?"

"Dorsal intercostals," Lacey says, "two day recovery, then flip him over."

A seven-hour procedure—damn that Fabiola. Go on in and it's just as well she can't see his face, just the field from armpit to spine to armpit. Nurse Delores is upon her stool at the head of the table. "How's the patient?"

"Milked and gassed," Delores says, "BP and pulse normal."

A minute passes before Lacey enters with Haylee.

Nurse Jenni holds a mask. Be still as she applies it and it seems Coralie's nose is still tender. The nurse moves on to mask Lacey and Haylee.

Wait with gloves aloft for the team to assemble. Lacey monitoring tension and respiratory volume, Haylee on the targeting scanner—all's fine. Take hold of the threading gun and the imagery is wrong. Look Haylee in the eye. "You want me to thread his spleen?"

Haylee blinks. “Huh?”

Let her have it. *“You’re at the wrong theta!”*

Seems the whole room jumps, and then Haylee adjusts the angle. Lacey’s eyes look as if she’s watching someone being drawn into grinding machinery.

Which is good—seems everyone’s paying attention now. “We have a serious job to do, people—a job with a miniscule margin for error. Shall we proceed?”

Haylee says, “Yes, doctor.”

Lacey says, “Yes, doctor.”

Delores and Jenni: “Yes, Doctor Gunn.”

“Thank you.”

* * *

Home. “Window: West Prism Seven.”

Waves crash in the moonlit distance, only too softly. “Increase volume. More... More...” Perfect. By morning, gulls will be screaming, but for now, it’s perfect. Focus toward the horizon:

Mapping...
75.18%

Well—past three-quarters. Too bad that won’t keep her from clinic duty tomorrow.

Yay, Public Service Day.

Already need a day off, and why? Because the routine is endless. As a doctor, she was never supposed to feel like the dishwashers on the second floor, or like the dry cleaners on the third, or like the burger-flipping-machine loaders on the fifth. A surgeon

is a fellow human to count on in crisis, a person to look to for strength when all feels hopeless, a woman who is strong and confident and a perfectionist above all because a micrometer can mean the difference between painlessness or suffering, between wellness and sickness, between life and death.

But Cascadia doesn't mind about any of that. Coralie may as well have been drafted because she only does government work—the mayor's wife included.

Twenty-nine.

Ridiculously old for the college boys, and all the men have died in the war. It'd be different with a husband—someone to come home to. If work gets too boring, spice it up in the evening, keep the routine interesting.

Availability must happen. Like everyone, the occasional man must find himself single now and again. Even the actors. Then again, not the actors, especially not the ones like Alejandro Valdez, and certainly not the policemen, because they all remind her of her brother. Government agents? (Goodman's as old to her as she would be to the college boys—what a shame). Sports—especially the hotties on the Timbers. Not as bulky as a football player but strong and lean and tan.

The waves crash and wash out.

Other than those, there's the home soldiers, the sofa sergeants. *Harley Briggs*. Oh, *God*. Every time Coralie brings up dating, Sara goes, "Remember Harley Briggs," and giggles. She means well, but after the hundredth time, it starts to hurt.

Harley Briggs!

Don't you know what you're doing?

Sheesh, go to bed. Don't think about the stupid sofa sergeant.

* * *

Snooze, sure, nine more minutes of bliss, but why not make it all day? Forget Public Service Day. Four hours for free, lunch at double the price, another four more hours for free. *Screw that.* Call the clinic and leave a message at the beep. *Hi, Coralie Gunn here, just wanted to say I'm staying home because, why? Because fuck you is why.* But they're the only patients she really knows, the same ones over and over—Juliette who always says she hasn't been drinking but smells of rye and mouthwash, Llwellyn who snorts Alka-Seltzer to flush her sinuses, Old Man Jesus (hard-J Jesus) who needs opiates for his arthritis. She won't call off. Her public service day is the closest thing she has to having her own practice—or at least it feels that way.

And calling off might earn her another visit from Agent Goodman.

Get up get up get up...

* * *

It's northbound and down on Public Service Day, upon Lake Otis parkway, taking it easy on the twenty-five belt. Above and to the right, atop the glass sides of the thirtieth floor of Abbott Street, sits a man. As his legs dangle over the open air, he leans forward, looking down. Step over to the sidewalk. The man wears faded, threadbare clothes; his face is bearded from neglect.

Beyond the glass beside Coralie, a tiny moose—no taller than a quarter-meter—hops near. "Psst," it says.

Look above again, and the man there looks upward. Then, with his hands, he pushes off. As he falls by, he makes no sound.

Inspiration!

“Psst, psst,” the moose says.

It’s a short, hurried walk—with the moose galloping alongside—until she locates herself above the lower levels of Abbott. Even with her forehead against the glass, the crossing skybridges obscure her view of the man. Wonder—wonder what happened to him.

“Hey,” the moose says. “Psst, psst!”

Don’t acknowledge the moose.

* * *

In the Skwentna Clinic, on the wall by the doctor’s duty desk, a row of cleaned-and-pressed lab coats hang, and flipping through them never reveals a Small, so settle for a Medium and get on with the day. The nice thing about the Medium is Coralie can put fully extended arms into its pockets, and that’s where they’ll stay until she must test a reflex, or palpate an abdomen, or listen to the sound of someone’s breathing, and the man, the presumably dead one, had fully extended his arms, too—right before taking his plunge—and he’d been looking up. Why? Is it too horrible to see the end coming? Perhaps it’s easier looking up, falling with the illusion that the ceiling, that Elmendorf, is receding away. Or perhaps he felt as though he was rising instead of falling—yes, rising—accelerating toward the vacuum of space, the emptiness, the void.

Verona, the clinic’s only nurse, enters. She holds a tablet with the morning’s patients upon it. “Another busy day,” she says.

Of course it is, so “who’s first?”

Verona smiles the way that says she's eating something putrid and liking it.

"Gretchen again."

Ah, Gretchen, victim of every essential, idiopathic, and somatic disease known to humankind, as well as homelessness. "Exam 2?"

"Yep."

"On my way." And Coralie already knows how the rest of the day will go—same ol', same ol'—and giving them all time off from Public Service will be as easy as C-scribble, G-scribble, and she'll sign all the prescriptions for narcotics, too, and, better yet, she'll do it all with a smile.

* * *

Her name's Maisie and her top is printed with an endless pattern of flowers and, yes, they're daisies, each one no more than a centimeter across, and Maisie has got a mild cold and wants some cough syrup, the kind of cough syrup with codeine in it, and daisies are not quite what Coralie had seen in Randy the Bellhop's preview, the flowers in the hills had looked more like poppies, poppies with petals soft as moth wings but colored madly, as though an artist stabbed paint tubes and flung the colors canvasward, and in a place like that, the signs would say, STRAY OFF THE TRAIL or DANCING ONLY IN THIS MEADOW or even SLEEPING ALLOWED. No need to go so far as the Aleutian Resort. Once to the flowers, she'll have gone far enough. Just take her there and she will breathe of the air's sweetness, she will look into the blueness above, she will smile, and then—

"Hell-ooo..."

Oh, right, Maisie. “Sorry bout that.” Sign the screen, print the prescription, and hand it over.

“Thank you so much, doctor.”

She’d almost tripped away, like she had with Sara. And what had Sara asked? *Are you sleeping?* was what and, well, what a fine time for *that* to get stuck in her head again.

* * *

Darkness permeates the city, and at the base of the glass beside her, ankle-high lamps flash by, illuminating her footing on the beltway that conveys her over the sunshine blocks. When near, the mishmash buildings appear a patchwork of styles and materials, but from here, the conglomeration curves, sinking below, rising above. At this hour, the buildings’ windows are mostly dark, but those few windows still lit refract into the glass prisms of Elmendorf, receding to a heaven of square stars, and isn’t it just beautiful?

A voice says, “The intersection of Twentieth, Lake Otis Beltway, and Eightieth is brought to you by your friends at Jacobs and Bemis. When you’re injured, just say *Jacobs and Bemis* at the glass for a personal consultation. Remember—Jacobs and Bemis—waging the war for *you*.”

As Twentieth flashes by, are those tiny antlers she sees? The palmate antlers of a moose? It had gone by too fast to be sure, but what else looks like that?

Well, it’s not here now. And that’s good.

* * *

Lying with her back toward her parents, the two upon their beach so long ago, bathed in their aura of blue—what would be the best way to join them? Not a simple prospect. Opiates would seem ideal, but an overdose sometimes leads to a vegetative state, and how much would that suck? Could be minimal consciousness of living. Could be endless thoughts, going on and on and on, never-ending thinking with no ability to go anywhere, say anything, talk with anyone. Awful, wouldn't it be? The leap off the skybridge would certainly have a high probability of success. Then again, in the one-in-a-thousand chance she survived, odds are she'd wind up quadriplegic. And, really now—how much different would that be from being a vedge?

Gunshot to the head. Leave Thank You cards to the clean-up crew: “My gray matter appreciates your attention to detail. Love, Coralie.”

Not her style.

There's gotta be something, something to make her sleep, sleep until the universe expands itself cold, forever painless and unaware, because suffering is the worst part of death.

Whatever she does, don't make her suffer.

Seven

Within the midst of youth, the girls, together in bed, the bedroom's highlights in blue, and in this night, Okaasan had been the one to kiss Coralie and Sara, and tuck them in. When done, she softly walked in her house slippers to the door and closed it behind herself.

"They used to sing us, in Keio, before going home," Sara said, "and then turn out the lights, as if they were putting us to bed."

Coralie yawned. "Did you have any friends?"

"I guess. But they knew I was different. There was my name, of course. Also, I had to learn English. I wasn't the only one learning a foreign language. There was a boy—he was learning French. So, sometimes, before the senseis left, we'd sing in French."

"Like what?"

"I remember one—it was called *Frère Jacques*," she said, and then she sang the song.

Yawning again, Coralie closed her eyes. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Sara said.

But they learned over the years. The translation transposed the first two lines. It could have been translated *Brother John, you asleep?*, sure, but it wouldn't have had the same, simplistic charm.

And suppose now an overdose of morphine *would* be the best. It's just a matter of sneaking a few doses from the dispensary. Wouldn't it be like falling asleep? Not the

late sleep like now, when her mind races like this... The early, unconscious sleep, when the mind trails away into nothingness—that's how to go. And is she sleeping? Is this really sleep when she knows the alarm is about to go off, because she always thinks like mad before it does, as if the thoughts were in emergency. And, yes, now the alarm sounds, but something else rings, too—her phone. So, slap the snooze and open her eyes. The phone says it's from Keio, so, "Hello?"

"Hey."

Gotta clear her throat. "What's up, Sara?"

"You knew about this. Don't tell me you didn't."

Oh. So, she knows now, and "yes, I knew." But how much has Dr. Minamoto told her? Does she know about the implant, and about what Coralie has gotta do? There's really no way to ask. Every phone is a bug, and chances are, when Agent Goodman was here, he or his thugs left some kind of device somewhere. Hope, just *hope*, that Sara doesn't want to chat about all the plans.

"You didn't tell me. Didn't even ask."

It had been too much of a risk. "I'm sorry."

"Bullshit you're sorry! Bullshit all your constant sneaking and bullshit all your stupid lies! I always thought the world of you! You know—I *like* what I am, Coralie. I don't need a fucking body."

Is this really Sara? Stupid—of course it is. "Have you seen her?"

Seems forever before Sara admits, "Yes."

"And?"

"She's beautiful..."

Singular she. So, Sara doesn't know—doesn't know about the other one. "Sara?"

"What."

"You don't have to go through with it. But I'm your sister—I already know you will." That does it—no reason to wait for a reply—just hang up, hang up and love her. Love her despite her anger because this is the first time she's ever been angry, and she's had many reasons to be angry before. Just lie back and remember.

It had been back when they were twelve, before the war, before they lost their parents, and Coralie came home from school with all the buttons popped off her blouse. Mom, who was busy in the kitchen, said, "*Okaeri*" as Coralie kicked the door closed. Arms folded over her shirt, she rushed away to her room. She threw her backpack onto the bed and, as she pulled off her ruined shirt, a final button at the tails resisted her.

"Hey, Freckles!" Sara said. "How was school?"

Coralie yanked and the remaining button flew away. She flung the useless cloth at the wall and it slid to the floor.

"What's wrong, Coralie?"

Coralie pulled a tee from a drawer. "Nothing."

"Shirt get caught on a snag?"

A snag? No, "it wasn't quite a snag, Sara," it was actually two boys, two small, ugly, disgusting boys, one of whom snuck up behind her as she was walking home, snuck up and grabbed her by the arms while the other pulled her shirt open, the buttons abandoning her as if they'd been spring-loaded, and then it hadn't been the one in front of her that did anything (his eyes just stared), it was the hand holding her right arm that

sought, sliding from arm to chest, and then groping with the palm and squeezing with the fingers.

She pulled the tee over and on. Then she dumped her pillow from its case.

“What happened, Coralie?”

“Nothing.”

“Your heart is racing.”

Coralie took the pillowcase to the bathroom, where Sara couldn't see. In the shower, she found the bar of soap and dropped it into the pillowcase. Then, she returned to the hall.

“What are you doing?” Sara asked.

Coralie walked to the living room. “You wouldn't understand.”

“Maybe I would?”

Problem was, if Coralie told Sara where she was going, what she was going to do, Sara would try and talk her out of it, but Coralie wasn't about to let that happen. She would teach those ugly boys their lesson, and Sara couldn't possibly understand this, couldn't comprehend what it was like to be assaulted by crawling fingers and watching eyes. Sara, the ghost, had no body, so she had no right to try and talk her out of it, “not this time.”

“Why not?”

Because this was none of her business. “Just back off, Sara.”

“Why dontcha let me help?”

Coralie opened the front door. What she needed was Michael, a brother who would defend her honor, but she knew what would happen if she told him. He'd either

laugh or tell her it served her right. If Sara had been a real sister, one that could carry a second pillowcase, she may have asked for help, but no, “you’re just a computer.”

She slammed the door behind her and, once up the block, she took the escalators down twelve stories, down to where the InstaVend store was, in front of which a knee-high planter sat, where the two boys always hung out, looking pathetic and begging customers for treats. She approached from a blind angle, swinging the bar of soap hard and low so it would knock the wind from Eyeballs. And then she wound back and swung at Crawling Fingers, who hadn’t even the time to stand, and the pillowcase wrapped around the front of his face before the soap connected with his ear. The weapon popped back toward Coralie’s shoulder, ready for another swing. Fingers jumped to his feet and tripped, leaving him sprawled out on the sidewalk, where he held his ear, wailing. She whacked him once more, missing his face but connecting with his collar bone.

Passers-by were all turning, and now one was rushing over. Coralie needed to escape.

“Go ahead and tell,” she told Eyeballs. “Tell and they’ll know what you did to me.”

Coralie ran away in the opposite direction from where she’d come. She found an elevator in the lobby of an hourly motel; inside, she emptied the pillowcase, kicked the bar soap to the corner, rolled up the cloth, and tucked it into a pocket. At the hotel’s top floor, she found a skybridge and began to cross.

In the skybridge’s glass-paneled sides, a young woman, maybe two or three years older than Coralie, with curly blonde hair and a summer dress, walked beside her past the

glass, walking upon the air. In her hand, she carried a Happy Meal by its handles. “It’s Okay to Love,” she said.

Coralie sighed and tried to focus ahead.

“I’ll give you two dougs off today—you know why?”

It might leave her alone if she answered. “Because It’s Okay to Love...”

“Uh-huh!” the girl said, full of good cheer. She began skipping, the hems of her dress bouncing, her Happy Meal swinging in a wide arc.

Coralie wished this skybridge had a beltway. As she got near the end, the girl said, “See you in McDonaldland!” and then faded away.

Still short of her level by two stories, Coralie caught an escalator. At the top, a beltway led back to Gander Street.

Once home, she looked up at Sara’s sensor. “Sorry,” Coralie said, “Hadta take care of that.”

There was no answer, which was strange—the front door sensor was the only one Sara always paid attention to. Coralie entered and closed the door. “Sara?” Not in the living room. In Sara’s cubby, her cube’s aurora pulsed with deep blues and violets—a color state Coralie had never seen. Nevertheless, a lit cube meant she was home, but where?

In the kitchen, Mom was rolling rice balls.

“Have you seen Sara?” Coralie asked.

Mom shook her head, and looked at the kitchen’s sensors. “Sara-chan?” Then she shrugged, shook her head, and went back to her rice.

Coralie opened the kitchen pantry—no answer.

Sara didn't answer in the hall, in her parent's bedroom or their closet, or in Coralie's and Sara's room. Coralie knocked on Michael's door. He wasn't home yet, so she went in, wading through his piles of clothes and calling out, but she wasn't in there, either. Was she ignoring all her sensors? She counted off each unit with her fingers: four in the living room, plus four in each bedroom, four more in the dining room (20 so far...), one in the pantry, three in the hall, one above the door and the other out beside the window (26...), one in their parent's walk-in closet, two on their skinny little porch... She hadn't checked the porch. She slid open the door and called for her. Nothing.

Where was the thirtieth sensor? It had been six years since Dad had installed them, but Coralie swore she knew where they all were. She walked through the place once more, counting. She was about to check outside again when she noticed the closet beside the front door—the one that held their jackets, the jackets no one ever had to wear because of Anchorage's consistent warmth. She put her ear to the door and could hear Sara sobbing inside.

Despite the spiders in there, she went in and sat on one of Dad's suitcases.

“What's wrong, Sara-berra?”

Sara sniffed. “I'm not a computer, Coralie.”

Oh, damn. “I know. I didn't mean it, okay?”

“I don't call you an animal just because you have a body.”

Coralie considered that, and what a really interesting analogy it was, and how often Sara was prone to that. It was one of those things that didn't make her quite human. But if Sara wasn't a computer, just what was she? Coralie would research it much later, when she was pre-med. Electronics engineers at Keio University in Tokyo had

discovered a peculiar phenomenon with recursive code run through silicon crystals.

Coralie didn't quite understand all the engineering jargon in the articles, but the gist was that a length of self-referencing code develops a pattern very quickly, and when this executing code is translated to light and placed in a properly doped cube, the code can continue to execute itself indefinitely. The scientists began decorating their offices with these cubes of trapped light and years went by with everyone thinking of them as pretty curiosities. One day, one of the cubes fell onto the floor, taking a chip out of it. The light within the cube wavered and turned dark. Led by Dr. Minamoto, a team of engineers tried to fix the chip in the glass, but the light inside eventually dimmed and disappeared.

That's when Dr. Minamoto began to think of them as life forms. They manufactured many more cubes and infused them with code. They worked on methods of communication. They installed touch points where the cubes sat, where the light beings could interface, and to these touch points they wired up cameras, speakers, anything they could think of. This is when the discovery started taking off.

They were like infants. No situational memory, no real senses, just a basic form in a silicon cube, making decisions about its own structure, the way a stem cell might decide to specialize and become cardiac muscle or a part of the nervous system. Each cube contained an individual since each sequence of code was unique. In a few decades, they had figured out how to integrate vision, hearing, odor analysis, and temperature perception through those touch points. Other senses emerged through the entity's experience, such as echolocation and depth perception. A sense of place developed after the first twelve to fourteen months, and the entities would use specific speakers to make it sound as though they were in a particular location within a room. And then the engineers

began teaching them, teaching them as though they were children, and they were children, they were *Jouki no Kodomotachi*, the vapor children, and they learned at the same rate as a human child. Their intelligence varied the same way human intelligence did, as did their emotions. But without hunger and physical pain, without hormones surging through their bodies, anger seemed non-existent within them. But sadness and loss... Well, Sara had always felt those quite acutely. And here, in the closet's gloominess, Coralie realized how self-centered she herself had been. The whole situation could have been solved with a hug, and this was one of the times Coralie wished she could do that. "Can we forget I said it?"

"I can try," Sara said.

"Fair enough," Coralie said, shuddering. "How bout we get out of the closet?"

Within minutes, the two were happily chatting, and Sara never brought it up again. But Coralie never forgot how she'd put her own sister down, and how could Coralie have done that, herself knowing what it feels like, with a brother always treating her as subhuman (and continues to do so even now)? Coralie will never forgive herself. Not ever.

* * *

This is Friday, Coralie's one day off before she must, once again, return to work. And it's never a day off, it's a time to get caught up on the unfinished chores of weeks' past, turning those chores needed to be done today into next week's, or the week after that. All this because of the sixteen-hour days at the Treatment Center. So what should she do? What to do?

* * *

Ah, this is a set of narrow, checker-plated steps, surrounded by a locked, waist-high, open-topped cage. That's why that young man chose the thirtieth level of Abbott. These must be the stairs the people on public service use to hang those celebratory banners from the sides of the skybridges: **Anchorage Wishes You a Happy Green Day**, and shit like that. Although the cage is locked, she could easily lift a leg over it. Why not try? Up and over and around. Now she's within the cage and upon the second stair. One step, two step, three step, four. Now from her waist up, she's above the glass sides of Abbott. One more step and she can lean forward into the open air, and look down. God, it's so far. Did she bring anything to drop? because she really wants to know how long it would take. Some people are yelling at her on the passing beltway, but the beltway takes them away. It could be so easy here. Just over, around, up the stairs, step off and downdowndowndowndowndowndowndown...

And then? Freedom.

But she didn't bring anything to drop.

Step down and get out of the cage.

* * *

Once more, another day of work begins, all scrubbed in and ready to go. But today it's not Lacey and Haylee, but Lacey and Renee.

Ask, "Did Haylee change her PSD or something?"

"Wedding," Lacey says, and then receives a surgical mask from Nurse Jenni.

No—*wedding* means *the union of two people*. "Huh?"

“*Wedding*,” Lacey says, “as in *Haylee and Cherles sitting in a tree*.”

K-I-S-S-I— “No way! *Cherles*?”

“Nice of her to invite us, huh?” Lacey’s eyes twinkle in a way Coralie can’t decipher, but it’s not likely that Lacey’s feelings are truly hurt.

Meh-faced Cherles Prince, and *Why you wanna name our son Cherles, dear? Cuz Cherles get the girls, that’s why*. Clever, clever...

This patient lies face-down on the table, unconscious, his right leg elevated in a sling. Coralie’s arms tire from keeping her sterile hands aloft, so, “What’s the procedure?”

“Warranty work,” Renee says.

Certainly not due to Coralie. “Oh? Our clinic?”

“Nuh-uh,” Renee says. “Lewis-McChord.”

Military stringers. What’d they get wrong this time?

“His calves are forty-two left,” Lacey says, “thirty-nine right. So, we need Strylon times three, right side.”

And “which muscles?”

“All soleus,” Lacey says.

Missing one—maybe two—per muscle could be a miscount. But missing three is lazy, careless, and worthy of a malpractice suit. “Did imagery confirm?”

Lacey and Renee nod.

“What are the angles?”

Renee reads them off a sterile tablet.

Well, this should be fairly routine, so grab the threader. Renee positions the ultrasound target above the patient's calcaneal tendon and angles it properly. Three well-aimed shots does the trick, all parallel with the muscle fibers within 0.02 percent.

Since Coralie's work was minor, the military might send this soldier straight off. "Renee, make a note in his chart that the recovery time's the same as if we'd done his whole body. Don't let the bastards RTD him."

"Got it," Renee says.

Pull off her gloves and mask and there's a sound—from another procedure room; although distant, the sound is sharp and distinguishable. It's a sound Coralie had only ever heard when her class had been practicing on cadavers. It was a juicy sound—sticky and abrupt—but fast as an explosion.

In the corridor, agonizing is the only sound. Follow it through a door and there stands Doctor Matthews and her two assistants, covered in shreds of flesh. They form a circle around their howling patient, whose intestines are left with nothing to hold them in, the missing flesh a slab some stupid kid in med school had called "the bacon."

Gotta ask, "Why aren't any of you dosing him?" and no one responds, so get to the dispensary, and screw Janelle for complaining Coralie's not supposed to rifle through the Hapqiq and the Floatera, and the screaming won't stop—hadn't they properly anesthetized the poor man?—and the box of Cofentanil autojectors is here, so rip the top off and grab some and pocket them, and several escape, bouncing away on the floor. Hustle back to the room now and the patient seems weaker, groaning instead of screaming, but certainly alive, and what pain this soldier must be in.

Dr. Matthews is cleaning her glasses in the sink. Her two assistants have left.

Gotta do it. Stick him in the neck.

It's just an easy touch and the medicine's in.

The soldier stops groaning, but the poor guy is awake. He wears a wedding ring. Smooth his hair and lie. "Your wife will be here any minute now."

"Husband," the soldier says, "but he's no good," and then he stops breathing.

Dr. Matthews still cleans her glasses.

Go to her. "Bridgit?"

Under the faucet's stream, she rubs a lens with her gloved thumb. "Six surgeries yesterday. Two already today. I got distracted. Didn't mean to. But..." She switches to rubbing the other lens.

Step behind her, pull the ties on her gown. Dr. Matthews steps off the faucet's pedal, towels her glasses dry, puts them on her head, and then allows the dirty gown to slide off her scrubs and onto the floor.

This doctor needs out of this place. "Let's get you home."

But Fabiola's at the door with two technicians. "Home? With this mess, nobody goin home." She turns to the technicians. "Bag the body and once it's clear, clean from the ceiling down. Got it?"

Bag the body. What a cold-hearted bitch. Walk Dr. Matthews to the door, and Fabiola fails to make way. "Excuse us."

The trio backs away. Step past and Fabiola says, "Ten minute break, but then Bridgit can move to Room 7."

Not gonna happen. "A patient is dead, Fabiola. Not because of Daria or K.C. or Bridget but because of *you*."

Fabiola tilts her head. “Coralie—”

“No! You’re putting too heavy a load on us.”

“Every other clinic—”

“Don’t give me that. Your databases and spreadsheets and tables full of numbers don’t mean shit. We are people, not machines.” Go on and walk Dr. Matthews out.

Fabiola has followed. “You have procedures scheduled!”

Guiding Dr. Matthews, step onto the beltway. “Reschedule them!” Give it a couple hundred meters, look back, and it appears the bitch gave up.

“I’m so stupid,” Dr. Matthews says, wiping her eyes.

“No, Bridgit—it was just a mistake.” And how many more days left in this life?

Look into the glass above:

Mapping...
87.83%

Two days? Three days? How’s she going to put up with three more days of this shit?

At the next intersection, Dr. Matthews says, “Thanks, Coralie—this is where I get off,” and steps onto the sidewalk. Before Coralie can follow, her colleague has already entered a stairwell.

* * *

That was just the excuse Coralie needed to take the rest of the day off, and isn’t that awful? She’s a terrible person because she knows damn well that soldier was also a person, no different than she, and yet she continues on, malingering, while he ended an hour ago. Who will continue on when she’s gone? Her parents smile within their picture

frame, dead, but somehow immortalized. With Coralie gone, where will the picture go? Dissembled, ground to pieces, and recycled within the bowels churning below 6 is where, again immortalized, its image gone but its pieces transformed into milk cartons or cereal boxes or even the recycling bins themselves.

What's in her pocket? A pen? Pull it out and...

Interesting.

The autojector is red and yellow and explicit. Skull-and-crossbones symbols adorn either end, obvious no matter how the axis is turned. Along the tube's side, in black letters on yellow plastic, it says, **Cofentanil, 0.5 mg**. The needle end has a spring trigger, and the opposite end has a red, thumb-activated safety.

Interesting how, with the patient, she hadn't even thought about the safety—it had just come so naturally. Click. Release. Click. Release.

Death. To what does the horror belong? Not in death. The screaming, the groaning, the moaning all occur while living. It's living that's painful. A forced endurance. Wanting the suffering to end, yet it persists. The heart keeps beating, the lungs keep breathing, the eyes keep watching. Broken and dying, but not dead. That's where fear lives.

Sit on her bed.

Click. Release.

* * *

Beyond the window, a woman crawls under barbed wire as nearby dunes and palm trees explode. She squints and screams.

Should Coralie transmit as soon as the implant finishes or does she wanna wait?

The rolling, flowery hills, the men surfing the waves at the resort... One last treat for this body. It'll be just fine to meet her end at the Aleutian Resort.

Ask, "Harold?"

Marry That Soldier! pauses and Harold walks to the window's center. "Yes?"

"Tell Randy I'll take the vacation. Make it on Tuesday."

"Done."

* * *

The next morning at work, it's not just Kat but also Fabiola beyond the counter.

"Morning, Kat!" Try the door and it's locked. Look and it's Fabiola at the button.

"I will see you in my office," Fabiola says, and then unlocks the door.

So, go in and wait for Fabiola—it's not long. The woman unlocks her door and motions Coralie in.

There's no avoiding it, so have a seat. Sonoran memorabilia lines the wall. If Fabiola is so proud to be Sonoran, why doesn't she live in Sonora?

Fabiola closes the door and then sits behind her desk. "Again, you cause us to reschedule multiple appointments. The incident was bad enough, but then you made us short by two surgeons."

Fabiola awaits a reply, so tell her. "My God—a patient explodes all over your surgeon and you're upset she went home?"

Fabiola shows no sign she was asked a question.

"Your numbers have stolen your soul."

Fabiola offers a tablet. “Read and sign,” she says.

Take it. The title says, FINAL WRITTEN WARNING. Some text above the signature line says, I UNDERSTAND blah, blah, blah... TERMINATED blah, blah, blah. God knows Coralie wants to maintain her composure, but once her giggles start, she can’t really stop. What should she do? Throw the tablet? Slap it onto Fabiola’s desk and break it? *Termination?* Good—she would enjoy vedging at home before the window, but focus off to the side and away:

Mapping...

91.16%

and the giggling abates. Yeah, just a couple days left anyhow, so none of this really matters. Just sign the stupid pad so she can get to work.

“I’m glad you find this funny,” Fabiola says.

Of course she does, so stand.

“You get terminated, and you’ll never work in medicine again.”

Whatever—the clinic in Skwentna would hire Coralie instantly and, besides that, Dr. Milstein could get her a job at the ER. “So you say.” Leave and go into her own office. Get her coat on, sit, and there’s Lacey’s knock.

“Hey,” she says, and takes a seat. “Gonna stick around today?”

“I might.”

“How’s Dr. Matthews?”

“Dunno.” Last Coralie saw, Dr. Matthews appeared to be in shock. “We got on the beltway and she stepped off right away.”

“She lives in Lazy Mountain.”

That has always sounded funny, as if living in a cave. “We were headed that way.”

“I’ll call her tonight, check up on her.”

Yeah, “I think she’d like that.” Time to get on with the day. “So, who’s first?”

“Of course, without you here, Haylee and I got clean-up duty.”

Ah, some resentment. Perhaps an apology would smooth things over. “Look—I’m *really* sorry, but I felt awful after dosing the poor kid, y’know? Never had to do that—to hasten someone’s passing, I mean. Performing surgery after that would have been irresponsible.”

“Sure,” Lacey says. “I suppose.” She clears her throat. “Corporal Leopold Dundee, final checkup before checking out. He’s leaving tomorrow along with the rest of the rotation.”

“How soon until the next rotation?”

Lacey gives her a look that says, *You stupid?* “Today?”

“Wonderful. Where’d they put him?”

“Exam 5.”

* * *

He says she doesn’t remember.

Remember... His eyes, his brow, his lips, his nose, his cheekbones, his face—a nice assembly, but nothing familiar. So, remember what? Give Corporal Dundee an expression that relays the vacancy in her mind.

His face flushes, either from embarrassment or from shyness. He says she did the surgery on his butt.

Pick up the tablet, flip through the pages, and yeah, she'd strung his glutes—almost three weeks ago now, on the day she'd been worrying about installing her implant. Now she's the one who's embarrassed. "Sorry. That was a busy day."

He slouches and turns away.

There it is again. He *is* shy. Or... Set the pad down. She's an idiot—he *likes* her. Could it be true? "Any pain?"

He looks at her... He says it's been only pain for the last month.

...the color of his eyes like caramelized sugar. "I mean, anything current." And his smile...

...wishful, as if he had little chance. He says it only hurts when he laughs. Or coughs. He looks down.

Tilt her head and try to coax his gaze back upon her. "The intercostals take a while to heal. Just try not to breathe."

That got him—he smiles.

"Let's test you out. Go ahead and stand."

The paper on the exam table's top crinkles as he slides off. He stands now at attention, as if for inspection.

May as well use his language, and please—try and smile. "At ease, soldier."

He nods, lets his hands relax, and moves his feet apart. He wears boxers on his hips and nothing more. From hips to ribs, his abdominals corset his waist. Above, his chest emerges like a pair of iron slabs. For someone who has been the victim of a

surgically necessitated, month-long recumbence, his shoulders and arms and legs show little sign of muscular atrophy. Matter fact, he's in wonderful shape. Better than Brent, or even Harold. Not that either of them have any real shape at all.

He says it's okay to call him Leo.

Sure, and *It's Okay to Love*. Come on, smile. "Okay."

He asks for her first name.

And oh, no. He's not really doing this. He's just being a nice guy, playing nice for the civilian. Gotta tell him like this: "Coralie," and now move on. "We're just going to do a few tests and make sure all your supplementations are working properly."

He says okay.

* * *

Jog, no walk, no jog, no walk, walk, walk. Whisper, "*Oh my God, Lacey.*"

Appears as though Lacey thinks Coralie is injured. "Yeah?"

"I think Leo likes me."

"Leo?"

Nod. "*Corporal Dundee. My patient?*"

Lacey frowns, and then whispers back. "*Coralie—you're in enough trouble already. Honestly: dating a patient?*"

Oh, come on.

Lacey sees the look and wilts. "*Want me to find out?*"

Duh. Nod. Nod some more.

Lacey strolls away to the exam rooms. There's nothing here for Coralie to flip through, and she'd left her phone in her office, so all she can really do is wait, so just stand and wait, and this takes forever.

As Lacey returns, she needs to say nothing—her expression says it all.

* * *

Late surgery, it's almost eight, and her throat is in her heart—wait, no, the other way around—and how should she knock? Not desperately, of course, but how does one knock all relaxed? Two knocks—one, two. And not too hard, because if she doesn't watch it, she could drive her knuckles right through the stupid door. This should be the easy part, and why can't it be? Just shut up and knock, already.

He says to come in.

Turn the handle softly, walk in, and she has stopped breathing; just close the door and her skin tingles and if anything touched her just now she'd probably spring backward right through the wall.

He tells the window to display Multnomah Falls.

And to her right, in the window mounted to the wall, a stream of misty water drops in front of a cliff dotted with ferns. A second fall cascades below a single-arched footbridge, the sound a steady static.

He tells her hello, calling her Coralie.

Gotta say something, but try and take a breath first. "Hey, Leo." Breathe, and should she sit beside him, or just stand here looking dumb?

He says he wishes they had more time.

And that's it—he wouldn't say that to someone who's just his doctor. He wants more. Thank God he wants more. Better be worthy of his attention, so go ahead, lie beside him, see where this goes.

* * *

“Private Manny Spinoza,” Lacey says, “bi- and tri-.”

There had been no sleep in the night. Stuck behind this stupid desk at this stupid job when she should be by Leo's side, enveloped in his arms, whispering and teasing and kissing...

“Should be done by eleven,” Lacey says. “After lunch, we'll tackle Private First Class Dixon Greene, who's getting his knee ligaments done.”

Leo leaves today. Why couldn't the night have lasted forever? “I won't be back till two-thirty or three.”

Lacey looks up from her tablet. “Fabiola will shit.”

Oh, well. “Give her a diaper, then.” Walking Leo to Elmendorf is mandatory. The Anchorage Biomechanical Treatment Center can suck it. “Set it up for three.”

“What are Haylee and I gonna do for four hours?”

Whatever you want, like “you could go home.”

Lacey shakes her head, thumbing her tablet.

* * *

At 11:05, Coralie runs the final thread. “Okay, can you two finish up?”

Above Haylee's mask, she looks surprised. “Sure!”

Lacey looks toward the ceiling.

* * *

When Coralie arrives, Leo is dressed in his uniform, running a lint brush over himself. Kiss him, lead him to the bed and he resists. Turn and ask, “Something wrong?”

He says he got dressed up so they could take pictures, and he waves his phone at her.

How thoughtful! Take out her phone as well. Snap a few, kiss him again, and then strip that uniform clean off him.

* * *

Whisper, “*Wait.*”

She and Leo are hunched down below the nurse’s station. Nurse Marisol disappears into a patient’s room.

They’re in the clear. “Come on.” Lead him to the food cart, take some sandwiches, and shove them into her purse. Now take his hand. “Okay, let’s get outta here.” Hurry away and push through the door into the lobby. Tell Kat, “See ya at three!” Go on out and onto the beltway.

After just a block, Leo tugs at her hand. Her tells her to come, to follow him to the perfect spot.

Perfect? As long as it’s with him it could be anywhere. Of course, follow.

He leads her to an el, holding her as they ride down to 30. Although they had showered no more than thirty minutes ago, hints of musk are upon him, and a squeeze to his ass brings a kiss to the top of her head. The el's door opens, so follow. He says it's not far, just a couple blocks.

She can't help but beam at him, and she's gotta take two steps for each of his because his legs are just that sexy. And she also can't help but notice that, for once in her life, every woman around seems envious.

Soon, they're upon a greenroof lawn, decorated sparsely with boulders—each one taller than she—and he takes her to one, sits, and leans his back against it.

Sit with him and take out the sandwiches. “Looks like we have a couple tuna, a couple turkey and bacon.”

He puts an arm around her shoulder. He asks what her preference is.

Lean into him. “Tuna, I guess.”

He takes a turkey and bacon and unwraps it. He says this will do perfectly and takes a bite.

Unwrap the tuna. Nearby, a flowing creek babbles. “You like the water, huh?”

He says he finds the sound soothing.

And it is. Have a bite and lean deeper into him.

* * *

It's 1:45 at the el, and the door opens.

Coralie has never been up to Elmendorf. “Sure it's okay?”

He says they can ride together, but only he can exit on 190. He leads inside.

Go, of course, and hold him, and she's just tall enough for her ear to rest atop his heart. A hundred and thirty floors makes for a long ride, but it could never be long enough. Until two days ago, each day dragged—every one since the death of her parents—but what's happened since yesterday? Every second seemed to slip away and there was nothing she could do—nothing at all—to hold onto this time with Leo.

His heart seems fast. "Nervous?"

He denies it, saying again he wishes they had more time.

Listen to his heart, to his breath. Breathe in his scent. These are the only moments left worth caring about.

He sees her tear, wipes it away, and kisses her.

Someone says, "Get a room," and how juvenile, but don't stop until the door opens.

When it does, everyone beyond the door looks like Leo, only with machine guns strapped across their chests.

He says he wants to make it back to her, and his kiss comes again.

Like all the other moments, the kiss ends. "Do it, then."

He smiles. Then he stands tall, raises his chin, and turns from her. He marches into Elmendorf and the door slides closed behind him.

* * *

On the twenty-five northbound, Coralie is almost back to work, and how could she just let Leo go like that? But there was no avoiding it, tomorrow was bound to come—they both knew it—and now she's got even more reason to hate Cascadia.

* * *

After another fight with Fabiola, after another seven-hour stringing, and after getting on the beltway home—here it comes, the moose, sprinting up beside her on the other side of the glass. “Exit now!” he pants. “Take the escalator down!” But no, don’t step off, and the moose slows to a walk, although its adjacency doesn’t change any.

Don’t look at the moose. Maybe there’s an ad for shoes around somewhere...

He trots ahead within her peripheral vision, off to the right.

Look left and how irritating—can’t even commute in peace. If the moose were a person, she could sue for harassment, but since he’s an ad, it can haunt her from now till her motorized-chair days and she’d have no legal recourse and, yep—he’s still there—only now, he stands with its nose pressed against the glass, making faces.

Stop looking, but she can’t. The moose has rounded his lips and widened his eyes, just as though he’s on the verge of performing a trick. Now, he struggles, pushing his hoof as hard as he can against the glass. *As hard as he can?* It’s a computer-generated graphic—a cartoon—there is no *hard is he can*. Then—pop!—the hoof presses through.

Blink and look again. The hoof certainly is on this side of the glass. The moose’s face says, *This trick has a Part Two...*

Suddenly, the moose leaps past the glass and onto the beltway.

It’s not like Coralie hasn’t seen holograms on her side of the glass before, but this is crazy. This cartoon moose looks *real*.

He trots up and runs in circles around her feet. “Come on, come on, come on! Stop ignoring me!”

Search the other commuters' faces to see if they're watching, but no, they all seem oblivious to this spectacle. Go on and shush him.

"That's better!" he says. Then he stops running and begin rubbing an antler on her leg.

Thank God she can't feel it.

* * *

She had finally ditched the moose when she transferred onto the twenty-third level of 121st Avenue and now, at home, she's grateful to be rid of it. Technology—always marching forward, always finding a new angle, always becoming more intrusive. The moose was irritating enough before, but circling around Coralie's feet? Unbearable!

Never mind. It's just another ad. "Window: TV."

Harold appears, bronzed and less beautiful than Leo. "Welcome home," he says.

Pull out her phone. "First, I want to order a print."

All of Coralie's photos appear in the window. Wave the older ones away and the one she wants appears. Point to it. "I want that one, wallet sized."

"Done," Harold says. "It'll be up in ten or fifteen minutes."

And then there's the vacation. "I need to talk to Randy."

"Just a sec," Harold says, and then walks away.

Randy walks front and center, and waves. "Hey there, Coralie! Bet you're looking forward to tomorrow!"

"I need to put off the vacation. Something has come up."

Randy blinks rapidly. "Is it some kind of emergency?"

“No, no...” Why does she have to explain herself? It’s not like she’s trying to cancel. “I just can’t yet. I still wanna, but we’ll set another date soon.”

Randy nods understandingly. “Only problem is we agreed on a reservation. The Aleutian Resort has already spent a great deal in good faith anticipating your arrival. It’ll be impossible to resell your room—even at half price—on such short notice.”

Asshole. “How much is it going to cost me?”

Randy shows his palms. “The cancellation fee would be 250 dougs, but we’re not talking about cancellation. So, I’ll tellya what—for an additional five dougs a month, we’ll call it even. Just be sure to reschedule within thirty days.”

Five dougs seems reasonable. “Sounds fine.”

As Randy and Harold switch places, a green light flashes, startling her. Let her focus drift:

Ready.

And it’s over—the mapping of her neurons, the unbearably protracted wait—finally over. She can transmit, wake up in Tokyo, with everything but this body’s death tied up in a neat little bow. But now there’s love—now there’s Leo—and not only that, but what if she’s pregnant?

Eight

Pour the first cup of the day, mix in the creamer, take a sip. Look at the photo she and Leo took together, and isn't he handsome? The draft is a one year term, and Leo has been in surgery for a month, so eleven more months—that's how long Cascadia can keep him in their clutches. Can he really survive? No one ever makes it back alive. Cascadia says they do—homecomings are showcased on the news—but when has she ever met a veteran?

This *place*—could she possibly hate it more?

If he does live, she'd endure this place for him.

What a mess. Something in her knows she's a fool, but she can't help to hope.

And it figures Dr. Minamoto would call just now, so tell him “hello.”

“I have news,” he says.

“*Hai.*”

“On Saturday, Sara moved into her new home.”

Three days ago, into the *burenku*. So, Sara decided to go through with it, as Coralie thought. “No complications?”

“Everything is normal.”

Imagine... Twenty-nine years old and waking up in a body for the first time.

“I'm glad.”

“As for you, what is the percentage?”

That would be a hundred, but “let me look.” Ninety-six wouldn't be too far off, but he'd expect her to upload and transmit too soon. She needs to delay things until the

end of her cycle. The last one... Was it before or after the implant? It's been three weeks now. Will he believe ninety-four? Ninety-two? "It's been stuck on eighty-nine for a couple days now."

Dr. Minamoto grunts. "*Fukano de aru...*"

In other words, bullshit. "Something has come up."

"The *burenku* awaits. If it awakens without the upload, we cannot proceed." *It will awaken and begin living its own life, and to impose another life upon it would be immoral.*

Coralie has wanted out for so long she can hardly remember feeling any differently, and life waiting until its final days to give her a reason to stay doesn't seem fair. "I need a few days."

"We are ready *now*, Coralie-san."

"I can't. Not yet."

The call ends.

* * *

About twenty minutes later and the phone's ringing again and it's Leo!, so turn off the shower and say *hey*.

He says he made it to Seoul, and it's hurry-up-and-wait, and he wanted to hear her voice.

If only she could hop on his phone like Sara used to hop on hers. "I miss you already," and that did it, but suppose the shower's the perfect place to cry.

He says he misses her too, that he's going to draw his gear, that he's then going to board the *CS McLoughlin*, that it might be hard to get another call out.

Gotta make him understand he's valuable, but her throat chokes. Swallow and take a breath. "Don't be too brave, Leo. Just stay alive."

He says that's the goal, that the line's moving, that he's got to go.

Never enough time. "Love you."

He says the same and then he's gone.

Set the phone back on the toilet lid and turn the water on hot, hot enough to distract her from the fear permeating her mind.

* * *

Work lasted forever. Now, with the last patient of the day closed, the surgical gown doffed, she sits in her office, in the place where her chair has a desk in front of it, where the books of her youth gather dust upon the shelf behind her, and where, beyond the desk, her hard-won diploma hangs from a nail, and a knock, duh-DUH-duh, which means it's Lacey, and she never waits for Coralie to answer. Lacey enters, already out of scrubs and into—is that a bustier? and the cups of her ass hang below the bottom of her shorts. "Guess what day it is?" she asks.

Of course, "It's Taco Tuesday," at the Big Banga Boogie.

"Yeah, grrrrl," Lacey says, sticking out her tush and nodding it.

Stuck. Deny her tonight and Lacey will take it all personal. Just go, have a few tacos, and leave—that's all Coralie's obligated to do. "I didn't bring a change of clothes, so I need to stop home."

Lacey looks skeptical.

Put her at ease. "I'll meet you there. By seven."

Once home, sort through the clothes she never had the opportunity to wear for Leo. How could he have found her sexy in scrubs? With no makeup? With her hair all mussed from wearing a surgical cap all day? Wear something simple, something comfortable and cool. Sure, the Nikes, too. Not the best dancing shoe, but neither are the heels.

Go out the door and the moose trots in-place on the sidewalk. "All right! Whatcha celebratin, toots?"

Look toward Elmendorf and walk past.

"Oh, boy, a night out!" the moose says. He hops with her onto the beltway.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

Go straight for the forty and he clip-clops right alongside. Try and kick him off, but it's no use.

In revenge, he rams her a couple times and then shakes his head clear. "Alright. I think you learned your lesson!"

Lake Otis Parkway approaches to the right, so step over to the sidewalk.

"No, no! A few more blocks!"

Take the stairs down so she can get on the northbound beltway. The moose doesn't follow, thank God. It's only a few blocks and a quick el ride to the Big Banga Boogie, where there's a five-doug cover charge for women, and how do they get away with that kinda sexist shit?

Inside, the beat's bumpin and the music's got all the girls movin and wavin and dippin to the rhythm, but Lacey's not tearing up the floor as usual, so perhaps she has yet to arrive—might as well fill up at the taco bar.

“Hey, Coralie,” Sammy says. “Long time, no see.”

Sammy's owned this place for years, and Coralie used to hang with her weekly, complaining about the lack of men, complaining about the other women's voraciousness when there was a guy or two in-house. Since Lacey spent most her time on the floor, Sammy had been Coralie's stand-in companion. But when Coralie started on the supplementations, part of what she'd given up was coming to the club on Tuesdays.

“Sorry, babe. Work's been keepin me late most nights.”

Sammy smiles and scoops seasoned salmon into a couple taco shells. “Me, too.”

Yeah, makes sense, so smile and nod.

Sammy adds cheese, guacamole, lettuce, and tomatoes—just the way Coralie likes. She holds out the plate. “Lacey coming tonight?”

“She'll be along.” Take some napkins, sign for a five-doug tip, and take a seat at a table. Coralie's stomach feels like it's kneading bubbles, so take a bite. Delicious.

Seems Lacey actually beat Coralie here because there's no time for another bite before Lacey weaves off the dance floor with a couple guys in tow. She looks confident, sure, and purely sexual. With an arm on the shoulder of each guy, she nods one way, saying, “James,” and then the other way, saying “Jamal,” and then toward her, “meet my friend, Coralie.”

Smile? Take another bite of the taco.

“Asian sensation,” Jamal says.

Yeah, what every college acquaintance had called her at one time or another. Jamal and James are cute, for sure, but their expressions bleed with the insincerity that precedes a one-night stand. Tell Jamal, “Good one.”

Lacey looks as if slapped, a look she quickly corrects. “Guys!” she says, turning them away from the table. She chats with them, leading them a few meters away. Then she rushes back and sits. “What’s going on? *Come on*. What’s up?”

Set the taco down and talk in her ear. “I figured tonight would be like any other Tuesday. I’m sorry, but Leo—”

Lacey pulls her ear away. “Leo *who*? Come on—who’s more important? Someone *right here*? Or some dude in China?”

A slight lift in the shoulders seems the only answer.

“Coralie—I *need* this.”

Oh, God. “I can’t. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Lacey face darkens and falls, as though a victim of a bilateral stroke. When she looks away, she smiles again and hurries to the guys, saying something, and both Jamal and James shake their heads and blend into the dancing crowd. Lacey stands, back turned, hanging her head.

If Coralie had told Lacey *no* back at the clinic, everything would be fine now. Why did Coralie come, anyway? For the tacos? Just forget the tacos and leave.

Outside, the moose looks excited to get going. “All tuckered out, yeah?”

Step onto the beltway. “Shut up.”

“Come on,” the moose says. “I wanna take ya somewhere.”

Step up to the twenty-five. “Shit! Fucking *leave me alone!*”

A family passes by on the forty, staring.

“Okay, doll. Two more intersections and we go down a few floors.”

Hop on the forty and catch up with the family. One, a blonde boy of ten or eleven years, sees her and tugs at the sleeves of his father.

“Okay, let’s step off here!” the moose says.

But no—continue on.

“Come on! Come on!” the moose says.

Point at the child. “You! You saw the moose, didn’t you? Can you see the moose? Can you?”

The mother shrieks. The father steps ahead of his family and spreads his arms in protection. Their eyes gaze wildly.

Step down to the twenty-five and let them travel ahead.

“Awww,” the moose says, “we passed it.”

* * *

Beside the bed, Mom and Dad smile on the beach at Okinawa, in the blue sand, surrounded by their auras. Those must’ve been the days, for sure.

The family thought her crazy—not one of them saw the moose.

Stress can cause psychosis—Leo having to leave for China, Coralie having to deal with her horrible job, and, lastly, Coralie having to kill herself to leave this horrible place. The trip to the resort could alleviate some of that stress. Still, the moose: some figment of her imagination? or something with a simple explanation? Like an ad. *Gotta* be an ad.

But no one makes an ad visible to only one person. Since she's the only one who can see it, they'd have to have access to...

Her brain.

The implant in her head. Sure, an ad agency has hacked into her implant. But the implant's meter only works at one focal distance. Right now, it glows green, saying:

Ready.

and it doesn't look very sharp, and it's certainly at a lower resolution than the moose.

Oh, who knows.

Wonder if Lacey's gonna forgive her. *Leo* who? *Come on—who's more important? Someone* right here? *Or some dude in China?*

Lacey doesn't understand. Or, maybe she knows all too well.

Nuh-uh. Don't lose hope. Please don't.

* * *

Retract. Rotate to "169.41, proximal."

"169.41," Haylee says. She lines up the imagery.

Apply pressure on the gun. "Ready?"

"Ready," Haylee says.

"Firing." Press the trigger.

"0.002," Lacey says. "Normal and normal."

"Good." Retract. Lacey's been little better than a dead fish all day, and even if she is angry, how could she send Haylee in this morning for the briefing? Never mind for now. She'll be over it by tomorrow. "190.59, proximal."

“190.59,” Haylee says.

Apply pressure. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Haylee says.

Align the target with the imagery. “Firing.” Press the trigger.

“0.001,” Lacey says. “Normal and normal.”

“Good.” Ordinarily, Lacey would woo-hoo an error of 0.001. Not today. Not after last night. Retract. “211.76, proximal.”

“211.76.”

What could she possibly do to make up for it? Apply pressure. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Line it up. “Firing.” Press the trigger.

“0.002”

Behind, the OR’s door bangs open. Twist for a look and it’s Fabiola, holding a mask on her face flat-handedly. Her nails had been manicured since their last discussion.

“Sorry to interrupt, ladies. We just got the call we all gonna stay late.”

Nurse Delores wheels into view on her stool. “What happened?”

“Chinese sunk the *McLaughlin*.”

Feels like Coralie’s heart leaps into her sternum.

Fabiola continues. “We need to get the next rotation through. No day off, no public service. This rotation is our only priority.” She leaves and the door flaps closed behind her.

Haylee breaks out in a sob. “Cherles!” she cries. Her targeting scanner falls to the floor. “My Cherles was on the *McLaughlin!*” She raises her hands to her face. Oh, God—she’s gonna contaminate the field.

Gotta tell her. “Haylee! Step back!”

Haylee does as she’s told. Her eyes dart to random places in the horrors of thought, and then she runs from the room.

Lacey steps into Haylee’s place. “Are *you* okay?” she asks. Coralie can read Lacey’s expression, even with a mask over it—it’s concern, and the knowledge that Leo too was aboard the same ship.

Moving right along. “I’ll make it.”

Nurse Jenni steps in where Lacey had been.

What was the next angle? “232.94...” Take a deep breath. “...proximal.”

Lacey lines up the imagery. “232.94, verified.”

Apply pressure. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Lacey says.

Align the gun with the target. “Firing.” Press the trigger.

“0.001,” Jenni says.

Now, appreciate and motivate. “Good job. Let’s keep it up.”

* * *

A minute till midnight.

Strip off the gloves and the mask—trash. From the collar, pull the gown up, pull the top tie; pull the other ties; pull the gown off—hamper. Off to the office. Close and lock.

Breathe, and she breathes.

It's okay to lose it—no one to risk but her.

Breathe, and she weeps.

Come on and breathe. Gotta check and see if Fabiola's right. Upon a stand on Coralie's desk is a window. "Window: News, the CS *McLoughlin*."

The top item reads, "CS *McLoughlin* Sunk in Sea of Japan: No Survivors."

Press the headline and a CBC videobox appears with a young, auburn-haired woman in it. She speaks: "The Cascadian Ship *McLoughlin*, a naval vessel transporting the 2nd Infiltration Division of Cascadian Cyber Forces, was engaged by the Chinese Coastal Defense Force. The *McLoughlin*, facing overwhelming firepower, split in two and sank within minutes. The Chinese claim to have engaged in search-and-rescue operations, but report that no survivors were found. Be sure to subscribe to receive alerts on this breaking news story."

No doubt about it—Fabiola was right. Right now, Coralie can be anywhere but behind that desk, so stand, shuffle around to its side, and... *Leo is gone*. Breathe, and fuck all she weeps. Around her are the symbols of her life, of her practice, of her profession. Upon the wall, her hard-won diploma hangs from a nail.

Her desk is made of a laminated wood top and metal legs.

She bends and takes hold of one of those legs, pressing her other hand on the table's surface. She rips the leg free like a twig from a tree branch. Two galvanized bolts hold a twisted fragment of sheet metal to the rod's end, looking gnarly. Just as well.

She bats the window off its stand and its fractured, laminated mass thumps into some shelved books before dropping to the floor.

The four-cornered table lists without its fourth leg, but it still stands. She can change that. She centers herself at the table's supplicant end and, like a whip, she winds back, and then clubs the table, and the plasticized veneer splits, and the wood beneath dents, but, as hard as she struck, as loud as it cracked, no satisfaction came with it. This time as she strikes, she shrieks, descending with both arms, punching a rod-shaped hole through the fiber board. She yanks the rod free of the desk's twisted metal drawers, turns around, and, like a throwing axe, hurls the rod at the wall. Her diploma hops before exploding into glass shards and wood splinters.

She rolls the desk on its side, pulls off another leg, and casts it aside. She grabs the desk by its sides, making styluses and push-pins and medicinal sample packs bleed out, and as she raises the desk above her head, its remaining legs scrape ceiling tiles, which drop behind her. She whacks the floor with the desk, and in her arms she feels the two halves split, and the feeling is accompanied by the din of hollow, banging metal. A warped frame still holds deformed drawers, as well as the top's two halves together. With a foot on one half, she yanks and twists and pulls the other half free.

Coralie wields the desk-half to her side. With a single twist at the waist and a roar, she launches it at the bookshelf. Five hundred pounds of references, more easily read in the window, flop to the ground.

The dumb waiter, where she'd received a McDonald's lunch nearly daily for the last couple years, remains undamaged in the wall. She heaves the other desk-half at it and it dings.

She nods at the mess around her. Feels good.

She will never see Leo again. Not in this life, anyway.

Coralie's purse sits undamaged on the floor. She picks it up and opens the door. Fabiola is outside, and her eyes scan the mess.

Walk by and Fabiola says nothing.

* * *

No way that wasn't a deal breaker, fuck that job, and Coralie has passed the beltway home how far ago? Two blocks? Three? Just where is she?

The moose gallops ahead of her, turning its head to ensure she's following. "Psst!" he says. "Come on!"

How could she let herself believe Leo would make it? No one ever comes back from China. How could she have been so stupid? She'd hoped... *Hope*. When does *hoping* for anything do any good? *Hope for good grades*. Ha! She'd had to study every free minute of every single day. *Hope for a raise*. Sure, she got a raise every year, each time a percentage or two below inflation. *Hope for world peace*. Whoever does that: a fool. Never has happened, never will.

"Psst," says the moose.

Above the sunshine blocks, the beltway pulls her into a cloud's shadow and, to her left, a stream of people exit the shadow into light.

“Oooohhhhhhhh,” the moose says, hopping on his hooves, clacking like castanets. “We’re gettin close now!”

Beyond the skybridge’s glass sides, various caricatures and flashy signs beckon, competing for space to attract Coralie’s attention. Look between them, outward into the deep, the depth that wants to take her, to swallow her whole and deliver her onto the firm surface of Level 6. All at once, the beltway’s forward motion makes the distance beyond the glass zoom at her, and nausea attacks, so step off to the sidewalk, lean over and breathe, just let the feeling pass...

“Don’t stop just now!” says the moose. “Come on!”

Look up and through the glass and the Hamburgler blinks at her. On the sidewalk, the moose twiddles its hooves. The nausea is gone; why not follow the moose?

“That’s right, doll,” the moose says, “I’ll take care of ya.”

Across the skybridge and two blocks over, the moose walks through a set of thick, French doors. Unlike the moose, Coralie will need to open the door, so pull. To the left, bathed in dim light, are some booths; ahead, each with seating for four, are some tables; and to the right stretches a bar, where the moose already stands atop a barstool. He’s clacking his hooves on the glossy bartop, screaming, “Hey! Barkeep! Hey! Hey!”

Suppose Coralie should sit beside him. Why did she let Leo go? She could have fired a thread through his calf with a five-percent error, crippling him if not for life, then at least for a good six months. And isn’t she horrible for not at least entertaining the idea, and asking him if she should? But he’d’ve said *no*. He was too good a man to neglect his duty, and she too proud to do an imperfect job. What a waste. They shove the young,

handsome, and moral into the twisting meatgrinder, while the unhealthy, the chickenshit, and the manwhores stay behind.

Dragging feet sound from the left and a man appears at the service end of the bar. He's crooked in the back, with hair the color of goose down, and wrinkles deep as upholstery seams. Perfect teeth reside within his smile, giving him an appearance of artificiality, but the genuineness in his eyes says he's glad to see her, that she's anything but an imposition—which is exactly what the cashiers in the retailer's windows are programmed to do—but this man isn't on the other side of a window, he's real and right here.

“A little slow,” the bartender says in a quaky voice, “but I get the job done.”

“Awww, yeah,” the moose says, “about time!”

“So, what can I getcha?” the bartender asks.

The moose speaks as if his team just scored a goal. “*Molson Dirty Brown, baby!*”

“Suppose I'll have a Molson—Dirty Brown?”

The bartender slides something below his counter and glasses tingle. He trundles to the tap, angles the glass, fills it, and brings it back.

A tiny mug has also appeared in the moose's hoof. In a couple gulps, he chugs half the drink, and then sighs in ecstasy. “Oh, *yeah!* That hits the spot!”

This is what's been stuck in her head: A beer ad.

“Getcha something to eat?”

Coralie's stomach feels punched. "I don't think I could eat." Try a little taste to see what the moose's fuss was all about. Gotta strong, yeasty flavor, reminiscent of dark chocolate.

"Some bad news come your way?"

The snort is involuntary. Wash it down with a gulp. "Lost my boyfriend in China and then walked off my job."

Compassion? Is that look for real or what? "Lost both my granddaughters over there. The two weren't sisters, but cousins. Best of friends, though."

A good reason to lift and drink. "I'm sorry."

"Sorrow is a burden most of us share now." The man clears his throat. "Lucky my grandson emigrated to the ROT. Left before this whole mess started."

Sure, nod, lucky him, and drink up the rest.

The bartender removes the empty. "Another?"

The moose raises his mug. "Aye, keep em comin, barkeep!"

* * *

Coralie hadn't kept her balance on the beltway—she fell transferring belts, landing on her thigh and shoulder, and getting a good skinning through her scrubs. A couple Samaritans helped her up. Full of beer, as well as advice from the bartender regarding employment, she entered her home.

It's time to talk to Harold. "Window: TV."

He appears before her. "Hello, Coralie." His eyes are attracted to her scrubs' bloody stains. "So, some antiseptic? Some gauze pads?"

No and no, so shake her head. “Got all that.”

“Another set of scrubs?” he asks, looking hopeful and disturbed at the same time.

“Harold—I wanna leave now.”

“Leave?”

“The trip—the Aleutian Resort. I need to leave now.” The drunkenness in her own voice sounds unnatural. Just *what* was in that Dirty Brown?

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“When, then?”

“Tomorrow at nine—which is better, I think. It’ll give you time to...” he pointed in a line from her shoulder to her knee, “...fix that.”

Tomorrow. Just hang her head. “Window: West Number Seven.”

Harold dissolves away and outside, moonlight dances on wavecrests.

* * *

In the dark bedroom, Coralie’s vision flashes between orange and green, like a monstrous neon sign in the bad part of town:

Mapping...

Ready.

Mapping...

Ready.

Mapping...

If only Coralie could turn it off. Try—just try and think of something else. But what else is there? A child to love. Could she really raise a child in this place? Well, in this

home—sure. It's Anchorage that's the problem. And Cascadia. But the child would matter regardless of this place.

Only two paths ahead:

1. Go to the Aleutian Resort. If she is, tell Dr. Minamoto about the baby—he'll understand. She can count on Dr. Milstein to find her work. It won't be a job in her specialty, but she's *done* stringing soldiers.

2. Go to the Aleutian Resort. If she's not, upload, transmit, and then walk along the beach to a nice place, use the autojector and join Leo in the ever-after.

Wishful thinking the pregnancy—is Coralie just trying to hold on to someone who is gone, never to return? No... It's not a wish—it's a possibility. She very well could be pregnant. Sleep, now. Sleep and perhaps he'll come in a dream.

The autojector rests in her hand, beside her thigh.

Just a quick push and done.

No.

Go on now.

No.

Ready.

Mapping...

Ready.

No, no, no. Set it on the nightstand.

* * *

Through the window, the moon sets behind the palm trees of Fire Island.

“Window: Clock.”

5:09 A.M. there.

Mug, faucet, turn the brown knob and fill, push the mug into the fridge’s dispenser, stir with a finger, and then gulp it down—so much better than yesterday’s Dirty Brown.

In the bathroom, pull off the stained scrubs and check out the abrasions. They both cover a large region, but are superficial in depth. She can clean them fine in the shower, but more coffee first.

In the kitchen, fill the mug, take a sip, set it on the counter. Time to water Doggie, so fill the pitcher.

Underfoot, something crunches in the living room, so flip up the light switch and Doggie’s leaves have fallen. Those few still on his branches have wilted. Feel one—dry as paper. Low down, a deep crack runs through his bark. Touch it and a huge chunk drops off. Doggie’s other three legs are worse.

Doggie is dead.

Sit on him. Pat his top. She may soon be with him.

Wouldn’t she rather die at home? Vacation is such a commercial thing. She’ll get there and it’ll be nothing like it looks through the window. There’ll be a worn-out carpet, a dirty shower, a noisy party in the bungalow next door, and the beach... She has always wanted to go to the beach. But in Anchorage, the law is **STAY ON THE TRAIL**,

which is funny because no trail leads outside, and no trails exist because *Every Step Destroys Soil*. Only planes and trains exit Cascadia.

Doggie... Just how long does she sit with Doggie?

The Aleutian Resort—where she can kick through the sand, ride on the waves, splash in the water.

That's what she wants to do if she dies.

So, pat Doggie once more and get into the shower. Dry off and Coralie's wounds don't even need bandaging. In the icky closet, get the extra bag Mom hadn't taken on her final flight. Carry it to the bedroom and pack it, pack it full, put everything she's gonna need inside... There's another bag in Coralie's closet, one she can't ever remember using. Well, she's gonna use it now. Fill it with makeup and a hairbrush, a couple razors and lotion, toothbrush and toothpaste; but the phone, the uploader, and the autojector—better keep those on hand.

And better get dressed now, so pull a blouse from her drawer and put it on. Will it be too warm for these jeans? If so, she can change when she checks in. Is it time yet? Gotta be time to go.

Zip up the bags and put them by the door. The window says 8:01 A.M. Won't she get there awful early? Who cares—gotta go. Gotta get moving. Shoulder the bags, grab her purse, open the door, and gasp.

There stands Agent Goodman.

Vacation

The fear of death is worse than death.

—Robert Burton

Nine

He won't stop her now. "I remember you." If he makes a move to arrest her, just knock him on the head and go. "Agent Goodman, why are there no dogs at the end of your leash?"

Agent Goodman folds his arms across his chest. "Where are you off to?"

As if he doesn't know. "Munna go on vacation."

"First thing this morning, Miss Sandoval filed a lawsuit against you."

Damn that Fabiola. "Shouldn't affect my vacation any."

Goodman's expression says otherwise. "If you stay and get back to work, I can smooth all that out. I'll get your expenses refunded—no harm done."

Check the time on her phone. "I gotta go." Lift her suitcases, but make them look heavy and offer them out. "Why don't you walk me to the el?"

Goodman takes them in his wrinkled hands.

Stash the phone inside her purse and close the door behind her. Beneath the window, the Public Service Squad's broadleaf plants have sent up blooming shoots—birds of paradise. Itta been nice to see them before now—before the moment she might be leaving them forever. Oh, well. It's just a few steps to the beltway, so skip on up to the forty.

Goodman, with her suitcases in hand, makes the transfers less efficiently, needing to hustle to try and catch up, which is just as well—he *is* the asshole who broke her nose, after all.

Soon, he's beside her again. "You're living the good life," he says. "Why give that up?"

The good life? Twelve, fourteen hours on her feet? Earning half what she should? Always buying necessities and nothing more? *Really?* But now it can be, because "a vacation is the good life, isn't it?"

Goodman sets her luggage on the beltway. "You own your home, you don't pay on a mortgage, and you don't pay rent. Only those in Stressford enjoy that luxury. But without your job, you won't be able to pay the taxes. Your home will get a lien for non-payment. I mean, think about it."

"I have." Need to transfer a floor down, so step down to the twenty-five.

Goodman picks up the bags and this time it's as though he's tethered to her. Move to the sidewalk, and down the stairs. Get on the westbound and up to the forty belt and Goodman's not even panting—pretty healthy for an old man.

"Take the offer," Goodman says. "Take a couple days off, even. Think about what you value in life."

What she values: Leo, Mom, Dad, Sara, Doggie, and living until tomorrow—and she only values the last one for the baby. "Everything I value is already gone."

"Don't go."

The el is coming up. "If you can give me two days off, then you can give me two weeks." After which she'll know—maternity or death. "I promise I'll consider whatever you have to say."

"I can't save your job after two weeks."

Once to the el, the display reads **126**. “A job isn’t the problem. I could work full time at the Skwentna Clinic and they’d still be short staffed.”

Goodman sets her luggage beside her. “You didn’t prepay your daily tax.”

He’s still spying on her? “So?”

“It tells me you may not come back.”

The number is already down to **27**, so pick up her bags. “I’ll be back. Talk to me then.”

She’d finally worn Goodman down because he says nothing. At **21**, a bell sounds and the doors slide open. Step in, turn around, and Goodman’s there, watching, a mild expression of sadness not only upon his face, but also in his posture—and doesn’t that feel wonderful?

The doors close, and Goodman makes no sense to Coralie. Last time he broke her nose, but this time he pled with her in desperation. It almost seems as though he’s taken a liking to her. Perhaps if she’d not lost Leo, she’d be taking a liking to him, too. But, no—that’s impossible now. Impossible.

* * *

Done with security and wasn’t that a hassle? The latex-gloved woman had emptied her bags, despite the scanner having done a complete inventory, and then asked what the strange device in her purse was. *It’s for transporting a ghost*, Coralie said, and the woman had no idea what Coralie was talking about, so she’d went through the whole spiel about Sara, and even after listening, the woman seemed not to comprehend. So, she had to tell the story over again to the woman’s supervisor, and if the supervisor, didn’t

understand, than she could feel free to contact the *Kenkyujo no Daitai Raifu Fomu*—the Alternative Life Forms Lab—at Keio University. Neither one wanted to do that, so they gave her the uploader back. The autojector never became an issue—Coralie had pushed it so it paralleled her jeans’ seam, the scanner seemed not to care, and neither the woman nor her supervisor did a pat-down. So, Coralie repacked her bags and a baggage handler took everything but her purse.

More beltways led to the train station and now ahead, a platform leads to the train, a long, five-car deal, and the crowd seems disappointing. Maybe the surfers and soccer jocks travel nearer to the beginning of the week. That would make sense—most of the televised events are broadcast live from Friday through Monday. Not that she’d hoped to stare at one or two, or maybe to smile or wink, because none could possibly measure up to Leo. Nevertheless, Coralie seems to have booked a ticket with the senior crowd. Men, yeah, but cranky geezers, for sure. The passenger cabins seem to be all windows, which is wonderful, since there will be nothing to look at on the inside. Instead, she can enjoy the ride looking outside, toward a place she has only been as a child—the outdoors—a place with no prisms overhead, just blue sky, fresh air, and endless fields leading to the Pacific’s warm waters.

Step aboard and take a seat just forward of the door—that way, the seat-thumpers will bother someone else. Then, as if she had a husband, reserve the seat beside her—no point sharing the ride if she doesn’t gotta. In time, when the final boarding call goes out and the train’s doors close, no one has asked for the seat.

Through the window, the first floor stretches away. Coralie has never been this low. Lit sparsely with fluorescent lamps, the place seems cold and dungeonous. Below,

a young woman closes the door to a luggage compartment. She sees Coralie watching, so she smiles and offers a wave. Give her a nod and she smiles again before walking away.

“Good morning,” a voice says through speakers, above, “and welcome aboard Aleutian Rail, offering non-stop service from Anchorage to the Aleutian Resort. Your trip begins momentarily, after we ensure all baggage compartments are secure. Thank you for choosing Aleutian Rail.”

You're very welcome. Outside, two other baggage handlers walk away from the train. The two women join each other, share a brief dialogue, and then head toward security. Hopefully, that'll be it.

The voice speaks again. “We are now leaving the station. We hope you enjoy your trip.”

Coralie had once flown to Japan with Michael and her parents, and Coralie had the window seat. As the plane took off from the roof above Elmendorf, she stood to look out. She must have been... Three? Four? It was in the time before Sara, and like anything before Sara, Coralie's memory of the trip consists of what seem like photographs—like the palm trees of Fire Island from above, like the endless expanse of the Pacific, like Fujisan lording over the open-air megalopolis of Tokyo. These are sentimental images, images recorded with a frosted lens, images between gaps in time, and Coralie would do anything to fill in those gaps, to remember the full experience instead of the momentary images. But she knows this will never happen. Instead, she can make sure this trip is fully experienced, fully remembered, fully enjoyed. What a fine gift it'll make for her new body.

A brief jolt precedes acceleration. A narrow, dark tunnel replaces the dungeonous station, and the acceleration continues. In an instant, all is light, and blinking helps the eyes adjust. Warm sunlight bathes the sand, the palm trees, the curly waves breaking ashore. In the direct sun, the train's atmosphere warms quickly, but a motor starts and cool air flows through vents mounted above each seat. Reach up and adjust the vent, feel the cool air on her forehead, and this luxury is just the beginning. For once, she's gonna have a good time. This is what she's waited for. Outside, the palm trees and sand have transitioned to stunted pines and weedy foothills, and the train climbs high above the tropical, white-sand beaches of Turnagain Arm.

In a few minutes, the bushy foothills transition to grassy fields. The train slows for a turn, and the fields now stretch away through either side of the train. But Randy had shown her flowery fields, and where are those?

* * *

The fields are here: beyond the window now, the fields are endless, with splashes of amber and turquoise and crimson and sapphire, and perhaps if Coralie could fly high enough above the colors, they would resolve into a picture, a pure image of creation, of nature, of God. If only the train would stop, she would run out and swim in the petals, make a soft bed of them, change the expression on this image of God. Blasphemy here, aboard this train, where the window imprisons her within a world of clean sterility, of passive immobility, of imagined instead of experienced life. The fields have gone by for an hour now and Cascadia won't allow a single foot upon them. No—to Cascadia, enjoying life within nature is profane.

In Coralie's pocket, her phone vibrates. Does she really care who it is? Could be Fabiola, or even one of her lawyers offering a settlement for her ruined office. Suppose it could be Goodman—and wouldn't *that* be a trip? *I've decided I couldn't go on without you, blah, blah, blah. You broke my nose, old man—fuck off.* Could be Lacey...

Yeah, Lacey, maybe. Roll on her hip and pull out the phone and it's actually Dr. Minamoto, so touch ANSWER, but it's already gone to message. Say his name and a picture of her mother's university *sempai*—oldish and dorky—appears above the word CALL. Hover a thumb but now the words VIDEOMAIL RECEIVED flash across the screen. May as well check the message before calling, so swipe away the CALL screen and play the video.

Dr. Minamoto's image fills the screen. "*Hajimemashite*, Coralie-san! I know how nervous you are, so for encouragement, I thought maybe you should see someone." The phone pans to a young, Japanese woman in a wheelchair, but the image is dark, as though shot indoors with the window darkened. "Say hello to Coralie, Sara-chan."

A voice, sounding a little drugged, says, "Hello..." Then the video pans away from her.

Sara speaking? So soon?

Dr. Minamoto's face fills the screen again. "We have come to visit. See us soon. We stay for now at the Lone Doug Hotel, here in Anchorage, Room 101—the first room off the lobby."

Anchorage? *No...*

"We must leave in the evening, day after tomorrow. You will visit, yes?"

The bastard brought Sara back to Anchorage. All that work to get her out and he brings her back! “No!” Soon as it’s said, the phone drops from her grasp.

“Goodbye, Coralie-san,” Dr. Minamoto’s voice says from below the seat ahead.

Reach down and get it, but it slides away from her fingertips. Isn’t that how it always goes? Kneel, and under the seat, a set of closed ventilation louvers have stopped the phone from sliding any further. Salt crusts the frame around the contraption.

Get the stupid phone and stand, but Coralie stands askew with the beautiful fields outside. It’s the damndest thing—she’s gotta lean back to stay level, but the scenery is level with the windows. Is it acceleration? No—the flowers stream past at a constant speed, and anyway, that wouldn’t change the angle of *down*. Through the floor, she can feel a bump travel from axle to axle, from car to car. At the bump’s speed, they could only be going twenty, thirty max. Outside, a hundred seems about right. She leans more now, back toward the train’s rear. Again, no change out the window. Another bump in the track travels slower this time.

Downhill—it’s the only answer. What shows beyond the windows is false and they are heading downhill.

Look up, and along the car’s centerline, another set of louvers run from front to rear. Around them, more salt. The walls, the window frames, everything’s crusted from the warm, salty air.

Secure her phone in her purse.

A passenger screams, “Hey!” The train car fills with murmuring. Several others stand now.

Above, the louvers snap open with the shrieking of unlubricated metal. Something drifts in through them—ash? Catch a drifting flake and it turns to water immediately.

Snow! How can that be?

Face uphill—toward the train’s rear—and kneel. The metal slats beneath each row of seats are open, too. A glance through them reveals that the track is mounted upon a trestle. Beyond it, something rises and falls, but without knowing what it is, it seems hard to focus on.

Text snaps into the deep:

Ready.

and then she can see it all too well: the ocean lies below, bottomless and angry, its surface undulating.

Another bump travels along, and this bump agrees with the trestle’s speed, below.

They are heading into the ocean.

A voice: “*What the hell is going on here?*” Snow continues to drift through the slats in the roof.

Panic now—gotta get out, gotta escape, only got seconds to do something.

Through the window, the flowers stream by at their impossible angle. At the window’s frame, a handle is labeled EMERGENCY RELEASE. Go there and pull, and nothing happens. Pull harder and the phony handle snaps off at its pivot. Punch the window and it cracks, the image within flicking and turning gray.

This fucking thing’s coming off.

Shove with both hands full force. The window cracks and then, all at once, releases from its weatherstripping, flying down and away from the tracks.

All her senses come to her at once. The wheels below screech, the cold robs her body of heat, her mind recoils from the imagery outside. The window no longer blocks the distance. The window no longer keeps her trapped. Beyond the window: an obelisk high as Elmendorf; at its apex, the square corner of a white sky; at its base, waves crashing; a craggy cliff the direction the train came from; shavings of snow twisting and curling in gusts like feathers; below, the trestle travels, extending a couple meters beyond the train's side; the ocean rising to meet the descending train—down down down down down down, another bump travels through. Gotta get out. But not out there, because out there, nothing is fine. The shouts of her fellow passengers turns to miserable wailing.

A sudden vibration joggles the world—it can only mean the forward car has struck the ocean, but the train still descends. Stick her head out for a look and the rear of the front car submerges.

In the waves, snow floats on the water. Her only chance is the trestle.

If she crawls out the window facing in, she can hold the window's frame, controlling her fall.

Do it and the cold paralyzes, but she's hanging, so turn and release and she lands hard and flat.

Ice glazes the trestle's wood, so don't stand yet, just wait for the passengers' screams to stop.

Coralie convulses from chill, but look back and someone else jumps from the broken window, landing feet first, slipping, and cartwheeling into the waves.

Her car sinks as the final car trundles past where she lies.

As that car disappears below the water, a wave races up the trestle, foaming over Coralie's feet and legs and kissing the small of her back.

The cold forces a howl from Coralie.

The wave washes out.

Pray for home and then twist onto her back—scoot away from the chance of that ever happening again. Look and the cliff forms a bowl around her, with a narrow inlet a half-kilometer straight ahead. At either side of the inlet, obelisks rise, holding two corners of a large white panel that continues above and behind her, where two more obelisks hold the other corners.

Scoot up the trestle, and there's gotta be a faster way than this, but the wood is too slick...

Her numb hand grips the steel rail. The train's weight has cleared it of any ice.

Try and straddle the rail, and this might work, and gotta get outta this freezer. Up now and onto her feet, she can do this—about ten stories to climb, about seventy meters of rail to do it on.

Keep going but the shivering won't stop, and shutting her mouth closed makes her teeth grind. Just keep moving and climb, climb, climb...

Under Coralie's feet, the rail vibrates. Above the cliff and beyond, steel wheels screech.

Shit.

Sprint, but this is a rail, gotta go faster, gymnast on a freaking balance beam—how's she gonna manage this dismount? Go faster and she falls on her face.

Get up! Get back on this rail and wheel those useless legs. Could she jump?
That high? Prolly not, so gotta keep going, and how far away is that train?

It hasn't crested the cliff—keep moving one foot in front of the other, even if she can't feel them, their skin turning blue from lack of blood, and if the moisture of her flesh crystallizes, it'll turn black, toes falling off within days, and wouldn't that look tough?

Check me out—I lost my toes at the Aleutian Resort!

There it is—why should a robot train need a headlight? She's gotta jump. Can't risk the edge of the trestle—a little vibration may shake her over the edge. It's only ten meters away—do it—but she's never practiced jumping—gotta do it—do it—do it!

Flying.

Over the water, her stomach turns. But then snowy ground lies below. A soft landing surprises her, but even so, her legs have become like a marionette's and she falls, hip first and then shoulder striking the snow.

Steel wheels bump and squeal. Push up to her hands and knees and look back—the final car of many descends from view.

Can't bear another minute of this cold and, pregnant or not, this is it. Gotta upload, simple as placing it against her head, and pressing the button. Beyond the snow, her implant reports:

Ready.

But the uploader was in her purse.

No!

And so was her phone.

Not fair. Gotta get somewhere, anywhere, anyplace warm. Look around—a cement bunker juts from the ground a few meters away.

Get upon her wobbly feet and run! She can bust down the door if she must.

A sign upon the door shows a Doug Flag and reads:

**Cascadian Government
Facility PC-332**

**AUTHORIZED
PERSONNEL ONLY**

Authorized? Yes, freezing and damn well authorized. She can authorize the handle right off that door, but no—it's unlocked. In—get in and close the cold out, and warmth surrounds her like a blanket but her flesh won't recover quickly, so tuck her itchy, stung, chilblained hands under her armpits. While her teeth chatter, take a look around and she's upon a narrow landing within a cement tunnel oriented downward. Echoing to her up a set of stairs—voices, calm voices, the voices of those engaged in work.

Sit and wait—gotta wait until the feeling comes back to her feet. But she'll have to go down, eventually.

What monsters will she find down there? and just what is this place, anyway?

The Aleutian Resort her ass.

Is this a dream? The pain in her extremities tells her, *Don't you wish*. No, this is as real as it gets.

Down there, the people who pull the bodies from the trains work, and they're gonna find a window missing from one of the cars, so they're gonna come up here looking for her. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

Look at her hands—each finger feels hammered. Tuck them back into her armpits.

Take off her sandals and kick her feet under her calves. Sandals, jeans, and a blouse—stupid. But then, how could she have known any different?

* * *

No one had come up the stairs in what seemed like a half-hour. Perhaps they don't know she escaped. Or perhaps they think she froze in the ocean, because being fully submersed would have been unsurvivable. The air has warmed her enough that her hands and feet have color in them again. Even a fool wouldn't leave without more clothes—and some decent shoes, for that matter—so should she wait for someone to come to her or should she go down and to them?

Time to put the sandals on and stand.

Down it is. Step lightly and hug the wall—well, no way to do that because it's a tube in here—but stay close to the edge so she isn't silhouetted.

Below, the stairs end and at a shiny, vinyl floor. To the left, a wall extends forward and, upon hooks, a row of puffy jackets hang.

Stepping down exposes more of the room is exposed, still all floor and wall. Another step reveals a long counter. Chatter from the room continues, but another step brings silence.

Keep stepping now—step down like she belongs here. Maybe someone or something else caused all this quiet.

Once at the bottom, the counter appears more like a fifteen-meter long table. Behind it, more tables rise in rows, like in a theater or lecture hall. A dozen people sit at each table, each one at a glass panel.

They sit motionless. Every eye is upon her.

Uh, really weird. And also, not good.

Take a couple jackets and run.

* * *

Once outside, her hands and feet stage immediate protest. Drop a jacket and get the other one on quick. Zip it.

The door opens. A man exits. Even through his thick clothes, Coralie can tell his muscles are a scale larger than most men's.

Pick up the other jacket and turn away.

“Get back here,” his deep voice says.

A hand grabs Coralie's shoulder. Jump from his grasp, turn to him, and raise her fists.

He laughs. He thumps his chest with his fists. Then he opens his arms wide. “Tell ya what—I'll give ya a free shot.”

Go ahead and take it. Don't pull the punch, now. Drive a fist right in the sternum and follow through.

Under her fist, his ribs snap like kindling. His arms drop limp. He coughs once and then his body falls.

Strip him clean of clothes and the pants are so big she's gotta strap them on with her belt. Damned things are too long as well, so roll up the legs. His jacket will fit fine over the stolen one. And the boots? Furry and warm, but at least five sizes too large. Nevertheless, don't wait for another man to exit—the next one will probably be armed.

Yeah—gotta run—follow the tracks inland and run.

Ten

Do these tracks really lead back to Anchorage? Because contradiction resides in everything here. Clouds blanket the sky above, gray and wide, squeezing out every hint of blue, but never had such skies drifted above Anchorage. And all this snow—one of the few places left in the world with any snow is Denali, a place well outside Coralie’s budget; nevertheless, elevation drives the snowfall in Denali. That implies the train had climbed into the mountains. What she saw wasn’t a lake or a pond—the train she rode certainly went into the ocean. If any truth resides in what she sees before her, then Cascadia continuously transmits lies from every single window in Anchorage, and they’d been doing so all her life. It’s the only explanation. But why?

Did Mom know? Did Dad know? Does Michael?

Harold: His new pitch had been the Aleutian Resort. But before Harold came along, Brent had a different angle. *Anchorage would like me to ask if you’d round up to help fund the Trans-Aleutian Light Rail’s construction.* Had Brent been protecting her? *Look, I’m sorry. Been under a lot of pressure.*

Having run an hour, slow now to a walk—look behind and no one follows. The snow under her feet gives like frosting that’s sat out too long. It compacts under her feet, sounding like her flesh scooting on the fleather couch. Who knew snow would be so strange?

* * *

Gotta stop shivering. These clothes let too much heat escape. Walking faster may combat the cold, but it will overcome her in time, especially after night falls. What can she do about the blisters behind her heels? What good was all that bone and muscle strengthening when the frailty of her skin remains?

Trees tower everywhere, limbs droopy from ice and snow. Move on, beat those bleeding feet, and to her left, a depression makes the trees appear to sink below the tracks.

Why hasn't there been another train? She'll see another one eventually, but how could she possibly warn those inside?

Where the trees were sinking, a valley now stretches away, not at all like the fields of flowers, but beautiful in its own way. Since the coast, she felt as though she was upon level ground, but the land out there, full of trees, dips and stretches away for kilometers before rising again, and—

Out there—down there—a line of smoke rises.

Fire, heat, warmth. People?

Sure—people. Like that huge man at PC-332—the one she'd killed with a single blow to the chest.

How much farther to Anchorage? How long had she been on that train anyway? Should she stay along the tracks or risk the wilderness?

Heat is all she wants.

Cross the tracks and head into the sloping woods. When the slope levels, run, letting the motion of her body, of her supplementations, warm her.

* * *

The wilderness has enveloped Coralie and her feet are now shredded. Every step squishes and scrapes, but still run until she can run no more.

After a while, a rest would be nice, so sit. Her feet need bandaging—take off the outer jacket and pull the liner free of it. Now unlace the boots and, oh, it's not so easy because of the pain, so loosen the man-cloppers until all hint of pressure has been relieved and withdraw her feet.

In the snow, ten meters away, a crow lands and caws.

Tear the liner into strips, and the supplementations sure make *that* easy. Before long, her feet are wrapped well enough they may actually fit the cloppers. Try them on and this should work fine.

Not sure of her direction anymore, it's gotta be the opposite direction of her boot prints. Walk on, and the crow caws and flies away.

Along this way, the snow gets shallow for a few steps, and the firmness of frozen soil makes her steps easy, and then one more step sinks her to her knees. Lie face down and pull her legs free. This has got to be it—a comfortable place to sleep. A peaceful one, even. Just let sleep take her, if only so she doesn't have to walk on suffering feet anymore.

More calling of the crow.

No—wiggle ahead some, get beyond the deepness of this snow and back onto steady ground. Ahead, brown weeds protrude from the snow. Pull the jacket's sleeves over her hands and crawl. That's it. She's gonna make it. At the weeds now, so crawl to a tree to steady herself for standing. Good.

All's good, so step on. And again. Ahead, the trees appear thin. And what lies beyond them? Step further and below the rising smoke is a large building made of stacked logs. Step forward and *no!*—this time she sinks to her waist.

A man, tall and bearded, carries chopped wood. He walks toward the building's entrance.

Scream: "*Help! Help me, please!*"

Eleven

Warmth. The feeling of a fuzzy robe. The crackling of a roaring fire. The varying glow of a flickering flame. The sharp smell of burning pine.

Nearby, a masculine voice: “Welcome to the Lodge.”

The voice had come from beside Coralie, so look, only her head feels unliftable, and her stiff neck resists turning. But the man leans into her vision, and he’s near to her in age, with friendly brown eyes and a craggily beard. He’s dressed in, of all things, pajamas.

“My name’s Jack. I’m the Esteemed Loyal Knight of Seward.”

The... *Huh?*

“What’s your name?”

Being vulnerable enough, she had better tell him. “Coralie,” and it seems the cold outdoors stole most of her voice.

When Jack smiles, it’s obvious he could benefit from a couple years in braces. “Would you like some soup, Coralie? My wife made a killer salmon chowder for dinner.”

Wife... Mother... The baby? Maybe. A little nod would let him know, yes, she’d like some chowder, but would she be able to enjoy it, enjoy it at all? Knight... Did this guy call himself a knight?

Jack motions beside himself, where a woman sits. “This is my wife, Contessa.” In her hands, she holds a bowl and a glass of water.

Reach out, take them, and indulge. The soup is creamy and fresh, and she's never tasted the like in all of Anchorage. Seems seconds before she has made the bowl and glass empty, but her stomach still grumbles, so look at Contessa pleadingly. "May I have some more?" and her voice is smoother now.

Contessa takes the bowl and glass, smirking at her husband. "Absolutely," she says, and walks away, almost skipping.

Jack clears his throat. "Where are you from?"

"Anchorage."

"That's over a hundred miles from here."

Miles?

"Sorry... A hundred and thirty kilometers. A very long way to walk."

Well, she didn't exactly walk, "I took the train."

It seems Jack stumbles on a word, and then blurts, "Oh." His look, somewhere in the continuum between horror and disbelief, is one that betrays a knowledge—a knowledge of where the trains go, of what the trains are doing.

"What?" What is it? What does he know?

"How'd you escape the train?"

"I punched out a window."

Nodding, Jack looks at her hand. "You sure did."

Turn it, look at its backside, at her knuckles where the initial contusion had spread under the derma, turning shades of violet and yellow toward her wrist. Flexing it doesn't hurt at all—the bone reinforcements worked perfectly.

“Even from a quarter-mile away,” Jack says, “you can hear them. Do you know how a shriek travels through a class of preschoolers?”

Yes, everyone does, so nod.

Jack gazes toward a distant nowhere. “It’s that exact sound when the trains plunge into the chill. An hour later, the same train appears again in a covered yard to the north, its doors open, empty inside.”

This “knight” knows the execution of people happens by the hundreds, every single day, and yet he does nothing—that’s downright heartwarming.

“What did you do to be punished like this?”

Tell him the story, but not all of it—just the part about firing Brent, and how, as soon as she’d hired Harold, he pitched her a vacation. As she does, more soup arrives, so eat, and meanwhile, finish that story. When done, set the empty bowl upon the table. Gotta wonder who these people are, because “it’s illegal to live outside the UGB, isn’t it?”

“No,” Jack says. “Been a hundred years since the citizens vacated Seward, but every single one sold their property voluntarily, and every single one moved to Anchorage voluntarily. Cascadia took over their properties, demolished the buildings, and let the land turn wild. Like that, it happened as far south as Mt. Shasta. Voluntary urbanization to Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland. Far as I know, only we Elks held out. We own our property, we live well on it, and it rewards us. We go into the commons when necessary, to hunt or fish or gather mushrooms. But we always make our way back home—here to the lodge.”

This must be a meeting place—seats for dozens curve around a fire pit, and above the fire, a chimney starts some three meters up, extending through a vaulted ceiling ten meters high. Beside the fireplace, stairs lead to a long, railed balcony. Behind her, on the ground level, hallways extend away in two directions. “How many of you live here?”

Jack looks at Contessa.

“Three-hundred and twenty-one,” she says.

“All in this lodge?”

“No,” Jack says. “We live in cabins, one to a family. The only people who live here are the Exalted Ruler and his wife, and then the tiler, who watches the door.”

Exalted Ruler? Tiler?

“We share the lodge like we share the fields. We come together each morning for breakfast in the dining hall. We discuss important things to our community here in the Grand Hall.”

Contessa speaks. “We have nearly everything necessary to sustain our community—greenhouses for our crops, barns for our animals, fields and silos for feed, a tower for storing fresh water, and a wind farm for electricity.”

Nearly everything. Some things, like the spoon Coralie ate her soup with, were certainly not made—

A loud bell sounds, striking again and again for nearly a minute. Above, a wrinkled man, with sprays of white hair above his ears, shuffles to the railing at the balcony’s edge.

“You have heard the tolling of eleven strokes, and for Elks, this hour has tender significance. Wherever Elks may roam, whatever their lot in life may be, when this hour

falls upon the dial of night, the great heart of Elkdom swells and throbs. It is the golden hour of recollection, the homecoming of those who wander, the mystic roll call of all those who will come no more. An Elk is never forgotten, never forsaken—living or dead. Morning and noon may pass, the light of day sinking heedlessly westward. But ere the shadows of midnight fall, the chimes of memory shall peal forth this message: Here's to our absent members.”

In the exact manner the old man had shuffled to the railing, he turns and shuffles away again.

Coralie had never seen someone so old. “Who was that?”

“That,” Jack says, “is our Exalted Ruler, Jehoshaphat Harris.” Jack looks awestruck. “Some say he'll live forever.”

Yep, these people are nuts.

“Contessa?” Jack asks. “Can you set up Miss Coralie in one of our guest rooms?”

“Of course.” Contessa extends a hand.

Must've been just yesterday—Coralie swearing she'd feel insulted if anyone but Kat called her *Miss*, but times change so quickly. It's okay to take Contessa's hand because she seems awfully sweet. Stand and Coralie feels tired but replenished.

“Follow me,” Contessa says.

* * *

Nothingness. The void. Blank as the mind before the body's first-ever kiss. A knock yanks Coralie away from this bliss. “*Yeah.*”

The door opens and Contessa peeks in. She nods and enters with Coralie's clothes, pressed and on hangers. She places them on a hook. "Breakfast is being served in the dining hall. We'd love to see you there."

Hug the blanket and sit up. "Okay. I'll be along."

* * *

Follow the sound of noisy conversation, the kind punctuated by children's voices before attenuation is learned, the kind that says everything's okay with the world, the kind that usually falls silent when she enters the room—or, so it goes in that nightmare that was yesterday. But enter and the room doesn't quiet, and only a face or two gaze at her in the wonder of non-recognition. Picnic tables are situated end-to-end, forming long rows, and there must be enough room to seat a couple hundred, though the dozens of families here have left plenty of gaps. At the room's far end, a line forms before a long steam table. Coralie's stomach gurgles and churns, so she may as well join the line.

Shuffle along with the others and, once close to the front, through steamed glass lies mounds of animal products and shredded potatoes, all soaking within puddles of grease. No one will notice a cringe, but if these crazy people enjoy such unhealthy food, better go along with it.

A sweaty man, short and wide, looks at Coralie questioningly.

"I'll... just take... everything?"

"Good choice," the man says. He plops a serving of scrambled eggs onto a plate and slides it down to the next station. "The works!"

The next man, also sweaty, tongs sausages, ham, and bacon onto her plate.

Though repulsed by habit, Coralie salivates. The hunger in her core feels moments from satiation, and a tingle runs up her spine.

Another man drops a pancake of grated potatoes, as wide as the plate, on top of the rest. He then ladles a cream-colored, lumpy gravy over the top. He offers the mess to her.

Take it, and as awful as it looks, it smells delightful. Take some silverware, find a gap in all the families, and have a seat.

Eat, and it's a salty, fatty, calorie-ridden pile of garbage she'd never dream of putting in her body, but all that running yesterday, all that stress of the train going into the ocean, seems to have changed her somehow.

Or...

It's okay to entertain the thought—motherhood may await her. It would bring a happy end to all these dreadful thoughts of death. Have another forkful.

A man sits so his hip touches Coralie's, so turn to look and he's so near that Coralie's eyes cross.

"And who are you?" he asks.

Swallow that last bite and then slide away for some room, but doing so seems to have pulled him along. "Coralie..."

He nods, black hair bouncing, teeth grinning. "You could be my Oriental one."

These people!

A hand appears on the man's shoulder. Look from hand to arm to face and thank God, it's Jack. "Herb, why don't you leave my friend alone?"

Herb reluctantly rises and then walks toward the breakfast line, looking back.

“He never seems to get enough,” Jack says. “He has nine wives—each a different ethnicity.”

Seriously. “Nine?”

“Yeah—I’d be pulling my hair out with another one, but Herb wants a decimal set. He collects them from Fishhook, poor girls.”

Ewww. Fishhook is the slummiest. Coralie worked there for a couple weeks as part of her residency... Remember—Anchorage—the upload—Sara. Gotta get back. “I need to get back to Anchorage. To the Lone Doug Hotel. Can you help me?”

Jack sits and uses the edge of his fork to cut a sausage. “By now, they must know you escaped the train. They’ll be on the lookout for you, so you should stay here a while. In a couple weeks, the heat’ll be off and going back will be less dangerous.”

A couple weeks? By then it’ll be too late. “It can’t wait. This is urgent.”

“How about a phone call?”

Absolutely not. “Facial recognition will get me. They can use that to get to her.”

Contessa arrives with a tray of food and sits across from Coralie.

“I can call,” Jack says. “I’ll give her whatever message you need to send.”

But that won’t help Coralie with her upload. “I have to get there myself. I have no other choice.”

Jack shakes his head as though Coralie’s making no sense. “Well, I can get you there. But I won’t let you go unprepared.” He looks at Contessa.

Contessa lays her fork down. “I’ll get her.”

* * *

Now in an echoey, windowless corridor, the tiler walks with a confident stride, her hand upon her sword's hilt. "I'm Petya," she says.

People really wear swords? *Really?* Give her a little wave. "Coralie."

"Is that French?"

Is it? "Dunno. Actually, I think my father named me that to mess with my mom."

They walk through a tall, open double-door. "How's that?"

"It's hard to pronounce in Japanese."

"That's an awful long trick to play on someone."

Turned out not. "Eh, you'd have had to know him. He was harmless."

From under the tiler's cloak, she produces a ring full of skeleton keys. She selects one as they stop at an iron banded, wood slatted door. She inserts it into a keyhole and, when she's turned it full around, a heavy clack sounds within. The tiler opens the door and walks in.

Follow her within and on busts and hangers and shelves, capes and coats and bill-less caps are situated, all in a blue that might be purple in the right light, and trimmed at their edges with gold. The tiler ignores all those and goes to a set of floor-to-ceiling drawers as long as the entire wall. The tiler opens a drawer labeled, **Bodysuit, F, 2**, and pulls one out. "It's a pain in the ass when you need to pee, but it's fireproof, cutproof, and bulletproof, and it also obscures your infrared signature, making it difficult for guns to target you." She goes to another, larger drawer and pulls out a backpack. She stuffs

the bodysuit inside and drops the backpack at Coralie's feet. "Because of the potty thing, wait until you're inside to change into it."

Sounds sensible. Go on and shoulder the backpack.

The tiler goes to the wall's end where there's a large, vertical handle. She takes hold of it, saying, "Help me out."

Go to her, but then she says, "The other side." At the wall's other end, there's a similar handle. Look down and a track runs along the adjacent wall. Pull with her and the wall moves into the room, but a door-sized set of drawers in the center remains in place. After pulling for three meters, the room is smaller, but a passage now leads into an adjacent room.

"Come on," the tiler says, and then walks inside.

Follow her in and around to the right, and the tiler again rests her hand on the hilt of her sword. Within this place, aisles of shelving stretch back for a hundred meters or more. The tiler goes down one labeled, **Undergarments**. She consults signs displaying gender and size and then throws a small bunch at Coralie, saying, "Bras."

The bras are white and stretchy, bundled together with twine. Stuff them in the backpack.

Without pausing, she goes to another spot, selects another bundle, goes to yet another and selects. She tosses both at Coralie.

Catch them. Bikini briefs and calf-high socks. Stuff them.

Onto another aisle. By the time Coralie gets there, the tiler has already selected a pair of jeans. She rolls up the legs. "Try them on."

In here? Well... Set down the backpack and tug off her old jeans, one leg at a time. Toss them across the backpack.

The tiler nods. "It'll be the right size. I just need to set the cuffs."

Put a foot in, and then the other. Slide them up and button them.

The tiler rolls the jean legs to the right spot. "Okay. Take 'em off."

All business, this Petya chick, and Coralie kinda likes that. Make sure not to step on the cuffs as she takes them off. Offer them out and the tiler takes them back. She grabs a second pair the same size and leaves for another aisle, but before Coralie can get her jeans back on, the tiler is back, offering a couple folded shirts. "Try one on while I get a belt."

A strange combination of gray splotches and black, horizontal lines cover the button-up shirts. Go ahead and try one on, but it's hideous. The tiler arrives with a black leather belt, so hold up the shirts and ask, "You got any other pattern?"

A corner of the tiler's mouth tightens. "You have to be in-city to see it, but that's the best passive camouflage available. Don't worry about the pattern—we always wear it when we go in, and the cops never take a second look."

"You've been to Anchorage?"

The tiler nods. "Many times."

"Why?"

"Cloth, spices, coffee, sugar, paper, medical supplies—anything we have trouble producing on our own."

"You steal it?"

The tiler laughs an uncontrolled, youthful laugh. “We have. But we prefer to trade. There’s a high demand for some of our goods. Leather, pigskin, beaver and squirrel pelts—”

“Does it all have to do with killing animals?”

“No, we trade almost half the produce we grow. Come on, you need some boots.”

At another aisle, there’s a bench, so set down the backpack and take a seat. Take a couple socks out and pull them carefully over the scabby backs of her heels. The tiler offers black leather, calf-high boots. Stand in them and they’re a perfect fit, even if perfect hurts a little. Coralie really should tell the tiler how nice they are, but she has run off again. In a couple minutes, she arrives with pleated pants, a jacket sewn in the same pattern, a knit cap, and gloves, all in white. She stuffs them into the backpack and leaves again. When she returns, one hand holds sunglasses and the other holds a pistol belt with a holster and a gun.

And, oh my God, Coralie’s not this person. Swords and guns—that’s what turns Michael on, not her. What if Sara saw her strutting around with a gun on her hip? It would start with a giggling spurt and then erupt into full-blown laughter...

The tiler puts the sunglasses into the backpack’s outside pocket and then adjusts the pistol belt. She unclasps it and holds it out.

Take the belt, but questioningly. “You sure I need a gun?” Put it around the waist and clasp it.

The tiler centers the belt. “I understand you were aboard one of the trains.” She pulls on the holster until it’s above Coralie’s hip.

“Yes.”

The tiler steps back, inspecting. “Well, that means they decided on your execution. You think they’ll just forget about it?”

No, “not likely.”

The tiler nods. “If you’re recognized, they’ll come after you with everything they got. You’re gonna need something for defense.” Again, she rests her hand on her sword. She taps the holster with her other hand. “That is a Glock i92G.” She taps a row of the belt’s pouches. “Each magazine contains thirty rounds of cartridgeless bullets, propelled by a liquid polymer explosive. Take out the gun.”

Pull and it sticks. Oh, a strap—it releases with a little pressure from her thumb. Pull again and the gun weighs heavily in her hand.

The tiler taps below the gun’s barrel. “This is a gyroscope capable of keeping the weapon on target. Now, we have to program it to accept you as the user.” She pushes a tiny button at the finger guard’s crook. “This is Petya.”

“An unauthorized user holds me,” the Glock says.

“Yes,” the tiler says. “This is your new owner. Her name is Coralie.”

“Authorization?”

“Petya 9-4-Zed-4-3.”

“Ownership transfer complete. Greetings, Coralie.”

Coralie feels as though she’s talking to a toaster. “Hey.”

“Let me show you how it works,” the tiler says.

* * *

Coralie just can't get over the comfort of her boots, it's as if the backs of her heels had healed, and she's never owned a pair of jeans hemmed to the right length, and if it weren't for the ugly shirt, Coralie would feel just right for a night out. The tiler closes the door to her little wonderland and pulls the key ring out again. The door locks with a loud clack.

The pistol belt, with the gun and all the spare magazines, weighs heavily on Coralie's hips. She could eliminate a small army with as many rounds as she has. But she'd rather not think about that—hopefully she can avoid using it. If she stays out of sight—well, is that possible in Anchorage?

The tiler leads Coralie back to the dining hall, which is now empty except for a pile full of supplies at one of the tables, where Jack is seated. The tiler taps her a couple times on the shoulder, so turn, and the tiler spreads her arms for an embrace.

Um, yeah, figure it's okay.

“If you die, take a few with you,” she says.

Crazy that Coralie likes this chick. “Sure, Petya. Take care.”

The tiler squeezes her and then walks away.

At the table, Jack looks satisfied. “Tell me she gave you outerwear.”

Set down the backpack and pull out the puffy pants and jacket.

“Good,” Jack says. He points to the pile in front of him. “Three days of food, plenty of water—”

But “I'm not going to need all that.”

“So you say,” Jack says. “A first-aid kit, some basic survival items—the instructions are inside.” He takes the backpack, takes out the gloves and cap, and begins stuffing the supplies inside. “Contessa made the sandwiches. Turkey, bacon, and guacamole—my favorite.”

Not Coralie’s, but there’s little point showing disagreement.

When Jack finishes packing, he slides over a large glass panel. When he touches its surface, a three-dimensional map of Anchorage floats above the table. “Show me all the cameras,” he says, and the outline of Anchorage dims and fills with countless red dots. He points to the beach west of the UGB. “Zoom in... More... More... There.”

Where he’s zoomed in, a semi-circular culvert exits the building. “You’ll enter where Chester Creek dumps into the mudflats of the Cook Inlet.”

“The beach?”

“No—mudflats. And they’re deadly, like quicksand. Step on them and they’ll suck you under. You need to stay upon the riprap situated along the building’s foundation.”

Oh, God—what else is Coralie naïve about? “Alright.”

“I’ve mapped a path that’ll get you to the Lone Doug with minimal exposure to cameras. Let’s go over it.”

Yes, please. Coralie can’t wait to get moving.

* * *

Both of them dressed in white, Jack has led Coralie to a barn and through double doors large enough to fit a train through. A machine the size of a small refrigerator sits

upon straw-covered dirt. At its front, an enormous beak juts out, and below this, it appears to rest on forearms thin and wide, like huge butter knives bent at their tips. Above the beak, two lights peer like angry eyes, and above those, a window curves back above rubber handles. A narrow, fleather bench sits along the contraption's spine, and below this bench, a treaded beltway runs on rollers in a trapezoidal circuit, the lower part atop the ground.

Consider how to sit on such a thing. "Is that an automobile?"

Jack has carried her backpack and he sets it on a narrow rack at the thing's rear. "Of a sort." He unfastens a couple straps, wraps them around the backpack, and cinches them tight.

But automobiles are illegal. "Where'd you get it?"

"I rode it here from Quebec." He reaches down, swings out a rubberized peg, and then goes around and does the same on the other side. "Those are for your feet." With a quick swing of his leg, he's atop the thing. He grabs the handles, touches something, and the thing begins to roar.

What a horrible sound! Cover her ears...

Jack pilots the thing outside and then hops off. By the barn door, he retrieves a couple helmets.

At a distance, she can handle the noise, so drop her hands and take the helmet Jack offers. It fits snugly over her knit cap.

Jack slides his visor down, so do the same and follow him out. He closes the barn and hops atop the machine. Try and copy him and it takes a couple tries, but she gets her

leg over the infernal thing and finds the pegs to rest her feet on. Being seated like this is almost intimate and nearly obscene.

“Hold me around my waist,” Jack says.

Yeah, doing so just might prevent her from flying off the back. Hug him and his stomach tenses, as does hers. He twists a handle and the noise and vibration forces a chill through her.

“Here we go,” he shouts.

All the sudden, it feels as though the world slips beneath her.

* * *

Hours now, and the train took nowhere near this long, and instead of fields of flowers, it's those towering, droopy trees. Does this man feel every time her thighs squeeze him, every time her hands grip him? Wish Jack were Leo on this trip, but who is she kidding? Leo was merely a fling, a two-day fantasy on her part, and who knows—maybe on his part, too? Time will trivialize the momentary passion, the fleeting attraction, the instantaneous love she felt. Unless... Yes, a child can lengthen the instantaneous, stretch it into a lifetime.

As a mother she'd have a child, but as a woman she'd still be alone. If there could be a next time, if she could find a man once more to love her, then maybe she'd feel as she had with Leo. Maybe a nice guy like Jack is out there somewhere, waiting for her in one of those communal lodges.

You could be my Oriental one.

Figures she would discover some secret society of weirdos in blue capes calling one another knights and tilers and such, keeping pilfered goods beyond secret passages, traveling from place to place on vibrating machinery. It's no wonder Cascadia outlawed automobiles, because she'd prefer to never get off this thing, to ride on through the night, to keep on south through Jefferson, the ROC, down to the very tip of Baja.

But like her time with Leo had, this trip too will end. And once she gets to Sara, she will upload and be on her way. The *burenku* will awaken to a world where a good man can be found, in a country at peace with the rest of the world, where the population of men to women remains roughly one-to-one.

Coralie, though—*this* one—will have to move on. If she's pregnant, where else could she go but back to the Elks? If she's not... Well, then nothing's changed. Just make sure Dr. Minamoto gets Sara out of Anchorage. After that, it's really very simple, isn't it?

* * *

The trees to their left had thinned and are now gone. In their place lies a brown flatness, the antithesis of everything Anchorage sold the beach as being. Less sunlight penetrates through the clouds each minute, and soon, even the brownness turns an ominous black, and what had Jack said about the mudflats? *Step on them and they'll suck you under.* Easy to believe, as dark as they appear.

In the distance, Anchorage looms beyond haze, stretching nearly a kilometer high, its surface a gray, featureless sarcophagus, except for a couple blinking red lights on the roof. She'd lived within it all her life, so how can it look so unfamiliar? As the ride

brings her closer, the building's breadth expands. At this distance, its height towers so much it seems to lean, as if it would fall upon her.

The noise from the machine quiets and Jack turns it around. He pats Coralie on the knee and turns off the engine.

Pull a leg around and hop off. Now that she's off the thing, why does its vibration still course through her? Pull the helmet off because she's gonna need to shake her head clear.

Jack dismounts and begins working the backpack's straps. Although difficult to tell in the dark, the building must be at least a half-kilometer away.

Wonder why it's dark so soon. "What time is it?"

He stows the tie-downs into a small compartment, raises his helmet's visor, and then looks at the sky. "The sun has set... Eight-thirty?"

Which means it's still light inside. Cascadia even lies about the daytime.

Figures.

"I still don't understand," Jack says. "Why are you doing this?"

Why? Why does everyone need to know why? "There's a computer in my head mapping my neurons. And in Japan, there's a body, one printed and then injected with stem cells. It lies asleep in a lab, matured and ready for me to be uploaded into it."

Jack tugs at her sleeve. "And what's wrong with this body?"

What's wrong is where she is, what she is, and who she is. "It's stuck here in this dreadful place."

"Not anymore," Jack says. "Come back to the lodge. After the thaw, I can take you to Vancouver. From there, you'd have your choice of over eight hundred lodges to

travel to—they're all over North America. The forests, the mountains, the prairies, the beaches, the swamps—you can take your pick.”

 Tempting? Yeah. But Sara—to not go through with this when Sara already did would be a betrayal. Had it not been for Coralie, Sara may never have been willing to go through the transference. Coralie must do the same—or die trying. “I have to.” Hand him her helmet, pick up the backpack, and put it on. “I’ve got no choice.”

 He looks at her, and is it longingly? Imagine that—married and still wanting more. If that’s true, perhaps he’ll be willing to come along, because that’s just what she needs. If they’re looking for her at all, they’ll be looking for a woman in the shadows and stairwells, not a couple entwined, her arm up and around his hip, his down and around her shoulder, and they’d make a good show of that, that’s for sure.

 “Best of luck to you,” Jack says, and then slides down his visor. He hops on his machine, thumbs a switch, and it roars to life. The sound tapers to silence within seconds.

 She hadn’t even the chance to say *thanks*.

* * *

 The UGB towered and leaned, but as Coralie continued walking toward it, it receded in a dream-like fashion. Now, all the sudden, it rises a touch away, discernible in the cloud-covered twilight because of its blankness. It feels no different than a cold, rough slab. In grade school, she’d been taught there were prisms that collected the images from outside. The images were split by mirrors, channeled and routed via fiber optics to the different floors, and, when called upon in a particular window, photon

enhanced to match the original image's brightness. The teachers taught that the images were live and true. Clearly not—installed here is nothing but a plain wall. Where were the images from, then? Coralie never got the impression of any repetition—they had to be live from somewhere. But where?

Suppose it doesn't matter. Follow the wall to the shore and now it's not long before she's walking on what Jack called riprap, which seems an apt word for the craggily stones between the UGB and the mudflats. Maintain balance and step easy because these ankle-snapping stones seem to go on forever.

* * *

She has slipped twice, falling on her ass both times, but escaping injury. Ahead, that's gotta be it—that's gotta be Chester Creek, where light breaks free of the wall in a half-oval shape. A little closer and the light silhouettes a railing. And if there's railing, there's bound to be sidewalk, and how nice would that be right now?

Twelve

Oh, God! The warmth, all the false heat of Anchorage, and all the years she'd spent running an air conditioner at a hundred fifty douds a month—and all they were doing was piping in the outside air! Christ, she hates this place, and if the damn uploader hadn't sunk in the ocean, she wouldn't need to be here, and wouldn't it suck if Dr. Minamoto didn't bring one?

Take off the puffy pants, take off the jacket. Take everything off and slip into this bodysuit. Petya wasn't kidding—what a pain in the ass. But the jeans glide easily over it, and the ugly top keeps it from looking like a onesie. The pistol belt is a bad idea. Without a coat to cover it, the gun sticks out worse than a goiter. As with her stolen jacket, a thin liner is within; unbutton it and try it around her waist. Yeah, suppose it conceals the gun okay. And—

Oh.

Oh, no. Everything off again. No no no no no...

That's it. That does it. Oh, God, Leo. Nothing left to tie us together. But the truth, this right here, is truth written in blood, and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, my love.

* * *

No home to go to, no more pictures of family, no Doggie no Brent no bed no couch no rug no phone no nothing but one previously soggy picture of Leo, the one she'd ordered and had sent up the dumb waiter, so pull it from her jeans pocket and his handsome face smiles innocently, with no experience with the evils of China, of

Cascadia, or of their warfare. He's just a picture now, a recording of an instant in time while he still lived, though not as abstract as memory. When she tries to remember him, she can hardly imagine his face. Procedural memory, for Coralie, remains crystal clear over time, but faces—somehow time's passing obscures faces. Like with Mom and Dad, if not for the pictures around, she'd have long forgotten what they'd looked like. The pictures along with memory makes past recall so complete. Thank God... Thank God she has her picture of Leo. With it, she will never forget. Will never forget because hope for love happened for once in this life, because nothing else had ever been love, it had only been like that option she had taken once, once after Michael had moved out, the option of quartering a soldier just so she could have a man around, an option Sara told her was a *bad* idea, but Coralie, like usual, had done it anyway...

* * *

There had been no picture, no name, no information other than what the agency had provided—the date and time he'd arrive—and the knock had come as scheduled. Coralie had spent all day ironing and manicuring and ensuring every hair on her head lay just so. And now she opened the door.

It was a man. Sure, a man. Nevertheless, a man.

His eyes looked at her expectantly. "Coralie Gunn?"

She winced at him, smilingly. Sara made a sound like, "Bwaaaa..." that trailed away down the hall. "Yes, yeah, I'm Coralie." She held out her hand to shake, but he held equipment in both his hands—two hard plastic cases he showed no intention of releasing. Coralie let her hand drop.

“Excuse me,” he said, walking past her. He looked around, saw the window, and then set both his cases on Doggie. Then he dropped a large backpack on the floor.

Coralie closed the door. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Window: TV,” he said.

Ole shirtless Brent appeared. “Oh, hello.”

The man looked at Coralie disapprovingly and then spoke. “Override advertising. ID: Seven-Alpha, Bravo-Two, Eight-Three, Foxtrot-Niner, One-Four.”

Brent looked offended. A voice other than his came from the window. “Authentication?”

“Voiceprint: Ahhhhhhhhh, Mmmmmmmmmm, Sssssssss.”

Brent dissolved away.

“Ready for scan?” the voice asked.

“Affirmative.”

A line of laser light swept across the man vertically, then all across his horizontal girth. But, wait: When had lasers ever come from the window?

“Identity confirmed,” the voice said.

The man opened his cases. Inside one, he flipped up a hinged panel of glass. Then he took what appeared to be a game controller from the other case. “Logon: Charlie Company, Second Battalion, Twelfth Cyber.”

“Connected.”

“Comms.”

The sound of digital static came from the window.

“Synchronize,” the man said.

The noise transitioned to radio communications.

“I’ll take that drink now,” the man said. “I need Dr. Pepper.”

Coralie batted her eyes at him. “I’ll have to order it. Gimme a few minutes.”

The man huffed and started talking radio gibberish. Without control of the window, Coralie went to her bedroom for her phone. She knew somehow—just knew—Sara was seated at the edge of their bed. In Coralie’s mind she could see her, smiling, ankles crossed, left hand resting atop right between her knees.

On her phone, Coralie ordered a two-liter of Dr. Pepper. Cold, it cost her an extra doug.

“Can you hear it?” Sara whispered, and, yes, from the edge of Coralie’s bed.

Perhaps Sara was behaving herself. Since it would be a few minutes for the bottle to arrive, Coralie indulged her. “Hear what?”

“If you listen real careful, you can hear it.”

Coralie listened. Some radio chatter, nothing more.

“The frame. The sofa’s frame. The wood is SCREAMING!”

How could Coralie have fallen for it? “Oh, Shut up.”

“Help me, Coralie,” Sara said in a soprano. “He’s *crushing* me!”

“I said shut up, Sara! Shit!” When Coralie got to the kitchen, the dumb waiter’s bell rang. She slid open the door and took out the 2-liter. Wrestling with the cap, her sweaty hand couldn’t get a grip, so she used a towel to get it loose. She filled a glass, got a coaster, and set them before the man. It appeared he was in control of a land vehicle—a tank by the look of the long barrel.

Through the window, in the distance, people sprinted from one foxhole to another.

“Oh, fuck you,” he said. He used his thumb to guide a crosshair over the gap between the two mounds of dirt. The instant a shape appeared within it, he pulled the trigger. The living room erupted with the sound of machine-gun fire.

Coralie almost ducked.

Out there, two bodies were now slumped.

Jesus.

The man set aside his controller, inhaled half the glass of Dr. Pepper, and then grabbed the controller again. Coralie went back to the bedroom to order more. Would four 2-liters be enough? Her thumb hovered over the phone’s screen and she noticed it before she felt it—she was trembling.

“You okay?” Sara asked.

“I don’t know,” Coralie admitted. “It’s just...”

“Take a deep breath,” Sara said. “I think you’re freaking out.”

All Sara’s sensors and, yeah, nice diagnosis: *freaking out*. “I’ll be alright.” She thumbed the up-arrow three times and confirmed the order.

“You said, ‘It’s just.’ Just what?”

“It’s nothing.”

“I can tell it’s not. Come on.”

“He’s...”

“Oh,” Sara said, “he’s killing people. Yuck—he just ran one over.”

“Yeah, I thought quartering meant, you know...”

“You didn’t think he’d be fighting a war in your living room.”

That was exactly it. “Yeah.”

“But that’s why they call them *sofa sergeants*.”

“Yeah—I get it now.” Coralie returned to the living room. It sounded like a bomb went off, but the sound came from the cannon on his tank. What looked like a tiny train car fragmented to pieces.

“Fuck you,” the man said, “fuck *youuuuuuu*.” He found something moving, put his crosshairs on it, and the machine gun was so loud, Coralie couldn’t stop herself from jumping.

What if they were civilians? Did he even care?

“Hey, Coralie,” the man said, “get over here. I wanna see the goods.”

She walked next to Doggie, to a place where she wouldn’t block the screen.

“Goods?”

“Yeah, *goods*,” he said. “Show me your tits.”

The machine gun blasted a few rounds.

In retrospect, this is the point where Coralie fantasizes about what she told him.

“Take a jump off a skybridge,” is what she imagines sometimes, other times, she walks to him and punches him squarely in the nose. But these were younger times. She shook her head saying, “Alright.” Button by button, she removed her shirt. She unhooked her bra and let it fall.

“Real sexy,” he said, and then looked back at the window. He fired a few more shots. “Well?” he said.

Coralie felt alone and stupid. “What?”

With his controller still in his hand, he motioned to his groin. Then he drove his tank forward, plowing through dirt mounds and driving over trenches.

She kneeled before him and worked his shorts and briefs to his ankles. He scooted his ass forward for easier access.

She did her best, gazing at him faux-longingly.

“Watch the teeth!” he said. “Don’t you know what you’re doing?”

She gave up. “I—”

“It’s alright.” He shifted forward a little more. “Just hop on.”

Coralie held a finger up. “Let me get a condom...” She ran through the hall to the bedroom.

“Eeeewwww...” Sara said.

Coralie flipped through the flotsam in her nightstand. “What.”

Sara giggled. “Well, he’s driving his tank with one hand and flying his rocket with the other.” Now, she snorted.

Oh, for crying out loud, and “y’know—I never took you for a voyeur.” Coralie dumped out the drawer. When was the last time she’d needed a condom? When she was in residency?

“I can’t help it—Coralie, *don’t*. I’m begging you.”

She found one. With it in hand, she unzipped her skirt and wiggled it off. “Sara: I’m begging *you*—go hang out in Tokyo or something. Just for an hour.”

“I’ll stay in here, I swear. Wait—”

Coralie tore open the condom’s wrapper. “No more.”

“No, wait! There’re people outside with machine guns.”

But Coralie was already in the hall, and then beyond it before registering what Sara had said. With the sound of the door being broken in, she dropped to her belly. A sudden consciousness of her nudity occurred... And the man, of course, sat upon her sofa in a similar but unequal state, and *what was his name again?*

A voice spits commandingly: “*Ziben zhuyi de zhu!*”

The sofa sergeant said, “Wait!” and then, the sound erupted—the machine gun—was it here or in the window? Coralie stayed prone, covering her ears with her hands. When the machine gun stopped, voices spoke in Chinese.

A man with Chinese eyes, dressed in tactical gear, spoke. “*Kan-kan zhege.*”

Two others appeared beside him. The one in command stepped toward her and knelt. His face morphed from a terrifying neutral to one flushed with pity. “Poor, poor girl,” he said, like *Poooo, poooo giew*. He cradled her chin and lifted it up. He shook his head. “*Feichang baoqian.*” He released her chin and stood. “*Zhonguo zai suoyou,*” he said, motioning away with an arm, and she thought for a moment he was shooing the other soldiers away, away so he could be alone with her. But then, facing her, he crept away and shut the door behind himself. In a few seconds, she stood. She stepped, each step taken as though mouse traps were set all over the floor. She covered her breasts with an arm, and held a hand further below. From the sergeant’s left side, things didn’t look so bad. She could see the sofa’s arm, the sofa’s back, and his tee-shirted belly.

Sara’s voice came from in front of him. “*Damn.*”

Coralie took a peek at the door—frame splintered to hell, but closed. “Are they gone?”

“Yeah,” Sara said. “I called the police. You better get dressed.”

Sulfur... The sharp smell hung in the air, bringing Coralie to her senses. She picked up her shirt and bra, rushed to her bedroom, and put on a jersey and shorts. When she came back, she walked to Sara, where the full-frontal view was. The elastic waistbands of the shorts and boxers around his ankles seemed taut enough to snap. “Should I pull them up?”

“Better not,” Sara said.

A scattering of bullet holes led from his belly to a tight concentration in the center of his chest. His blood was draining in a channel to his right, the direction he was listing. His eyes rested half-closed and he wore an expression as though he was receiving a wedgie.

Poooooa, poooooa giewwww.

Another couple bullets had been fired into the sergeant’s case with the glass panel. Beyond the window, within grayness, the words floated:

TELEMETRY LOST

How had the Chinese known he was here? He just arrived and perhaps they followed him, and had he been stupid enough not to notice? And now the cops were coming and, oh, God, what would Michael think about all this? Michael—in Seattle for training. Had he not been, he sure woulda responded to a call on Gander Street. And to see a slob of a man with his shorts around his ankles—oh, she’d have never heard the end of that, and somehow, she had to make sure he never found out. So, she needed to play it like what’s-his-name was a longtime boyfriend or something. Yeah, they’d known each other since high school, blah, blah, blah, and decided if they hadn’t gotten married by their late-twenties they’d hook up and give it a shot. That would make this more of a military

crime scene than a civilian one, right? If they would just hand it over to the CMPs, then they would take care of it, no muss, no—

“The police are on the beltway,” Sara said, “about a block away.”

The dumb waiter dinged. Shit—what was she going to do with four bottles of Dr. Pepper? And... Crap, “I don’t even know his name.”

“He’s gotta have a wallet.”

Sure, that made sense. She bent down in front of him. His belly seemed to have swallowed his penis. Within the shorts around his ankles, she found it. “Harley Briggs?”

“Heh- heh- heh- Harley! Sounds like a girl’s name.”

Coralie threw the wallet on top of Doggie. Her hands felt dirty.

A single, loud knock sounded and the door’s knob thudded against the wall.

Coralie turned and two cops were beyond the doorway, guns at the ready.

“Hands!” the one commanded. “Show me your hands!”

Coralie complied. The one kept his gun aimed at her head while the other gave her a quick frisking. When the other said, “She’s clean,” the one put his gun away.

“Any weapons here?” the one asked.

“No,” Coralie answered.

“Tell me what happened,” the other said.

Coralie motioned to the body. “I was...” She shrugged. “You know... I got him a Dr. Pepper and... I went to the bedroom to get a condom.”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” Sara said, “that’s exactly what she did.”

“Who was that?” the one asked.

Coralie motioned to a sensor in the corner. “My sister, Sara.”

The other glanced at it briefly. “Oh, one of *those*.”

“Do her cameras record?” the one asked Coralie.

“I’m not a recording machine,” Sara said.

“So, you can’t replay it for me?” the other asked.

“Pffff, not at all,” Sara said.

“Your name?” the one asked.

“Coralie Gunn.”

“Two Ns?”

“Yes.”

The other motioned to the body. “And him?”

“Oh—we’ve known each other since high school. Figured if we weren’t married by now, we might try things out.” Coralie stared at the bullet holes. She began seeing why Sara was so adamantly against him. It wasn’t just that he was fat, it was more like—

“His name?”

“Huh?” Coralie asked.

“Harley,” Sara said. “Harley Briggs.”

The other scribbled the name in the notepad.

“Now,” the one said, “what happened.”

Coralie kept her eyes on the body. Its tongue was sticking out, but just slightly—only enough to cover his bottom teeth. “I was coming back from the bedroom and I heard the door break open. I dropped to the floor. A man shouted something in Chinese.”

“Are you Chinese?” the other asked.

“Japanese. Well, half. My father was Irish.”

“Go on,” the one said.

“Then, the machine gun went off. It was really loud. I covered my ears. When it stopped, they left.”

“Did you see any of them?” the other asked.

The body had arms thicker than her legs. It had not one hint of handsomeness. “I saw their feet. There were three men. That’s all I know.”

Soon, the coroner arrived, followed by a representative from some branch of the military. Then, more people came, people in suits showing Cascadian Investigation Bureau badges. She and Sara were questioned a second and a third time. Finally, six of the people loaded the body onto a gurney, two of the guys in suits took the cases, and everyone left.

Coralie was unsure the window would still work. “Brent?” she asked. The LOST TELEMETRY screen disappeared and Brent appeared upon his stage.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

Coralie sighed. “Nothing.”

“Oh...” Brent said, staring at the sofa. “*Yeah...* Allow me to search for how to clean that up.”

“No,” Coralie said, turning to it. “Just find someone who will haul it away.”

“Joe’s Recycling has a flat-rate, thirty-doug special on hauling furniture and appliances.”

“Do it.” Coralie turned toward the front door, where Brent couldn’t see. “The door’s broken in, so I also need that fixed.”

“Calamity June is on call. She’s also really close—two floors down, three doors over.”

“Perfect. Send her over.”

“Very good.”

“Now,” Brent said, his serious tone turning to cheer. “Have you ever heard of fleather?”

* * *

All alone, and Anchorage’s nightfall seems so far away. A pipe wide as a body rises from beside the creek and up through the culvert’s curved ceiling some eight or ten meters above. Seems a good hiding place, so stuff her gear behind it. Coralie’s stomach grumbles—open the backpack and find the food and, yeah, a sandwich would be great right now, so eat and wait for darkness to come to Anchorage. Even back here, the final fall of Chester Creek seems so loud, sounding like a thousand angry slaps a second.

Stay in the shadow of night, Jack had instructed, stick to the shantytowns. For heaven’s sake, don’t go home. The Lone Doug Hotel is two blocks north of Fishhook, and twenty stories above. *Find the stairwells and use them.* It’s one thing to plan this on a map, another to live it in person, at full scale, with the city all around. Leo... Won’t be long before she’s with him, and the copy—that body in Tokyo who’s gonna have a reproduction of her neural connections—can go on and live without him. But this version—this Coralie—can be with Leo forever.

* * *

Nightfall comes to Anchorage. Once more, check that the jacket liner covers the gun—not that it would fool a cop. Should she leave it behind? Jack thought not—perhaps she should, too.

Just go. Ahead, a waterfall drops and, beside it, stairs lead upward. About three-quarters up, a thick, iron grating stretches across the falls. Within the grating, several items of trash have been saved from flowing out into the mudflats. Wonder who comes around to clean it, and then continue up. Now level with the swiftly flowing creek—which really is more of a river—walk along its side. Jack had said the creek would curve to the left, but a doorway ahead would lead to the first floor. That’s just what she sees, and once near the door, it opens for her, and beyond it, shelves of boxed goods tower some fifteen meters high. Robotic arms elevate along the shelves’ frames, articulate within, selecting items, and then withdraw again, lowering the items onto waist-high conveyors, their wheels turning and squeaking at the base of each shelf. *Follow the wall,* he’d said, *don’t get lost in the warehouse. The stairwell will be a hundred meters ahead, on your right.*

It’s straight ahead, so go on. The door opens and a woman in overalls goes through. She looks over her shoulder and meets Coralie’s eyes. What a nasty look, but the woman continues away. Now at the same door, go in.

Inside is an el and another door labeled STAIRS. Move onward into the stairwell and go up—six floors to the base level, which is actually more like twelve because these are the warehouse floors, where all the goods and machinery move, where all the used

items are sorted and washed and recycled, where all the objects needed for life or luxury are put onto dumb waiters and elevated to where they're needed.

This stairwell ends at 6, so go on out. *Avoid the beltways. Move along the sidewalk, near the cardboard shanties with the blanket doors. If you see a cop, duck in through one of those blankets.* And a man passes, right by, staring.

Turn to look and a pistol is leveled at Coralie's shoulder. The momentum from turning continues to pull her around—try and stop and all the sudden she feels flung clean out of her conscious mind.

Evasion

Death must be so beautiful....
To have no yesterday, and no
tomorrow. To forget time, to
forgive life, to be at peace.

—Oscar Wilde

Thirteen

Above, the hash pattern of skybridges cross, and Coralie lies upon her back—fallen, the wind knocked from her, so try and force some breath. Had her breast been struck by a bullet or a mallet? Above her, a gun, a hand, an arm, an agent. Inside the gun's barrel, darkness. Just lay motionless and breathe.

The man speaks into his watch: “Agent Valdez, Number Two-One-Seven-Two, shots fired, block One-Two-Four-Six-Zero-Six, northeast corner, requesting backup.”

“Roger, all officers in the vicinity of One-Two-Four-Six-Zero-Six, agent needs assistance, shots fired—I say again, shots fired.”

Agent Valdez lets his arm drop. The gun in his other hand points steadily between her eyes. “Coralie Gunn?”

She still can't take a full breath, so a nod will have to do.

“Stay still. You move, I shoot. Understand?”

There's enough breath now for a whisper: “Yes.”

A female voice from the watch: *“Unit Four-Three-One responding, ETA two minutes.”*

A different voice, this time male: *“Unit Nine-Two-Zero responding, one minute.”*

Another female: *“One-One-Three, one minute.”*

Meaning Coralie's got about ten seconds to make up her mind. If this is it, if this is the end, they'll drag her into a stairwell and shoot her in the head. Gotta make up her mind, gotta act quick, gotta do it now.

Kick the gun and the kick lands true, and the gun has flown away and, in this man's eyes, she can tell he means to disarm her, so as he descends, roll out from under him and hop to her feet.

But he's quick and has a hold of her holster, gripping hard.

Fall upon him and grab, and his neck holds firmly in her hands, and he's unclasped her holster's strap, but the gun's programmed for her, so could he really fire it?

Just make him stop.

Under her thumbs, his throat crushes like a paper cup.

Release him, but that changes nothing—the damage is done. She could only bypass it with a tracheotomy, and no possibility of that before the other cops arrive.

Gotta go. Holster the gun and run, and now she's killed two, this last one with the tips of her thumbs.

Run, and how many more have to die? What is she living for, anyway?

So she can transmit, that's why. She'll have a new home soon. One that hasn't done the horrible things she has. But won't these memories become a part of her new body?

A shot rings out and chips of brick fly in her face.

Gotta get away, gotta get low, or even get high—keep running and look up...

Beltways travel above at every other floor. She's never tested how high she can jump. More shots, and they miss by millimeters, but only because of her speed, so better make a move soon. Another bang, and a bullet flies past her face and glass crashes, so look at where it came from and the cops have closed the distance by travelling on the beltway. God, she's stupid! Another shot just misses, so skid to a stop and run the other

way. Ahead, more cops speed near on the beltway. Run faster and faster and an intersection is coming, and the cops level their weapons, so no time to calculate, just jump, and the east-west cross street above descends toward her, and then she's well above it, and the arc she's on may carry her over the entire level and back down to 6, and as she falls, the far edge of 7 appears close, and closer still, and if she reaches out, she just may be able to grab the glass wall. Do it and the strain in her shoulders is momentary. Her body flops onto the hologram side of the glass on 7, and her hands keep hold. Pull up—up and over and down. Roll onto the beltway and take a glance at the passing address numbers. She's going eastbound away from the Lone Pine and toward Stressford, but that's okay, just run, dodge all the standing, gray people, get away from the shooting bastards, and at this all-out sprint, she must be travelling eighty, and Jack's plan has gone all to shit, and her breast throbs as if the bullet had penetrated, and now she needs to find another way to the Lone Doug Hotel.

Two cops stand on the passing sidewalk, and at her speed, they seem to flash by, but consider her seen. If she keeps running, they could never catch up. But what if some have entered the beltway ahead? Better slow down—they may not even have her description. Then again, every pane of glass beside the beltway has a camera. Just stop running because it makes her more obvious.

Here, the beltway begins to rise—she's reached the eastern foothills, the ones that rise into Stressford, a city where each building actually sits upon rock, and where the ones close to the UGB are sprawling estates only two- or even one-story high. She needn't go that far though, so step over to the sidewalk, and the Police Appreciation Building, draped on all four sides with leafy vines between the patios, must be near—she

just needs to get her bearings. Take a quick look back. It appears she lost her pursuers, so walk around a block or two to try and see the building. At the end of the block, through the gap of a cross-street, the green building rises within the cityscape.

Seems unwise coming here, to an apartment complex that houses only police and detectives, but Michael has called this place home ever since Coralie turned eighteen and, on that very day, moved out, with anger and resentment that Mom and Dad had willed the condo, along with all the savings and investments and insurance, to Coralie and Sara. Michael charged expenses for having to watch his kid sisters, and to him *watching* meant sulking around, studying his tablet full of criminal justice texts, notes, and case files. By the time Coralie turned fifteen, Michael worked as a cop, and by the time she turned seventeen, he'd become Anchorage's youngest detective. On the morning of Coralie's eighteenth birthday, she awoke and all Michael's things were in boxes by the dumb waiter, and he sent them down. "I'm leaving now," told Coralie. Then he looked to one of Sara's sensors. "Talk to you later, Sara." Then he walked out the door. It had been nothing new from Michael, but Coralie felt disappointed, having hoped one day they'd get along.

At the Police Appreciation Building, there's no sign of cops. Step inside and there's a bank of elevators, but again, find the stairs. It's thirty-two floors—better get a move on.

* * *

She'd only been here once, just to check it out, right after he moved in, because Sara knew the address. Michael hadn't been pleased to have Coralie over. But she still

remembers the number on his door—3231 it had been, another of those one-offs that reside everywhere in life. And now, kick the door open. Just inside, her brother's service belt is hung on the hall tree.

No need to expose curious passers-by, so close the door, even if it never will latch again. Now, take Michael's belt and sling it across her chest.

The sound of hurried footsteps brings Michael from around a corner and into his living room, wearing only briefs. He sees her. "What the fuck, Coralie!"

She's not afraid, so look at him that way.

He marches to her as if to attack.

Pop him in the face, and something in there breaks, and had she really hit him that hard?

He collapses to the ground, spits out a tooth, and drools blood.

Roll his belt on her shoulder to expose the handcuffs. Take them from the belt's holder.

A chick's voice asks, "What is it?" and the owner of that voice bursts into the room naked, where Michael had. Seeing Michael's bleeding face makes her yelp, and she runs to him, squealing his name.

Slap the chick and shove her onto her ass. "Shut up."

She shuts up.

Michael shifts as though he's gonna get back to his feet, so kick him onto his back and pin him with a foot on his chest. With his hands gripping, trying to lift her leg by the calf, it's easy to snap the handcuff on him. Release his chest and drag him by the cuffs to

his bed partner. Now seize her by the wrist and drag them both to the hall tree's wrought-iron posts. Pull their arms behind it and slap the open cuff on the chick.

Michael makes a swipe for his gun, but he grips short of the holster. Twist away, place a hand on his face, and shove him back to the floor. Best to get some distance now, so step back.

The chick wails, and how irritating. Pull Michael's heavy, steel baton off the belt. Extend it and then bend it into a U. Drop it at the chick's feet, where it lands with a solid thud.

"If you don't shut up, we can try that with your toes."

The chick quiets to sniffing.

Michael says, "You've supplemented yourself..."

Unslung his belt and toss it away, then turn to him. "After serving all day, does a bartender deserve some liquor? Does a chef deserve some lobster? Does a surgeon deserve some strength?"

Michael appears contemptful. "It's *illegal*, Coralie."

Yeah, yeah—breaking the law is illegal in Cascadia—got it. Coralie's breast throbs, and Michael has got to own a vest. The tiler's bodysuit has done its job, but it does nothing to reduce the force of a bullet's impact. Look around and there the vest hangs, upon a chair in his dining room. Go to it and the word POLICE shows on both sides. Tear off the labels and try the vest on. The weight is heavy on her breast. Now go back to her brother.

"What trouble are you in this time?" Michael groans.

He doesn't look so different all grown up. "Remember when you used to sit on me, hold me down, spit on me, and slurp it up?" That was just one. All the times she'd been shoved into a kitchen cabinet, where she couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and he'd leaned his back against the door, securing it shut, and sat for hours with Sara screaming at him to let her go, and he'd say, "Why don't you make me?" just to be cruel to her because he knew Sara could do nothing to help. All the times he'd lay in wait until she walked by, when he'd slug her in the arm or in the gut or in the back of the head, and when she screamed in agony and Okaasan came running, he'd say, "She's making it up," and no matter if Sara saw it too, Okaasan always believed him, telling Coralie, "Stop trying to get your brother in trouble." All the times he'd put boogers in her food, or all the times he'd tainted it with something else—paint in her toothpaste, soil in the Cookies 'n' Cream ice cream she once loved so much, and even once a dusting of Alka-Seltzer on the spare Kotex she kept in her purse.

"That was years ago, Coralie," Michael says. "We were kids."

No, "it was yesterday..." He'd always hated her. He hates her even now, and not because of that bloody nose. He wills his hatred of her. Figure she'll never know why because, even if he knew himself, no way he'd ever tell her. "Michael, have you ever heard of PC-332?"

There's no recognition in his eyes. "No," he says, shaking his head.

It's okay to believe him. The place is probably a fed thing and Michael's just an Anchorage detective. But how could he not know about the outside, about what's beyond the UGB?

"What'd you do, Coralie?" he asks.

“I beat up a cop and threatened his girlfriend.”

Michael looks up, toward the corner of his living room, as he'd always done at home, looking up toward Sara's sensors. Follow his gaze to the ceiling's corner. The sensors are there.

Sara? No, Sara's at the Lone Doug—

“Simon,” Michael says, “how much longer?”

At Coralie's shoulder, a British voice speaks: “They're here already, sir. Should I send them in?”

No...

Through a grin, Michael says, “Do it.”

The door Coralie had kicked in flies open.

Where to go?

Glass ahead, but not a window, a sliding door leading to a small patio. *Run.*

Beyond the glass, a soldier drops down on a rope, rifle at the ready.

Too late to stop now, gunfire erupts all around, and the patio glass shatters, its shards hanging in the air. Feels like a sledgehammer striking her, first in the right scapula, then in the thoracic region of the spine, then, from the front, in an upward travelling line: right thigh, pubis, the abdomen's left-lower quadrant, its left-upper quadrant. The impacts are forceful but painless.

The glass has rained to the floor, so tackle the guy on the rope, push through, and *snap!* the patio's rail gives way and she falls, hugging the man who'd shot her, and with a jerk, the two now swing thirty floors up, and her stomach churns, panic comes, swinging back and forth, and vertigo attacks and she can barely breathe.

The cop punches her in the head, and then on the shoulder. Downward—another patio railing.

Wait for the swing and release.

Grab, *missed*, grab—*grab at anything* and got it! Over the rail and onto someone's patio. Bullets snap through the air around her so kick out this glass door and run.

“Hey!” yells some voice, but run on through. Bust through the front door and sprint away to the stairs. Breathe, damn it, breathe, and it's like sucking air through a pillow and her mind flirts with unconsciousness. Stepstepstepstepstepstepstepstep, turn, step again, turn, step again, and then a sign:

Skybridge

This Floor

Do it, get out, follow the sign with the arrow and there's a cop at the skybridge's entrance—his back turned—so run at him, lean down for a tackle, and shoulder him.

He flies a couple meters but this one's quick, and he's getting back to his feet.

Before he can do that, seize him, take him in both arms and launch him against the wall, and gasps erupt from onlookers. That did it—the man stills, so run. Run across the skybridge, onward through a another building, and another skybridge, and another building, and then into a stairway; now shuffle down and breathe, down and breathe, down...

* * *

Here is Skwentna, upon the solid floor of 6, with the warehouse floors invisible below. Wearing Michael's vest, Coralie feels conspicuous as hell, but keep walking. Everyone here wears glasses and they seem to pay her no mind.

Ahead—no, that one's teeth are too crooked for a cop, so he's likely just a man dressed in black.

Above, hanging from a ninth-floor beltway, a banner, with a smiling family printed upon it, declares, DAY 7 FOR WHOLESOME MEALS. Pass under it and a scratchy voice yells, "Hey." Draw the Glock and its gyroscope spins up; point it in the voice's direction.

An old lady motions to her, to enter her cardboard-sided hut. Go on and once inside, the woman drops down the blanket that serves as her door. She digs through a pile of junk, finds a tablet, and shows it to her. "You're the one on TV," she says.

Holster the weapon and look. Funny seeing herself from an outside perspective. She looks small and scared. All the sudden, an urge arrives. "Bathroom?"

The old lady points her thumb. "There's a G-John two doors down, to the right."

And... "Supplies?"

The woman leaves past her blanket. In a few seconds: "Hey, Jolene! You gotta cork?"

No attempt at couthness round here. Off with the heavy vest—the floor seems the best place for it. A few more seconds and the old lady places the cork in her hand. Pull back the blanket, look for black uniforms. None.

Inside the G-John, take off the jeans and shirt, unzip the bodysuit, and, in the polished-steel mirror, damn—looks like she’s been the guest of honor at a stoning. Touch them and they look worse than they feel. But then there’s that one, the one she can’t see in the mirror, just a light palpation and, *aaaugh*—that did some damage.

Do what she needs to do and get back.

Within the cardboard hut again, strain to get the vest back on. “I have to keep moving.”

“Okay, but you could use some camouflage, dontcha think?”

She certainly could, so nod.

Clothing sits in piles, sorted and stacked by size and sex. Some looks new, some looks used, others look soiled. The old lady withdraws what looks like a lightweight tablecloth. “Pull this over your head.”

Coralie unfolds it. The total amount of cloth must come to two square meters—it’s a giraffe- and rhino-printed muumuu for a six-hundred pound woman. May as well try it on.

The woman sorts through some things. “Swear there’s no lice,” she says, and now she’s holding out a poofy, knitted cap.

Go on, now—this disguise is the only chance Coralie’s got.

“Don’t forget your glasses. No one here goes anywhere without their glasses.”

Jack had given Coralie a pair of sunglasses, but she’d left them in the backpack. Why hadn’t she thought to bring them? Say “thank you,” take them, and try them on.

Look and the stack of clothes have become a stack of gold-hemmed, richly colored, silk garments, stacked neatly within cherrywood shelves. Behind it, the

cardboard wall has turned into logs—like the walls at the Elk’s Lodge. To the left, the old lady’s bed has transformed from a mat on recycling crates to a four-post bed with lacy drapes all around. To the left again, no cardboard wall shows—in its place, a field of grass stretches away, and in the distance, between a couple lollipop trees, a unicorn feeds. Coralie turns to the entrance, where the blanket hung, and in its place hangs velvety cloth, in royal purple. “This is amazing.”

“Just seems like home to me,” the old lady says. Through the glasses she appears as she may have some fifty years ago, when youth was the cause of any of her beauty. She still sounds wrinkled and old, though. “Takes lotsa guts to take on the system. Hope ya win.”

“Thank you.” Go out through the purple curtain and look around. Skwentna has magically become a village of tiny homes, and Coralie feels as though she’s stepped into a metropolis for faeries or elves or gnomes. Look up and all the crossing skybridges have banners, and the first one she sees says:

DAY 7 FOR FOOD
DAY 1-6 FOR LEISURE

and then another:

PRODUCTIVITY IS A
VICE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

and another:

CLASS IS MEANINGLESS
WITHOUT THE POOR—
CASCADIA APPRECIATES
YOUR SACRIFICE

Which means... What, exactly? On her public service days, had her desire to give anything and everything to her patients been motivated somehow? Had she fallen victim time and again to another Cascadian scheme?

* * *

Coralie had always felt invisible in her scrubs, happily blending into crowds coming to and from work, and she'd rarely gotten a second look from anyone, from anything other than an advertisement, and she could ride the beltway to work naked and the ads wouldn't treat her any differently. But strolling through the sixth-floor faerievilles in this getup has got her feeling visible indeed. Nevertheless, no one has turned to look at her.

Spoke too soon—two chick dicks dead ahead, so keep her head down and shuffle by, and don't turn back to look, just move on. There's a beltway ahead, where a cop stands guard. Just keep walking on the sidewalk and he looks, and she meets his eyes, and that's gonna finish it, but no, he looks away. Just breathe and keep moving.

On the left lies an antique store built into one of the main vertical structural beams. A sign declares, *Closed For Now*. Beside it, stairs are built right into the beam—right where Jack had said it would be. Duck inside and step up. If it weren't for the pain in her back, climbing these stairs would be easy, and she could ascend in half-flight leaps. But these stairs step hard, and she can endure them only one at a time.

But the time passes as it always does. Exit at 40, step out, and before her, the Lone Doug Hotel's ground floor is stationed in grandness and austerity. Time to go in.

Happily, no one mans the desk.

Move on. First door on the left, Room 101.

Knock, and thank God Coralie's made it, and now she just can't wait to see Sara.

Fourteen

Dr. Minamoto opens the door and he's holding a tablet. By the look on his face, Coralie could be a monster.

Ask, "Minamoto-sensei?"

He blocks the doorway, turning the tablet to show her.

A video plays showing her strangling the agent, and then it switches to her dragging her bloody brother and his naked chick around by their wrists. Look up, back into Dr. Minamoto's eyes. "I had no choice. Like I said—something came up."

Beyond him is long, dark hair—someone in a wheelchair—Sara.

Shoulder Dr. Minamoto aside.

"*Sara?*" Go to her: Sara—in a simple, loose fitting, straight-sided dress, printed in a pattern of cartoon seafowl; her hair shiny and long and black, with bangs trimmed at the brow; her face familial, regal, beautiful. "Oh, Sara! Do you hate me? Do you hate me?"

Sara's dark eyes find Coralie's. Although Sara appears to try, she can't hold in a chuckle. "What *are* you wearing!" Her voice seems different—a little deeper.

Take off the poofy cap and goofy glasses and throw them on the bed. "Sara—is that really you?"

Sara's eyes search Coralie's face. "Yeah, Frecklth, ith really me."

A lisp—wonder how long that'll last. Bend and put a cheek on Sara's and hug her; it's a touch they've never shared till now. Whisper to her: "*I missed you.*"

She whispers back. "*Me, too.*"

Pull back and sit on the edge of the bed. “How’s it been so far?”

Sara makes a sour face. “No depth perthepthon. Odor and flavor—yuck.” She shakes her head. “Nothing ith the way I felt it before. I...” She takes a breath. “I don’t know if I can adapt.”

Dr. Minamoto sits on the other bed. “You will, Sara-chan—in time.”

Sara looks down. “I know what you’re gonna do.”

Look at Dr. Minamoto and he nods. Turn back to Sara. “It’s the only way.”

Still looking down, Sara nods.

Dr. Minamoto still holds the tablet, and he turns it to Coralie. “Why have you done these things?”

Stifle the rage. “Why did you bring Sara here?”

“I hoped seeing her would bring you here. The delay has been costly. What is your reason?”

Can she possibly communicate all that’s happened? “I quit my job. Since then, Cascadia’s been trying to kill me.”

Dr. Minamoto frowns and shakes his head.

“It’s true—there’s a train that goes to a place called the Aleutian Resort. But it’s not a resort the train goes to, it goes into the ocean.” Sara looks up at her. “Yeah, straight into the ocean with all the people on board. At a place called PC-332. And outside... Outside the UGB, nothing is as they say it is. It’s not sunny and warm, it’s—”

“Enough,” Dr. Minamoto says. “You could tell everyone in Cascadia all these things and it will not matter. Coralie-san—these people do not care.”

Continue anyway. “Outside, it’s cloudy and the landscape is covered in snow.”

“Really?” Sara asks, wrinkling her nose.

“Yeah, and—you won’t believe this... Michael has a ghost named Simon.”

Sara eyes widen and she gasps. “Nuh-huh?”

Nod, uh-huh. “And Simon calls Michael *sir*.”

Sara frowns. “All this time he coulda had me over...”

“Enough,” Dr. Minamoto says again. “There is no more time for banter. Where is your uploader?”

Tell him. “It’s in the Pacific Ocean.”

Dr. Minamoto sighs. Within his suitcase he finds another. He walks near and asks, “Are you ready, Coralie-san?”

Yes, never been more ready, but then Sara comes to mind: “Just a sec.” Reach to her and lean over, cheek-to-cheek once more; enjoy the warmth, the softness of touch. Take a hand and stroke her thick, dark hair that smells of strawberries. Feel the moisture of mingling tears. How wonderful it is to finally hold her, and how awful it is they must wait to be together again. Is there no other way? No other way than this? That’s been the only question and there is no other way. “Love you, Sara-berra.”

“Love you, Frecklth.”

Squeeze her one last time. Kiss her. Stand and wipe away the tears.

Turn resolutely to Dr. Minamoto. “One last thing.”

He looks sour.

“I think an advertisement hacked my implant.”

He shakes his head again, as though she were a fool. “Are you ready?”

If he’s not concerned, should she be? “I guess.”

“Very well,” he says. “Listen closely, Coralie-san. When you awaken, you will be in a fugue. You will not know where you are, who you are, or even what you are. You will remember nothing at all. You will be as a newborn child, crying and wailing. You will be strapped to a gurney for your own protection. The memories come back slowly. The neurons take time to connect. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Even when the memories return—and they will—you must still learn how to talk again. How to walk again. How to lift and hold and carry. How to chew and swallow. It is a new body and a new brain. So, it is like starting over again. You did it once before, so the process will be greatly accelerated. Maybe a month or two, and then a year for finer motor skills like writing. Don’t let yourself get frustrated by this—it is normal.”

“Okay.”

“Of course, we will be with you. Myself, my staff, and Sara too.”

Look at Sara—what a curious smile—and then back.

“Do you have any questions?”

Just “how long? When will I wake up?”

Dr. Minamoto nods. “We land in Tokyo at noon tomorrow. An hour to get off the plane and onto the train to Keio. You’ll be uploaded and awake by mid-afternoon.”

God—uploaded and awake. Uploaded and *out*. “I’m ready.”

He reaches into his pocket and takes out the uploader.

It feels cold on Coralie’s cheek. In a few seconds it beeps, and when it does, something in her vision washes away, as though she had been wearing colored glasses and took them off. She looks for the implant’s text and can’t find it.

Dr. Minamoto puts the device back in his pocket.

And?

“Okay Sara-san,” he says, “*watashitachi wa ikimasu.*” Dr. Minamoto fumbles his suitcase and it tumbles to the floor. He takes the strap and lifts it to his shoulder.

Admit it. “I’m not sure I can go through with it.”

Dr. Minamoto looks at the floor and sighs. When he looks up again, it’s as though he’s embarrassed and disturbed. His pinch hurts. “Your flesh, the bone underneath, all this must die. One person, one body. We discussed this lengthily.”

Her plan had been to travel to the Aleutian resort, upload, transmit over her phone, and then use the autojector, right, right, but so much has happened since then. And Sara wasn’t even supposed to be in Cascadia, so like *what the hell?* Everything had just been so different, different from all her imaginings. Now that she was being pursued by the government, could she just dose herself and be done with it? Let them win? Suppose those were questions she herself needed to answer.

“Coralie-san,” Dr. Minamoto says, “your spirit, your soul—your *ki*—it is all preserved.” He taps the uploader in his pocket. “They are here. This version of you, she will see. In a year, she will think of this just like she had moved from one apartment to another. But the other version,” he points to Coralie and frowns, “the old apartment, is scheduled for demolition. Just let it go, Coralie-san.”

And what “if I don’t?”

“No! Enough of those thoughts! Your body in Tokyo, she is beautiful, young, and she will have a good life with your *ki*. Most importantly—now that you are hunted—she does not have your DNA.”

Her DNA, of course, the unalterable stain of individuality, so look at her hands.

Sara's frail voice: "Coralie?"

Go to her. Coralie wants nothing more than to kiss Sara's forehead, to embrace her, but she looks lousy with fear. Just squat down and rest a hand on the chair's wheel.

"Yeah, baby doll?"

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Now that you've uploaded, I'm afraid the other woman won't be you."

Dr. Minamoto drops his head. "*Chikusho...*"

Just ignore him. "Why?"

"You wanna thave yourthelf. You may thave *who* you are—your *ki*—but *what* you are ith important to me, too."

"She'll be me, Sara."

Sara's head shaking is diagonal, but her expression says *no* well enough. "We've been together forever."

Twenty-four years, for sure.

"In all that time, I've watched, I've heard, I've thmelled *thith* body. *You*. Tiny, freckly *you*."

Dr. Minamoto clears his throat. "We must go, Sara."

"*Eeeeeeee*," Sara replies. Then her eyes return to Coralie. "I will love the other Coralie—I promith. But to me, thee'll never be you."

Still, it's the only way.

“Promith me you’ll try to live. To get out of Anchorage. To get out of Cathcadia.”

Coralie can’t refuse, so nod, and tears sting her eyes. “I promise.”

“Okay, Sara-chan” Dr. Minamoto says, taking the handles of her wheelchair, “we need be gone.”

“*Ikimath*,” Sara tells her sensei, and Dr. Minamoto opens the door, wheels her away, and the door closes softly behind them.

Escape

It is not a shadow, but a light;
not an end, but a beginning!

—Lewis Carroll

Fifteen

Okay, Sara-chan, he'd said, *we need be gone. Need be*—perhaps not a Sara-ism after all but a Minamoto-ism, an artifact of Sara's first five years, her years at Keio University, the years before she'd been packed into a box and given to her parents, the box printed with a caricature of a young girl, a girl with a bright smile as wide as her nose. They had been years that Sara never fully remembered, and she'd always described them as a human might, that all the memories seemed to get fuzzy, dissipating the closer she got to the moment of her creation. And now, here in this hotel, Coralie needs to face this body's death once and for all.

Pull out the autojector.

Certainly, she'll never make it to the culvert without a fight. By now there's cops on every corner or, if not, a camera every fifty meters programmed to recognize her.

Cameras—the window in here.

Oh, haha, Dr. Minamoto had torn away some drywall and yanked out its transformer. But Dr. Minamoto had sent her that video message from here. Gotta go or end this life. Now.

Put the autojector away. Put the cap and glasses on. Escape is the better option.

Crack the door and men's voices come from the direction of the hotel lobby. An exit sign glows in the opposite direction, so that's the way to go, so be quick and run, and a door exits into a narrow catwalk between two tall, brick buildings. Stairway or beltway, she needs to get down, south, and west.

Move like they do, like the poor, like she's got no purpose, and any beltway will do except north or east, and this one's going south, so step on and over.

Above the sunshine blocks, the glass comes near and the city descends below like the sides of a whirlpool and there's nothing to hold onto, so look ahead, it calms the vertigo, and she can't believe she once thought falling was the best way to go. Then, sidewalk lies beside the beltway again, and grass beyond that, and this is the park, the one she and Leo picnicked in before he deployed to China. Can she see the spot? Yes, the boulders are ahead a ways, and her stomach drops because she feels watched, so turn, and, sure enough, she is being watched—a gaggle of fully armored men rush toward her. Jump straight off the 40 and when she lands on the soft grass, roll. The rushing of water is near—the sound of Chester Creek. Get up and run toward it, to where she and Leo rested against the boulder. Check and see if the cops followed and they have exited the beltway, 150 meters away, weapons drawn. Take cover behind the largest boulder. Should she give up here? No need to use the autojector—just stand up and they'll blow her head clean off. It would be mostly painless. But what if she was struck in the neck, or just grazed in the head, or what if she got shot in the mouth—ack, that could be a most unfatal shot, but the pain, the deep and throbbing pain she would suffer. Look down and her knee rests on an anthill. Move aside a little...

A strange sound whines above the gurgling and splashing of Chester Creek. Look up into the darkness and she can barely discern the motion, so better unholster the Glock. “Can you target those drones? I can hardly see them.”

“Yes,” it replies.

“How many are there?”

“Four.”

The gyroscope will guide her aim, so point toward Elmendorf and fire, fire, fire, fire...

The drones clack to the ground. A voice: “Coralie Gunn—drop your weapon. You are surrounded. Toss your weapon aside and come out with your hands on your head.”

That’s not gonna happen—they’d shoot her. “How many hostiles are out there?”

“Seventeen, with more closing in.”

She’s not surrounded, just blocked in by a creek six or seven meters wide, a creek she can jump over, but they can’t, not unless they’d had all the surgeries, gone through all the painful stringing. No more killing, no more death, not because of her anyway. Soon they will send officers to the other side to flank her, so, time to move, time to get going...

“I need you to fire uncorrected,” Coralie demands.

“That is very unsafe.”

“All I need is suppressive fire.”

“If that is what you want, I am recording this conversation for liability purposes.”

“Fine by me. Just fire uncorrected.”

“The gyroscope is off.”

Gotta be quick, real quick. Stand and aim above them, squeeze and keep squeezing, and it works, they’ve all taken cover, so go—run, run faster, and plant the foot—

Struck. Fiery pain all over, struck again, and the impact seems to twist her. Her jump is short, the stream rushes below, and all the sudden she’s in it and sinking, the gun

swept away, and the vest—weighing her down, drowning her—tear it off but the muumuu prevents this, and, *unngh*, her head bumps along boulders, no air, no breath left, gotta get this 600-pound-lady-cover off, rip and pull and it's gone so tear at the vest's velcro and—

Air! Breathe! Breathe! Blink and look and she's airborne, weightless, falling down the Gavin Street Falls, from 30 to 28, and all becomes gurgles and bubbles, so kick for the surface, breathe and blink and now she's flowing eastbound, away from the UGB's coastal end. Try and kick toward the edge but it's no use, the current's just too strong, so ride it, try and breathe, and ahead, down, down, down she falls, and as she tumbles in the air, she sees crossing skybridges and, above them, the square stars of Elmendorf, and she smacks the water hard this time. This time, her diaphragm seems paralyzed by the impact, but the water doesn't care, it carries her onward, and she forces a breath, snorting water, and she feels stung between the eyes. Kick up and stay at the surface. Ahead, the creek takes a sharp turn, so try and float on her back, feet forward, and still she's flung into a layer of shallow riprap, and it's slick with algae, and she has slowed enough that she could crawl out if only she could get a grip but she slips and is dragged along the angular rock, banging knees and shins and elbows, and then she's back in the flow's center, in the churn again, and she's lost all sense of direction, and an edge approaches once more; ahead rises a windowy tower, which must have a beautiful view of the falls, and this drop might kill her, so fall and don't even try to fight it anymore, and her stomach seems to fall faster than her body, and which way is up, and now she's under again, breathless, kick to the surface, and breathing becomes more impossible with every fall, but breathe, just breathe, keep her head above water, and the flow has sped up,

drainage pipes feed the flow here, where the creek has become a river, and a riffle lies ahead, and this is dying, this is what she'd always feared, the suffering preceding her own death, and the water pulls her over stones as large as her head, and she is struck as if a mob had cornered her, striking again and again, on her tailbone, on her shoulder blades, on the back of her head, any part of her that protrudes, and still, fight to keep her head up, to breathe each breath, because she knows it's the last and

Leo, can you help me? Let me come. Or save me from this mess. But you gotta help me. Can't take any more. Who knew death could be so hard? Can't take another drop. Gotta be ten more. Gotta help me, Leo. Somebody help me. Won't anybody help?

Be still for another drop and she's weightless. Let unconsciousness take her this time, and when she lands, she smacks the water like concrete, and her vision blurs, but she's aware she's underwater and her head breaks the surface and breath comes biologically, involuntarily, and she's flowing across another level of the city. Blink and blink and the water is like dust in her eyes, but try and see the creek's bank and it looks like western Anchorage at maybe the tenth or twelfth floor and, yes, she can see the bank travelling by at the speed of the twenty-five, and she breathes and kicks, and on the bank is a cop, and she breathes, and his gun is drawn and he's firing at her, but his gun is a lousy shot because, being in the whitewater, she's a lousy target. Even above the water's roar, she can hear his shots continue until she's so far gone she wonders if she was the target in the first place, and the end is coming again and it happens sooner than she'd expected and, for a moment, she paddles as if she were still underwater.

And this is it. This is the shock that takes her from this fucked up place and this failed life. Feels as though she's stung all over, scalding hot, and it's the only sense she's

got until she realizes she's up and gasping, and another drop approaches and God hasn't saved her and Leo hasn't taken her—oh, no; of course not—and she's going to have to face every horrible moment, and then she's falling again, and while dropping, on either side of her, stacks of man-tall pipes, coated in algae, dump outward and down, creating a mist she descends into, and all at once, a universe of water envelops her, above the noise of the water, she can hear Sara, on that horrible day she was flying home from Tokyo.

* * *

Coralie had gone to bed without Sara for the first time since, how long—forever? So, she lay sleepless for hours, alone with her thoughts. When she woke, late in the morning, she woke to the sound of Sara, Sara shrieking as though descended upon by madmen, and Coralie jumped from bed and dashed to her, to the screams coming from the living room.

Upon the sofa sat Michael, his hair mussed from the textured upholstery. “Sara!” he said, rubbing his eyes. “Shut the fuck up!”

Sara panted in low grunts as though she'd run out of breath. The sound seemed to come directly from her cube—a place she ordinarily avoided.

Coralie sat beside Sara's cubby. “What's wrong? Why're you back?”

Sara spoke in unintelligible blubbery.

“It's okay, Sara,” Michael said, as though it wasn't. “You're okay.”

“No,” Sara said. “No...”

Michael set his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands. He looked into Sara's sensor in the corner and a furrow appeared between his eyebrows. "What happened."

Her voice spoke to Coralie. "There— There was an explosion. The plane's entire side, the wing..."

Michael turned to Coralie.

"Gone. *Gone*... And I spun, end over end, and the wind was so loud, and I tumbled so fast, I didn't..."

"Brent!" Michael commanded, and the suddenness of it made Sara yelp.

"*Shhhhhhhhh*," Coralie consoled, wanting to touch Sara's cube. But the cube itself was senseless, so there was no point.

"Morning, sleepyheads!" Brent said.

"Shut up," Michael said. "Scan the news—anything breaking. I want to know if any airlines have deviated from their scheduled flightplans."

"I'm searching... Three in Europe have had to vector around—"

"*No*," Michael said, "the Pacific region."

"All I can say—it appears there will be news."

"Explain."

"Cascadia has changed their Alert Level to High. All military passes and leaves have been revoked. There's an awful lot of communications traffic going on at CBC."

"Put it on," Michael said, and a videobox with the Cascadian Broadcasting Company logo appeared. Within it, a twentyish blonde interviewed a couple teenagers

who'd camped overnight for the Hadrian Bock concert, over at Anchorage Stadium. The two girls rambled, chattered, and squeaked. "Mute that."

Brent obeyed.

Coralie couldn't see the window from Sara's cubby, so she got up. "Come sit with me on the sofa."

Michael continued pressing Brent for information.

Coralie sat. She wasn't sure Sara followed, but acted as if she had. "Can you start over? The plane took off—"

Sara was there. "Everything was fine. Just fine. Dad pressed his phone against the window so I could see the takeoff. In no time, only ocean was down there anymore, so he passed me off to Mom. He was asleep by the time drinks were served. Mom told me about her old job at Tonogayato Garden, about the peacefulness of it, about how she could live happy in the place forever. Then, she began telling me about Obaasan, about how *she* had worked there as a child. That she hoped you and I could someday work there, too. Maybe in two or three years, over some summer. And she smiled, and then *boom*, no ripping, no tearing, there was just a hole, a hole where the window was, only this hole was three meters wide, and I saw Mom's hair lashing at her face, and Dad, he'd been where the hole was, and then so was I. I tumbled, there was no stopping it, and the wind rushed and whipped, louder and louder. Channels home appeared and were gone, dunno why, maybe fear, maybe signal strength, and the horizon rose, with choppy waves below; afraid and choking, I remembered the satellites. I could see *Kuki-Kuma Ni* and I was there, above the earth. I went from there to Keio. Then home..." Sara began sobbing.

Coralie wiped her own tears away.

“They’re going to break the story now,” Brent told Michael.

“Volume,” Michael said. “Full screen.” The videobox crowded Brent out.

Michael sat at the opposite end of the sofa from Coralie.

Trumpets sounded and the Breaking News banner rippled at the window’s bottom. The lady onscreen, who had the appearance of a Seawolves cheerleader, looked suddenly serious. “Cascadian Pacific radar has lost track of an airline, Alaskan Air Flight 8100, en route from Tokyo to Anchorage. We are currently collecting details for this report, which we will have for you after these brief messages.”

The window filled with a spinning CBC logo, and then Brent walked center stage. “Bad time to bring up Froot Loops, yeah?”

“Any other stations breaking this yet?” Michael asked.

Brent shook his head.

“NHK?”

Brent thought for a moment and, again, shook his head.

Michael turned to Sara’s sensor. “You said *the wing*.”

“Yeah,” Sara said, “we were seated above it.”

“How bout I have some ice-cold Coke sent up?” Brent asked.

Sara’s voice boomed like a god’s: “*Shut up.*”

Coralie chewed her nails. She and Mom were going to go shopping, day after tomorrow, for new clothes for school. But the shopping was just an excuse—anything could be ordered or exchanged through the dumb waiter. This was mother-daughters

time. A time when the girls could chat, make fun of old-lady fashions, try on expensive jewelry and not buy it. If what Sara had experienced was true, then—

Michael: “Shit, Brent—*how much longer.*”

—Mom and Dad were dead.

“Right now,” Brent said, and then dissolved away.

Dead.

Trumpets and banner again. “Mystery over the Pacific,” the cheerleader said.

“What happened to Flight 8800? We’re getting answers.”

The co-host appeared more like a ballet dancer than a cheerleader. “That’s right, Bettie. Our exclusive CBC TransPacific DroneNet has the video. The following images contain graphic images—viewer discretion is advised.”

“Joining us now,” said cheerleader, “is Fred Jarvis, a retired captain for Virgin Airlines. Thank you for being with us.”

Through the split window, Fred nodded.

“Okay. So, you’re going to guide us through this imagery.”

“At this point,” Fred said, “the aircraft, a Boeing 787-K, has been airborne for approximately forty-five minutes. It cruises at a flight level of 10,100 meters. The DroneNet hovers at an altitude of 3,000 meters, so that’s the reason for this oblique angle.”

What Coralie saw was a sharp image of the jet directly ahead of her, pointed toward the upper-right corner of the living room window. Although the jet itself appeared frozen, beyond it, cirrus clouds drifted. For a moment, Coralie puzzled over

how the drones could capture this video, but then she realized each of the video's frames must have been photographed by a different drone.

“The incident occurs at 19:37:44-Zulu, which was 11:37 A.M. this morning, Cascadian Standard Time.”

Making it 10:37 A.M., Alaskan. The screen was at 19:36:50. Less than a minute left. “I'm not sure I can watch,” Coralie said.

Sara said nothing. Michael said, “Then go to your room, you shit.”

“Sara?”

No response. She must've left.

“Still cruising,” Fred said. “At this point in the flight, it's routine to have turned control over to the autopilot. And...”

Beyond the window, the aircraft appeared to be cleaved in a cloud of smoke and the two parts quickly fell from view.

“Shit,” Michael said.

“Let's slow that down,” Fred said, and the imagery quickly ran back to when the plane was whole. “We're going to run this frame by frame.”

Coralie stared at the intact aircraft.

“Okay, here,” Fred said, and the image paused and zoomed out until the aircraft was the size of a doorknob. A line of white smoke pointed to it from below.

Michael stood and went to the window.

“This line here is a rocket trail,” Fred said. He zoomed in on the trail's tip. “The exposure is 1/125th of a second with the DroneNet, and since this rocket is significantly smeared, that shows it's travelling at an extreme velocity.” He zoomed out from the

rocket and moved the image back to the aircraft. “Advancing one frame forward, you can see the impact.”

A dark cloud appeared between the wing’s inner engine and the fuselage, but so far, the aircraft appeared intact.

“One more frame,” Fred said.

The black cloud had receded into the distance. The wing had separated away by twenty meters and dropped by about the same. The fuselage above the wing appeared shredded and large sheets of metal and plastic streamed away.

“In another frame,” Fred said, “without lift on the right side, the Boeing is rolling. With continued thrust on the left, it is yawing toward its injured side.”

“Brent,” Michael said. “Freeze that.”

The image froze and beyond the window, Brent walked to its center.

“Can you get a raw copy off the DroneNet?” Michael asked.

Brent thinks for a few seconds. “Several sites offer access for sale.”

“Buy it.”

Brent dropped his head and looked up again. “You’ve already spent your forty doug allowance.”

“Never mind that, Brent,” Michael says. “Buy it.”

“Done.”

“I want to see this frame, but get rid of CBC.”

Fred, the window Fred had been standing in front of, and Brent are all replaced by a pure image from the DroneNet.

“Zoom in on the damaged area.”

Two human shapes appeared to be in the debris behind the aircraft. Coralie stood and approached the window.

Michael touched one of the shapes and gestured for a zoom.

Some Japanese guy.

Michael zoomed out and back in on the other shape.

The first thing Coralie saw was that the man's leg had been torn off at the knee. The second was her father's flaming red hair.

She ran to her room, where she stayed, other than to fill her water glass or to use the bathroom, for twelve days. Sara was her silent companion. Finally, it wasn't Michael who'd checked on her but Dr. Jonas Milstein, her father's best friend.

"Hey there," he said.

Coralie stayed in bed, wrapped in her blanket. She looked at him.

"I can't imagine what you're going through. But I can tell you what's happening. Michael's gotten custody and I'm working with him on his university application. Looks like Cascadia is instituting a draft. His custody of you will likely save him from that. Your parents left the place to you and Sara, so it'll be yours when you turn eighteen."

Coralie covered her face with her blanket.

She felt Jonas' hand pat her on the shoulder. "I'm so sorry," he said, and then left.

Early the next morning, Coralie went to the kitchen, grabbed a paring knife, and took it to the bathroom. Passing her thumb along its edge shaved thin layers of skin. She closed the lid to the toilet and sat. She pulled up the right leg of the boxers she loved and wore at that age. With only the weight of gravity on the blade, she drew it along her

thigh. Nothing but a tickle. Then she added a little pressure, and this time, she drew a nice, shallow line and, for some reason, things began to feel real again, the horrible weight of her parents' deaths dropped away from her, and she felt she could bare moving on.

* * *

Stay up, Coralie hears her mind say, *just tread water, damn you, stay up*, and she knows she's with herself again. Blink and her eyes are scratchy and dry despite all the water. Her back feels slipped. Every square-centimeter of her body feels aflame or numb, and nevertheless, she floats on. Blink again and the sixth floor is beyond the water, and it's obvious even through her blurry vision because the sixth is a solid level, like Elmendorf, or the first floor, below. From here, the creek makes no more eastbound switchbacks, but instead it cascades from floor to floor until it drains into the culvert, where Coralie started earlier in the night. Breathe because she can hear the drop to five ahead. Try and turn to face it but before she can, she falls and her shoulder strikes bottom, so turn and kick off it so she can surface, but her legs make no contact. She sees darkness, hears roaring, touches nothing but the watery void around her, and she falls again. This time, even through the tumbling, she senses her orientation, so swim hard and she breaks the surface. Breathe deep, breathe hard, stay up, and she drops again, and in her ears, she feels she landed deep, so swim hard once more, swim and her chest burns with desire for air, and it must be close, so swim, swim harder, and she breaks the surface right at the next fall, but she catches a breath before tumbling, and smacking the water's surface.

Stunned—and she'd be delighted to never move again.

But she feels as though she's floating. Lift her head and another fall approaches, a second or two away, and she can take no more, and it seems less like a fall this time and more like going through a dip on the beltway, and the motion stops, and around her, the water's full force flows past her. Try and move and she's stuck against something solid, something metal and cold. Can't breathe—no air with the flowing creek weighing upon her back. Move—do anything, go anywhere it'll allow, and she can roll against the water's weight, and a full turn is all it takes before she's out from under it, lying on an iron grating, within the airspace between the falling water and its cement embankment.

Wonder what good Coralie's supplementations were. Strength only works when something can be pressed or pulled upon, that's for sure. But the supplementations consumed so much energy trying, and the exhaustion within her desires payment, and she can only give it its due by closing her eyes, so do it, and is she sleeping now? Does she sleep, just for a little while?

* * *

It's a timeless noise, changing at every instant, but the same at every moment—it is the sound of the universe, of creation, of destruction. Nothing else like it exists, but its sound is in everything. Pure static, the sound of noise, the sound a symbol makes an instant before turning silent. Background radiation. The distribution of particles in granite. Freckles.

Coralie.

The sound of water falling, striking, flowing to the ocean, the sound the first time she and Leo made love. She has made it to the culvert. How long has it been, because the police. They'll follow the creek. They'll find her here. Gotta get up. Gotta get out. Move, move, move, but it's not so easy, she's become a grand bundle of hurts. Crawling on this metal grating feels like nails pricking her hands and shards shredding her knees. Into the waterfall and the weight presses her flat again, so snake forward until free. Get upon hands and knees once more, and the five meters to the top of the stairs looks like a kilometer, but take it a little at a time and she makes it, so roll to her side and kick her legs out so she can sit on the top stair, but oh, ow, the bullet that caught her in the ass must've actually penetrated. Feel the bodysuit and there's no hole, but her butt has a welt the size of a plum. Just shift her weight to the other cheek and descend, one cement stair at a time, downward, down into the culvert, down to where there's darkness at the tunnel's end, and here, the air smells of salt and the air feels cool and the air still sounds full of rushing water. At the bottom, use the handrail to pull herself to wobbly feet. Take a step, then another, but she's too weak and falls prone. This sidewalk is smoother than the grating, so she can crawl, yeah, she can crawl to her backpack, take in some food and water, just a little energy before she leaves this place forever. Get up onto her hands and knees, look toward the pipe where her gear is hidden, and once again...

Agent Goodman. Eating one of her sandwiches.

Collapse onto her side, because it's impossible now. Look—unlike her, he's armed; unlike her, he's standing; unlike her, he's got a reason to live. Just what is she holding on to? Roll onto her back. Time to sleep.

Agent Goodman drops the sandwich and walks beside her. “Boy, I thought we roughed you up before, but look at you!”

Coralie doesn’t have to look—her lapidated flesh has its own way of communicating its condition to her mind.

“Just *look* at you,” he says. “No one’s ever survived falling into Chester Creek from above the eighth floor. It’s just too much strain for a human body. But you! Just look at you—you leapt in at thirty and rode it all the way down.”

And it should have killed her. Woulda been nice if it had.

“For almost a year, you were five, ten percent overused on strylyon, nitex, and bendar. I was convinced from the start you were stringing yourself. But I never saw any sign of it. Not until now.”

As Coralie’s skin dries, all her wounds flare. She’s burning at all her exposed tips: her fingers, her knuckles, her wrist bones, her brow, her nose, her cheeks, her chin...

“The soldiers call the exhaustion you feel *out of lives*. See, those kids waste all their time playing games, and when they do it for real, their game-playing language follows them.”

Coralie feels the tickle of her tears.

Goodman kneels. “I know you strung yourself. And I’m comfortable getting this close because you’re out of lives, Coralie.”

She needs to end all this somehow.

“In your business, Dr. Gunn, it’s called *calorie depletion*. Right? The body uses up all its glucose quickly, so it switches to ketones for fuel. But with all the work you’ve

done on yourself, your muscles demand more than your body can supply. Without some food, you've just got no strength."

Still that stupid, government-issue moustache.

"I gave you a way out. Why didn't you take it?"

Open her eyes—look at him. "Cascadia kills, murders their people, their own citizens."

"Value resides in productivity. Cascadia has never eliminated someone of value."

Such hauteur coming from this man, this man with the striking features; old, gray in the temples, and the fissures of crow's feet, but even so, his image still pleases her mind. And how is it she can feel a little turned on while exhaustion has left her a laid-out mess beside the raging creek? Struggle with that and the thought comes to mind of the abused wife, and how that would never happen to her, and yet she can clearly see that her attraction to him wouldn't abandon her because of a few just slaps. After all, she had been a bad, bad girl... Just who is he, this Agent Goodman? *What* he is, see, is a prime assemblage of meat and bone, with a jaw meant to kiss along, to nibble along, to feel with lips and tongue the prickly stubble that grows along. Ahh, but *who* he is—that's altogether different. Could he really just be a sadistic psycho?

"When you're unproductive, you find out the truth about government." He throws a leg over and sits upon her pelvis.

The pain! Sure, struggle some, but she's burned out, burned through, turned to ash.

With one shove, he has entered her. "Government is a gun in your mouth."

Try and cough, try and swallow, but there's too much pressure on her tongue to do anything but gag, an action assisted by the gun's overpowering taste.

"From birth to death, government is a gun in your mouth. If you meet your requirements as a citizen, you may live a lifetime without ever being aware of it, but you, Coralie—you're quite aware of it now, aren't you?"

Try and nod. *Unngghh*. Metal, sulfur, copper. The gun's sight rakes her palate raw. Tongue cramped, teeth chipping, throat choking. Gotta get out, gotta escape. Jack? Might he have decided to come back, to see if she needed help, to see if she'd made it back or not? *But he's no good*. No, don't count on the married man to save her. She needs—somehow—to deprive Goodman of the satisfaction of pulling the trigger. *Pocket*. The *autojector*. Take the shot or get shot. Can she reach around his leg to her pocket? Well, she can with her knees raised. Slide the bump from her pocket and into her hand. It's best in the glute, but she'd have to roll some to ensure that shot, and is that possible? So the thigh, the vastus lateralis, the fleshy part, and it's time to join Leo, so this is the end, the end of it all, one last, desperate act, one that will deprive Goodman of his kill. But then: Sara: Must escape.

You, Agent Goodman. *Your* ass.

Just an easy touch! There.

Your rage, your snarl is *gone*. Might your face slip clean off the bones? Whut... No: I haven't betrayed you, my love. *Oh*—a hypnogogic jerk. And another one. Ow, ow, finger off the trigger, you. Good boy. Can you see the light? Wonder it'll be like, for real, and what a shame you, beautiful horrible beautiful you, because I can see it in your eyes: You're going...

Are you sleeping?

A gun was in your mouth, too.

Are you sleeping?

Ah, yes—fixed and dilated.

You are sleeping.

Epilogue

“Ie. Ue kara kaishi suru.”

“Hai, Thempai.” Sara scratches out the Kanji she was writing and starts over. Sempai talks as though she’s swallowed a whistle. Sempai is a glutton for correctness. Sempai wants every stroke drawn in the proper order, in the proper direction, with the proper weight on the pen. A quick flick at thirty degrees back, then recenter, and now down, starting heavy and ending light.

“Dozo.”

Cramps: as a ghost, she never comprehended this particular feeling, how much it could really interfere with motion and thought and will. And Sempai, Sempai forcing her to be right-handed, which is intolerable because the pen keeps slipping as though its shaft is greased. Later, she’ll practice more with her left hand, and it won’t be this hard, there’s no reason it should be this hard, Sempai just wants it to be hard because she’s mean, and Sara’s putting up with it because she wants to do well, she wants to please, and there’s nothing she’s ever enjoyed more than pleasing others.

“Sore wa jikan da.”

Thank God. Sara drops the pen, rises, and bows to her Sempai. Sempai answers with a slight nod. Out in the corridor, it’s about a hundred meters to Coralie’s room, who the staff has taken to calling Kora, which is okay with Sara because Kora looks nothing at all like Coralie. Still, their bodies were made from the genes of Mom and Dad, so maybe she can think of Kora as a long-lost sister, but a sister for sure, one with the memories of

her other sister, the one who is who-knows-where. Maybe alive—is it wrong to be hopeful, to wish that she made it out alive?

As Sara approaches Kora's room, there's no screaming this time, no infantile bawling and struggling against the restraints. Sara pulls the curtain back a smidge and Kora sleeps peacefully upon her hospital bed, a stuffed animal in her arms. Funny looking thing—a furry, smiling moose with a collar, the tag adorned with a red maple leaf.

Should she sit with Kora a while? Yeah, but not just now—perhaps a little later.

It's a short walk to her room and, once there, an even shorter walk to the lavatory. She closes the door and locks it. In the mirror is a woman she doesn't recognize, and she wishes it had freckles. In the drawer is a nail file. Her fingertips tingle as she feels along its edge, and then she picks it up in her left hand. The point is sharp, and she presses it hard with her thumb, stopping short of a prick. She closes the toilet lid, pulls up her skirt, and sits.

When she draws the file's point along her thigh, a curious sensation runs through her—pain, sure, but not the tortuous pain of a cramp. Instead, along with the pain, an electric feeling fills her in a sudden surge, and in that moment before the scratch fills red, she feels free, like travelling the wires, like bouncing off satellites, like she's the order in her microscopic particles again, and it's glorious to be alive just now, alive, alive...

One more, one more line and stop.

Just this one last time.

Appendix
Map of the North American Coalition

Bibliography and Notes¹

Preface: “Dualism and Narrative Mode”

see References, *page x*.

Introduction: “The Geography of the Future”

Abramson, Alana. “Sales of Orwell’s ‘1984’ Increase as Details of NSA Scandal Emerge.” New York: ABC News, Jun. 2013. Web. 03 Mar. 2015.

Eisenhower, Dwight D. “Address at the Cow Palace on Accepting the Nomination of the Republican National Convention.” 23 Aug. 1956. *The American Presidency Project*. UCSB.edu, n.d. Web. 05 May 2013.

Describes the Republican Party as the party of the future, asks people to stop looking to the past (particularly with respect to the Great Depression), and suggests what the next hundred years will bring.

To be fair (*page xiv*), Eisenhower said the following earlier in the speech: “Just as on New Year’s Day we instinctively think, ‘I wonder where I will be a year from now,’ so it is quite natural for the Republican Party to ask today, ‘What will happen, not just in the coming election, but even one hundred years from now?’” So, when he spoke of the shiny, cheap future, he referred to 2056. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of 2015, Eisenhower’s vision was closer to truth in his time than in our time.

Gilbert, Daniel T., Matthew D. Lieberman, Carey K. Morewedge, and Timothy D. Wilson. “The Peculiar Longevity of Things Not So Bad.” *Psychological Science* 15.1 (2004): 14-19. Print.

Haub, Carl and Toshiko Kaneda. *World Population Data Sheet, 2014*. Washington D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, Aug. 2014. Web. 13 Feb. 2015.

Jefferson, Thomas. *The Jeffersonian Cyclopedia: A Comprehensive Collection of the Views of Thomas Jefferson*. Ed. John P. Foley. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1900. Print.

Jones, Eric M., ed. “One Small Step.” *Apollo 11 Surface Journal*. NASA, 1995. Rev. 05 May 2015. Web. 19 May 2015.

¹ By section, the bibliography is alphabetized, with notes in page order appearing afterward.

A detailed transcript of the Apollo 11 excursion. Explains that Armstrong thought he said “a man,” as scripted, instead of “man,” as the world heard.

To me, what probably cemented the “That’s one small step for man” phrase was Walter Cronkite repeating it right away².

Kennedy, John F. “Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Effort.” *Nasa.gov*, n.d. Web. 28 May 2015.

Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Signet Classics, 1950. Print.

“World Population: Historical Estimates of World Population.” U.S. Census Bureau (USCB), 19 Dec. 2013. Web. 13 Feb. 2015.

“...an old, red Thunderbird convertible...” (*page xi*).

I have never owned such a car.

“...five single-syllable words” (*page xi*).

Those words were, “She dies in the end.”

“...dressed in a thousand-dollar suit” (*page xi*).

I have never owned such a suit. Actually, I couldn’t tell the difference between a hundred-dollar suit, a thousand-dollar suit, and a ten-thousand-dollar suit. All I know is the guy looked rich.

“...first incomplete draft...” (*page xii*).

That first draft in 2006 was called *Hostile Takeover at PC-332*. A doctor named Jarrod, in love with his computer³, dreams of exotic locales. When he finally saves enough money to go on vacation, he discovers a death camp and decides he wants to run it.

Jarrod bothered me as a character just as Sara bothered me as a computer.

Now, looking over the first draft, I realize someone other than Sara survived: Randy the Bellhop⁴.

“Imagine this future—the place is North America, at the northwest quarter of its abandoned mass, within a unitary state called Cascadia” (*page xviii*).

² “CBS Evening News, Special Report.” 20 Jul. 1969. Television.

³ I had one of those moments when I saw the preview to Spike Jonze’s *Her* (Warner Bros., 2013)—“*Damn you!*” The way I heard it in my mind was as though spoken by Ricardo Montalbán from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*: “*Full power! Damn you!*”

⁴ I couldn’t help imagining Lee Evans as Randy the Bellhop.

Draft after draft, “The Moose Speaks” became more Serlingesque. Not that I mind. Rod Serling, to me, is the greatest narrator of all time.

Compare: “The time is now, the place is a little diner in Ridgeview, Ohio, and what this young couple doesn’t realize is that this town happens to lie on the outskirts of the Twilight Zone⁵.”

Epigraphs

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.
(Page 137)

Carroll, Lewis. Preface. *Sylvie and Bruno*. By Carroll. New York: MacMillan, 1889. Print.
(Page 216)

Capelle, M. (Pierre Adolphe). *La clé du caveau : à l'usage de tous leschansonniers français, des amateurs, auteurs, acteurs du vaudeville et de tous les amis de la chanson*. Second ed. Paris: Abel Lenoë, printer; Ledoux et Tenré, bookseller, 1816. Print.
(Page 1)

Wilde, Oscar. *The Canterville Ghost and Other Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
(Page 194)

Chapter 1

“Gregory Dyck.” Personal identifier. 1992-.

To me, my name has always sounded a little like the blowing of a sad trumpet. For my viewpoint character, I wanted a name that sounded mighty, a name with gravitas, a name that also translated into Japanese morae. So, I listened in my classes for one to fit my requirements. I modeled the name of Coralie Gunn (page 2) on the cadence of this fellow student’s name. Can’t you just hear Ed McMahon or Johnny Gilbert saying it?

My assurances, though—the cadence was the only thing I stole from Mr. Dyck.

“Day 7 for Food is how” (page 3).

If you’ve never gone to a food bank, this is how it goes: You go an hour early hoping to beat the crowd, but the crowd must have spent the night because the people loop around the building. You join the line, standing for an hour, kicking away other people’s cigarette butts. When the doors finally open, it takes a half-hour for everyone to file through and take a number. In the lobby, there are only fifteen chairs, so you wait outside, ticket in hand. Everyone else has a cell phone and a cigarette, but you have nothing but the clothes on your back and an empty wallet in your pocket. Time oozes like a seeping wound.

When your number is called, you can cross a line duck-taped to the floor. You are led to a tiny office where somebody better off than you asks how many people are in your family. He writes your answer down on a form with carbon paper⁶ between the sheets. He slides the

⁵ “Nick of Time.” *The Twilight Zone* 2.7. Writ. Richard Matheson. Perf. Rod Serling. CBS. 18 Nov. 1960. Television.

⁶ Carbon paper—an invention by Ralph Wedgwood in 1806.

form to you, asking you to read and sign. The form says *blah, blah, blah*, UNDER PAIN OF IMPRISONMENT OR FINE, *blah, blah, blah* (page 105). Because you need the food, you sign it.

The person takes the form. He gives you a nutritional fact sheet with the Food Pyramid⁷ on it, printed on colored paper that will tell your escort how many members are in your family. He escorts you to a doorway with another duck-taped line on it. A sign says, “Please wait to be escorted into the food pantry.”

You wait and wait and wait.

Finally, a volunteer who can’t wait to go home approaches. The explanation goes, “The shelves are labeled by color. Since you have two-to-four people in your household, you can have six green, four yellow, eight orange, and three red. There’s no limit on blue or white items.”

A sign says, “THEFT of ANY KIND will NOT be TOLERATED.”

Take a can of green. The expiration date was three months ago. Take a bag of orange. Looks like a truck ran over it, but it’s in better condition than the others. A can of red, by Hormel, says *Corned Beef Hash*. Just what is that, anyway?

After you’ve filled your cart with the items you’re most likely to stomach, it’s time to check out—just like in the supermarket. Your escort passes you off to the cashier, who ensures your items don’t exceed the amounts dictated by the color of your Food Pyramid sheet. You fill an old box with your food. The cashier says, “All bread is free—take as much as you need.” Carry your box to the bread. It’s all expired, but none moldy. Grab a couple loaves and escape.

On your way out you see a family—three kids with their mother, who probably works as a maid or in the drive-thru of some fast food restaurant. They are the last in line and the most in need. And you—how late is it in the afternoon, now? The whole day is wasted.

That’s what I mean by “Day 7 for Food.”

Chapter 2

Toy Informative: Bandai Official Site (おもちゃ情報満載, バンダイ 公式サイト). Bandai Namco Group, n.d. Web. n.d. <www.bandai.co.jp>

(Page 11). With Sara’s packaging, I tried to imagine some of the larger Bandai toys, particularly the ones made for girls, with their full-color printed boxes, their large letters and graphics, and their plastic windows. Similar boxes are often featured on Bandai’s homepage.

“...thirty-eight degrees” (page 7).

The future is in metric, dontcha know.

Chapter 3

Vincenzini, Pietro and Steen Skaarup, eds. “Electroactive Polymers: Advances in Materials and Devices.” *Advances in Science and Technology, Volume 79*. Zurich, CHE: Trans Tech Publications, 2013. Proquest ebrary. Web. 20 Sep. 2014.

⁷ Mypyramid.gov is now a dead link. The USDA replaced the Food Pyramid in 2011 with MyPlate (ChooseMyPlate.gov) after 19 years of pyramids. In four years, MyPlate still hasn’t worked its way to the food banks.

A collection of papers related to the development of artificial muscle fibers (*page 18*).

“...where the freesia blooms sweetly scented...” (*page 24*).

Once, as I fell asleep, I smelled a strong odor of Froot Loops. I drifted away, in that state where “[t]he restless sleeper may wonder whether he wakes or dreams⁸.” In the morning, I found no source for the smell. I hadn’t eaten Froot Loops since the 1970s.

Freesia blooms remind me of depression-glass vases. On a walking tour of Portland neighborhoods, freesia are found occasionally. They smell just like Froot Loops⁹.

Chapter 4

Concorde Career College. Advertisement. 2013-2015. Television.

(*Page 31*). Here is the real quote, as best as I can transcribe it: “I’m proud to say, when someone asks me, what— what do you do, I say I’m nurse. I look forward to changing patients life. Every day is a new day. You learn a lot every day. The tests that we do is never repetitive. The pay is wonderful. The benefits are amazing. It’s very awarding job.”

Now, I’m not criticizing the actress or graduate (whichever she is), who has a positive attitude and a beautiful smile. But, really now—what was the director thinking? Had I been there, I’d have said, “Great job, but let’s do another take.” Instead, in this commercial, there seems to have been a conscious decision, with constant edits, to compound her errors in speech. And after the production of the commercial, some executive at Concorde must have nodded saying, “Brilliant! That’s just what we were looking for!”

It’s one thing to appeal to those wandering in career decisions, and another to con the hopeless, to whom this commercial panders.

Cooper, Jonathan J. “Will Oregon voters say ‘no’ to a sales tax once again?” *KATU.com*. Associated Press, 15 Apr. 2013. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

This story notes that Oregon voters have rejected a sales tax “nine times in the past eight decades.” Residents pay higher income and property taxes because of a lack of sales tax. So, why do Oregon legislators keep pushing for a it?

When was the last time anyone in government said, “We’re just swimming in revenue! This is wonderful!” There’s always a shortage, but not for the things government wishes to fund, particularly their own jobs and benefits. In the meantime, government regularly starves funding from education and public infrastructure to redirect revenue for pet projects.

Although the sales tax remains absent in Oregon, the daily tax (*page 25*) is already here. Oregon—and most other states—utilize a daily tax in its most diabolical form: the lottery. With billions of dollars generated by this tax that preys on people’s dreams of escaping poverty, state governments should have all their reds blackened, all their bridges fixed, all their potholes filled. In eleven states in 2009, lottery revenues exceeded collections of corporate income taxes.

⁸ O’Connor, Flannery. “The King of the Birds.” *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970. Print.

⁹ Every time I see freesia, I can hear: “Follow my nose! It always knows!” spoken by Paul Frees. If you made a place out of his name, it would be Freesia, wouldn’t it?

But scratch-its, keno, and ball-machine drawings aren't the only way government robs from the poor. Other daily taxes that affect the poor disproportionately: cigarette taxes, alcohol taxes, gasoline taxes, and parking meters.

Seems amazing to me that the descendents of those who despised a 1773 three-pence per pound duty on tea seem so complacent about modern, rampant taxation. Our forefathers used to say, "No taxation without representation." Too bad they lacked the vision to see what taxation *with* representation would be like—much, much worse.

Fischetti, Mark. "Psst... Hey, You." *Scientific American* 296.5 (2007): 96-97. Military & Government Collection. Web. 06 Jun. 2015.

This article describes directional sound, a type of audio that can travel along a path with little or no dispersion. This is how I imagine Sara can whisper to Coralie (*page 28*) so Brent can't hear her.

"It was momentacious..." (*page 38*).

These words were originally written for Lacey, referring to a one-night stand. They didn't sound right coming from her, so I gave them to Sara.

Chapter 5

"Hello, Miss Gunn. Welcome!" (*page 66*).

I really wanted to write a song-and-dance routine for Randy like "Pure Imagination"¹⁰, but I was afraid it would seem hyperbolic.

"You betcha" (*page 67*).

Here, I've demoted Jarrod to a bellhop. I wonder if he curses me for this.

Chapter 6

Wiles, Robert. "Picture of the Week." *Life*, 12 May 1947: 42-43. Print.

For inspiration (*page 85*) throughout this story, I hung the photograph on 43 of Miss Evelyn McHale upon the wall above my computer, along with her suicide note: "I don't want anyone in or out of my family to see any part of me. Could you destroy my body by cremation? I beg of you and my family—don't have any service for me or remembrance for me. ~~My fiancé asked me to marry him in June. I don't think I would make a good wife for anybody. He is much better off without me.~~ Tell my father, I have too many of my mother's tendencies"¹¹. (McHale herself crossed out the middle sentences.)

What fascinates me most about the late McHale is how she was treated after her death. In complete defiance of her wishes, she was featured in *Life*, where they quoted only her stricken words. Afterward, Andy Warhol made her the subject of a collage¹², she's been written about in numerous articles and blogs, and Portland band *Parenthetical Girls* released a song called

¹⁰ Bricusse, Lesley and Anthony Newly. "Pure Imagination." *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Dir. Mel Stuart. Perf. Gene Wilder. Paramount, 1971. Film.

¹¹ "Girl Who Leaped to Death Planned Wedding in Troy." *The Times Record (Troy, NY)*, 02 May 1947: 1, 17. Print.

¹² Warhol, Andy. "Suicide (Fallen Body)." 1963. Serigraph (silkscreened ink and silver paint on canvas). Private collection.

“Evelyn McHale” in 2010¹³. I suppose I’m no better writing about her here, but I’m glad—for her sake—to take her image off the wall and file it away.

““Yes, congratulations! You’ve just won a six-thousand-doug loan from Cascadian Financial!”” (page 73).

I know I’m not the only one who receives envelopes in the mail that look like checks, or that feel like credit cards, or that have a mass-produced key enclosed that has a chance (in a gazillion) of starting a brand-new Kia.

“...and it isn’t long until the greenroofs are near again...” (page 76).

The vision of a city topped with green comes from Professor Olyssa Starry’s *Stormwater Systems* class, which I will remember forever.

Chapter 7

ADHD in Adults: Strattera (atomoxetine). Lilly USA, LLC, 2015. Web. 05 Jun. 2015.
<<http://www.strattera.com>>

Floatera (page 100) seems a better name.

“Autoinjector.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Apr. 2015. Web. 05 Jun. 2015.

“Autojector” (page 100) is formed from compounding the prefix *auto* with the clipped (*in-*)*jector*. Autojector was a form I sometimes heard in Iraq, where we carried 2-PAM-Cl, atropine, and diazepam autoinjectors. Common commercial brands are EpiPen and Auvi-Q, both epinephrine autoinjectors.

Particularly with 2-PAM-Cl, the meter of *autojector* seems an inevitable pairing: *two'pam-chlor'ide au'to-ject'or*.

“Equianalgesic.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 11 May 2015. Web. 05 Jun. 2015.

Cofentanil (page 100): A linguistic blend (or portmanteau) of *Codeine* and *Carfentanil*.

McDonald’s Corporation. “I’m lovin’ it.”¹⁴ Slogan. Unterhaching, Germany: Heye and Partner, 2003-.

My attempt to change this phrase to the second person resulted in the obtuse sounding command, “Love it.” Softening that command made it sound too much like a Nike ad: “Just love it.” So, I tried again to soften the wording and came up with “It’s okay to love” (page 94), and I thought that sounded McDonaldsy again.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G.” Playground song, c. 1960. Oral narrative. 1977.

The fascinating persistence of playground songs (page 99)—how long will they last? and how will the words change in the meantime?

The Monkees. “Goin’ Down.” *Daydream Believer/Goin’ Down* (Single). Colgems, Oct. 1967. Vinyl.

¹³ Parenthetical Girls. “Evelyn McHale.” *Privilege (Abridged)*. Slender Means Society, 2013. CD.

¹⁴ Or, as the original German slogan goes, “*Ich liebe es*.”

“Molson Dirty Brown, baby!”^{15, 16} (page 131).

“And now I see the life I led
I slept it all away in bed
I should have learned to swim instead
And now it’s really got me stumped
I can’t believe a-why I jumped
I’d like to get my tummy pumped
I can’t believe they drink this stuff in town
This dirty brown
Goin’ down
Goin’ down.”

PRISTIQ (desvenlafaxine): Treatment for Depression. Pfizer, Inc., 2014. Web. 05 Jun. 2015.
<<http://www.pristiq.com>>

I like *Happiq* (page 100) better.

Sixpence None the Richer. “My Dear Machine.” *Lost in Transition*. Perf. Leigh Nash. Comp. Matt Slocum, Jamieson Lindsey, and Daniel Tashian. Tyger Jim, 07 Aug. 2012. CD.

“I don’t call you a machine just because you use them” (page 95). This was the way I originally wrote it while listening to this song (for maybe the thousandth time—I’ll never tire of it). I changed this line a few times and it never felt right until the final version.

I was also listening to this song when I wrote the line, “Hello...” (page 144).

The lyrics remind me how poetic the little words are and how stuffy the larger words can be.

“Bullshit you’re sorry! Bullshit all your constant sneaking and bullshit all your stupid lies! I always thought the world of you! You know—I *like* what I am, Coralie. I don’t need a fucking body” (page 90).

As soon as I had written this, I was reminded of the Dolores O’Riordan lyric: “What of all the things that you taught me / What of all the things that you’d say / What of all your prophetic preaching / You’re just throwing it all away¹⁷”.

Chapter 9

Lucas, George. *Star Wars*. Perf. Carrie Fisher and Peter Cushing. 20th Century Fox, 1977. Film.

(Page 138). The line from *Star Wars* is: “Governor Tarkin, I should have expected to find you holding Vader’s leash.”

Morrissey. “Now My Heart is Full.” *Vauxhall and I*. Sire/Reprise, 1994. CD.

The place name “Stressford” (page 139) comes from the wonderful lyric, “Dallow, Spicer, Pinkie, Cubitt¹⁸ / Every jammy Stressford¹⁹ poet”.

¹⁵ I understand a “Dirty Brown” is vodka, milk, and chocolate Nesquik.

¹⁶ For Molson Dirty Brown, I imagined a porter with a high alcohol content.

¹⁷ The Cranberries. “Promises.” *Bury the Hatchet*. Island, 1999. CD.

¹⁸ These are the gangsters from *Brighton Rock*, by Graham Greene.

¹⁹ “Stressford” is presumably an epithet of the place Stretford, a town within Manchester, where Morrissey moved when he was ten.

Chapter 10

“...elevation drives the snowfall in Denali” (*page 154*).

This is due to orographic uplift, where air flowing over the region is lifted by the topography. The air cools at an average of 10°C per kilometer in elevation until a relative humidity of 100% is reached, and then it continues to cool at 5.5°C per kilometer. Denali (or Mt. McKinley) rises from sea level to over six kilometers in elevation. It is the tallest mountain in North America.

Chapter 11

The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America (BPOE). “11 O’clock Toast.” *Elks.org*. n.d. Web. 18 Sep. 2014. <<http://elks.org/who/history/toast.cfm>>

The toast appearing within the story (*page 161*) is slightly modified from the version appearing on the BPOE website, which I feel justified in changing since it appears to have been tweaked not just over time, but also from lodge to lodge.

I am not an Elk. During the summer of 2014, I went into a lodge because I saw a Help Wanted sign and I was desperate for a job. Inside, I found pictures of the Exalted Ruler and the Esteemed Loyal Knight and thought I had slipped into a parallel universe. I did not get the job.

““An unauthorized user holds me,’ the Glock says.” (*page 170*).

Everything talks in the future. I can hear my blender saying, “Put me on puree, baby.”

“Seward” (*page 158*).

I understand this is pronounced *sue-word*²⁰, but my brain never sees it that way.

Chapter 12

Kindy, Kimberly, and Kimbriell Kelly. “Thousands Dead, Few Prosecuted.” *The Washington Post*. 11 Apr. 2015. Web. 17 May 2015.

Details how extremely unjustified a police officer has to be before being prosecuted for killing an unarmed citizen.

Of course, Coralie is armed (*Page 193*) and had killed a government employee. Nevertheless, when is it acceptable for the police to shoot? When a wanted person is identified? When they turn to face you? When they refuse to obey an order? When they draw their own weapon? And, considering the cases in the above story, just how many bullets does it take to kill someone?

Pretenders. “Back on the Chain Gang.” *Learning to Crawl*. Sire, Oct. 1982. CD.

(*Page 179*).

“The powers that be
That force us to live like we do
Bring me to my knees
When I see what they’ve done to you.

²⁰ I quickly figured out *Willamette* back in 1994, though.

But I'll die as I stand here today
 Knowing that deep in my heart
 They'll fall to ruin one day
 For making us part.

I found a picture of you
Oh...
 Those were the happiest days of my life
 Like a break in the battle was your part
Oh...
 In the wretched life of a lonely heart.

Now we're back on the train, yeah
 Oh, back on the chain gang."

Chapter 13

"The man speaks into his watch" (*page 195*).

No, I don't think phones, watches, and tablets will ever go away or be supplanted by other forms. They will just get more powerful and, with programs like Siri and Cortana, they will all talk back to you.

Chapter 14

"I think an advertisement hacked my implant."

Me, too. Do you know how many advertisements have hacked into my head? "You can tell it's Mattel—it's swell!" "I'd walk a mile for a Camel." "Softens hands while you do the dishes." "Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce / Special orders don't upset us / All we ask is that you let us / Serve it your way // We can serve your real beef Whopper / Fresh with everything on top her / Any way you think is proper / Have it your way." "You'll wonder where the yellow went / When you brush your teeth with Pepsodent." "I wish I were an Oscar Meyer wiener / That is what I'd truly want to be-ee-ee / And if I were an Oscar Meyer wiener / Everyone would be in love with me." "Two all-beef patties / Special sauce, lettuce, cheese / Pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun // You deserve a break today / at McDonald's." "I'd like to buy the world a home / And furnish it with love / Grow apple trees and honey bees / And snow white turtle doves / I'd like to teach the world to sing [sing with me] / In perfect harmony [perfect harmony] / I'd like to buy the world a Coke / And keep it company [it's the real thing] / I'd like to teach the world to sing [what the world wants today] / In perfect harmony [perfect harmony]..." "Pepsi Cola hits the spot / Twelve full ounces, that's a lot / Twice as much for a nickel, too / Pepsi Cola is the drink for you / Nickel-Nickel-Nickel-Nickel / Trickle-Trickle-Trickle-Trickle / Nickel-Nickel-Nickel-Nickel / Trickle-Trickle-Trickle-Trickle..." "Here comes the king here comes the big number one / Budweiser beer the king is second to none / Just say Budweiser / You've said it all / Here comes the king of beer so lift your glass let's hear the call [when you say Bud] / Budweiser beer's the one that's leading the rest [when you say Bud] / And beechwood aging makes this beer at its best [when you say Bud] / One taste will tell you / So loud and clear / There's only one Budweiser beer / When you say Bud you've said it all / Ya-duh-da duh-da duh-da duh-da-da..."²¹ Etcetera.

²¹ I'm not going to cite or give credit for these because they've been fully integrated into my brain, and these companies paid top dollar to do that to me. The point is, once they started running in a constant loop in my head, they became a part of my identity, and thus I own these words.

Chapter 15

Cashill, Jack. "Anderson Cooper: 'TWA Flight 800 Was Shot Down.'" *Cashill.com*. 22 Jul. 2014. Web. 12 Mar. 2015.

(Page 227). I remember all the 1996 interviews of witnesses saying they saw a missile launched at Flight 800, and I've watched the television programs proving it was a fuel tank explosion.

In contrast, few dispute the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 by a missile²². One government that does is the Russian Federation. I wonder if the Russians will produce television programs proving MA-17 had some mechanical or electronic fault.

The interesting thing is that proof by eyewitness account can be argued against and eventually ignored, while evidence that matches the desired outcome is showcased.

What can't be discounted is video evidence—especially when live. The terrifying thing about 9/11 wasn't that an airliner struck the World Trade Center—the terror came later, as the cameras watched smoke rise from the North Tower, when the second plane flew into the South Tower. At the time, the on-air reporters were still calling the first crash a "possible accident." The second crash made it obvious there had been no accident.

But the day is coming when even live video can be edited. The NFL can paint the line of scrimmage and the first-down line upon the field of a live broadcast²³. The same thing is done with the Olympic and World Record (OR/WR) lines during sports such as skiing and swimming. This makes me wonder—how else can live events be enhanced (or even modified)? What will we consider evidence to be in those days?

"Somebody help me. Won't anybody help?" (page 221).

The pronouns somebody, anybody, and everybody fascinate me (-one works as well) because of the scope of their referents.

Bob Dylan played with referents in his lyric: "Come all without, come all within / You'll not see nothing like the Mighty Quinn²⁴".

"In your business, Dr. Gunn, it's called *calorie depletion*" (page 233).

My trainer at Arizona State, SFC Don Williams, used to call this condition "sprawled out at the side of the road."

Epilogue

"Sempai talks as though she swallowed a whistle" (page 237).

The curious, artificially high pitch most Japanese women converse in seems strange in modern times, and Japanese culture is so strong, I think this will persist.

"In the drawer is a nail file" (page 238).

²² 17 Jul. 2014, near the eastern border of Ukraine.

²³ Honey, Stanley K., Richard H. Cavallaro, Jerry Neil Gepner, Edward Gerald Goren, and David Blyth Hill. "Method and Apparatus for Enhancing the Broadcast of a Live Event." Fox Sports Productions, Inc., assignee. Patent 5,917,553. 29 Jun. 1999. Print.

²⁴ Dylan, Bob. "Quinn the Eskimo (The Mighty Quinn)." *The Mighty Quinn*. Perf. Manfred Mann. Fontana, 1968. Vinyl.

There's no need to improve on simple devices like nail files. Sonic showers²⁵ and such things bother me in science fiction.

Appendix: "Map of the North American Coalition"

Map data credit: Esri, HERE, DeLorme, and MapMyIndia. Created in *ArcMap*. Copyright 2015 by OpenStreetMap contributors and the GIS user community. Available for use under ODbL, a Share Alike license agreement within the Open Data Commons.

Regions partially derived from "A Map of America's Bioregions" by user Decadeology on Wikimedia Commons, available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License.

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Further Sources²⁶

²⁵ *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and onward into the later television series' shows utilized sonic showers, something that looked like a glycerin block for shaving, and other fanciful replacements for simple tools. In the future, I figure scissors will be scissors, forks will be forks, and a nail file will be a nail file.

²⁶ The following citations include material studied and considered for *Escaping Cascadia* but not directly quoted or utilized.

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Seems as good a place as any to include the standard acknowledgement disclaimer: Any errors in this story were mine. In addition to this, I can say all the good stuff was theirs.

My mother Judy supported me through my late education, allowing me to finish my studies without the need for a job. No words can express my gratitude.

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