



**IN THIS ISSUE, AUTHORS WERE CHALLENGED TO
WRITE A CREATIVE, COMPELLING, WELL-CRAFTED
STORY IN WHICH THERE IS MORE THAN ONE OF
SOMETHING THERE SHOULD BE ONLY ONE OF.**

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FIRST PLACE

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Call Forwarding

by Matthew Keefer

Gregory Sams woke up one morning with 535 million voices in his head and an immense headache.

At first, he poured his usual morning glass of orange juice. A sip in, he made it a screwdriver. Two sips in, a heavy screwdriver; one more sip in (and another 10 million voices) and he drank his vodka straight.

He was drowning in a cacophonous sea of voices: young, old, mumbled, loud, foreign and otherwise. He thought of his uncle Albert, who'd suffered from dementia and schizophrenia late in life. The doctors always asked if anyone in his family had a history of mental illness. Gregory lied to them; it seemed a fair exchange for the answers he'd never gotten. Albert died thirteen years ago. Gregory had flown in a few times, his aunt insisted she was okay, and memories came rushing back now, stuffed between millions of comments and whispers and hopes and wails.

After the third shot, the voices became more manageable. Still a flood, still he couldn't tread water, but he was able to discern a few words: *Dear God dear god dieu dios God Allah Jehovah*. Those were the few languages he could understand.

He'd never had that much to drink in his life. He was feeling numb except for the overwhelming headache engulfing him. He hated, more than anything, being a piece of a cruel chess game again. No reason, no rationale: we can only react to the movements. At least now he could understand why Albert had shot himself. That move made sense. But the move before...?

Gregory stopped holding his breath—he noticed he had been for some time—and picked up his phone. He dialed out.

"I'm not coming in today."

The supervisor answered back.

"No, I'm not covering him for tonight. That doesn't make any—

"No. I don't know what it is. God only knows.

"Bye."

Gregory flopped back into bed to let sleep's angels, and quality vodka, chase the nightmare away.

*

He stopped holding his breath—again—and drew his eyes back to the ceiling. It was hardly noon. Gregory was holding his head, as if he understood "holding himself together" to be a literal expression, one that he was clearly failing at. He was able to untangle one of the threads twisting through his own now stifled thoughts:

Dear God, I want to let you know that I TRIED to unclog the toilet but the plunger fell off and I had to pick it out of the toilet. Is that a joke? Or maybe you're trying to tell me...

He took a breath again—*maybe I can tell to pick up his what will happen alone please I just can't I'm so sad the bills*—and exhaled slowly. Another breath in, another breath out. He recognized a voice:

...never calls out, so I hope he's okay. Sometimes I get worried that he...

It was the voice of his young coworker, Ariana.

...lives for work. He needs to let loose one of these days, go travel or—no, maybe it's selfish of me to want for him what he doesn't want for himself. Anyway, I hope he gets better. Now how do I tell that new cutie at work...

Ariana was at least twenty years his junior. They often spent lunch together commenting on her Christian soap opera playing out on the television. Ariana would make brief comments about the more secular soap opera at the store as well, to which Gregory would offer scant non-replies. Their relationship, truthfully, was one of the more intimate ones Gregory had had in the past seven years. Her prayer was evidence to him of his otherwise nonexistent talent of making friends. But more importantly, Gregory had something important to test out. He called his employer once more.

"Hello, is Ariana there?"

"Okay."

"Hi Ari—"

"Oh, oops. Yeah, I'll hold."

From the background her energetic voice grew louder and louder until:

"Helloooooo Gregory! I'm shocked! Like, really really shocked! Are you okay? Can I do anything to help?"

Gregory made a few quick calculations as to how to ascertain the validity of his theory and yet not entirely to frighten his—

"Did you pray to God for me?" Gregory heard muffled noises from Ariana's phone.

"Do you think I live for work?"

There was silence. Even the usual bustle of background stocking seemed distant.

“And you like Jorge, right?”

“What the HELL?” Ariana shrieked. “How do you—no, fuck this, you CREEP.”

The receiver slammed.

That was one question answered.

Proof of concept.

*

Raisin Bran does not do much to clear out thoughts.

He had to nourish himself. And any adjustment to his normal food schedule could be dangerous. No, structure was vital given the circumstances, despite what some coworkers might believe. He would get through these last few hours of daylight, and then... maybe his strict sleep schedule would take over...? The voices drowned out the crunch of cereal, and almost drowned out the timid knock on his door.

When Gregory opened the door, Ariana was so frightened she nearly discharged the mace pointed at him.

“JESUS, at least you look normal. I don’t know what I was expecting.” She put the spray back in her bag. “Actually, you look like hell. Sorry to say it.” Her deep mascara and long dark hair seemed more than normally messy today.

Gregory did not know what he looked like, but he almost certainly felt like hell.

“Earlier today, how did you know?” she asked.

Gregory tapped his head. “I heard it.”

“Christ,” she said. “Oh shit, maybe I should stop saying—”

Gregory walked back to his couch and resumed eating his Raisin Bran.

“Can I come in...?”

He looked up and nodded. Ariana's first step into his house came timidly, as if she expected a snare or lion pit or something to get her. It took perhaps a minute for her other foot to follow. She looked around his living room and quickly relaxed.

"My God—I mean, wow, Greg. I hate to say it, but... I was right about your digs. Down to the tan couch and tan paint."

Gregory kept munching his soggy bran. She sat down next to him.

"I'm going to try an experiment," she said. "I'm going to go to the bathroom and pray, and you'll repeat back—"

"You're praying I don't explode your brain."

Ariana tensely nodded.

"I won't. No one else to watch *Roadmap to Heaven* with. Does that tell you enough?"

Ariana took a few breaths. For a moment, she seemed balanced precariously on the earth, as if she might fall through. She held the arm of the couch to regain herself. Something important came to her in what could be her final moments.

"Does Jorge pray to you about me?"

*

"AHHHH!"

Gregory shrieked through his dream on the couch. The faint tracings of a loud voice lingered in his mind.

"What's up?"

Ariana lay on her stomach on Gregory's rug. She sipped on an iced coffee. Her feet kicked up in the air idly; the room was dark, she hadn't turned the light on. "It's almost eight. You have a nightmare?"

"What are you doing here?"

"You said I could stay."

"I did?"

"Well, you didn't say I had to leave."

"Could you?"

"I wanted to make sure you slept well." Ariana caught herself. "That sounds kinda creepy, doesn't it?"

"It does. Please, now."

"I mean, okay, I can leave, but how cool is this?" She smiled. "I never knew I'd meet God! I mean, not alive, anyway." She fiddled with the cross around her neck.

"I'm not God."

"You are now."

The voice cut through clear this time. *GOD, THE BUZZER ISN'T WORKING. OPEN UP. CAN YOU HEAR ME?*

The voice was loud like a clarion, Gregory thought. It echoed in the halls of his mind before the deluge of lesser voices seeped back in.

"What was that?" Ariana asked. "Your face, it was pale."

Gregory shook his head. "I don't know. A loud voice. It cut through the rest."

"Wasn't me." Ariana thought to herself. "If you're God—"

"I'm not."

"Well *if* you are, wouldn't you need to talk to the angels?"

Gregory rolled his eyes.

"No, seriously."

Gregory rubbed his forehead and poured himself a juice-light screwdriver. It made Ariana more bearable, he'd hoped. "Go away."

"What if that's an angel? What did he say?"

"He's saying 'open the freaking door.' It's not an angel."

"Well, but..." Ariana stopped herself. "Fair point. Can I ask you something? An experiment."

"Please no."

"Can you pray to yourself?"

Gregory's interest was piqued. *Finally*, he thought, *she comes up with something—I locked my keys in where's my wallet I hope the Lakers win the spread.*

"I can't think. What did you say again?"

"Pray to yourself."

"What should I say?"

"I don't know, what you normally do. Don't ask me."

Gregory took another drink.

"Don't worry, I'm here in case your head explodes," Ariana said. She tapped her fingers on her temple. "So what did you say?"

"I don't pray."

"Really?"

"Yes. I don't."

"I thought you of all people would have something to..." Ariana said. "I'm sorry! Just, well, how about you pray to open that door?"

Dear God, Gregory thought, please take this annoying girl from me.

WHAT GIRL??

The voice again. Despite his reservations, Gregory went along with Ariana's plan.

Which door do you want me to open?

DON'T PLAY, I'VE BEEN OUT HERE HALF AN HOUR.

Help me out here.

YOUR APARTMENT.

Which is where?

WE'VE GOT A SERIOUS REBELLION GOING ON. WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR YOUR JOKES ANYMORE.

Sorry, which address again?

The voice answered back. Gregory took a few moments to process.

Ariana only took one. "Oh my God," she said. "You're seriously talking to angels."

The calculations were completed. "You have your car here?" Gregory said. "Would you mind driving me to Brooklyn?"

*

"This is so weird," Ariana said. "I mean, what if... what if it's Real God, and... what should I say? Could I ask for something? Do I get three wishes or something?"

Gregory understood the five hour drive would come concomitant with idle conversation from Ariana. "He's not a genie," he said.

"Well that's an improvement," she said. "At least now He exists."

"Did you set me up for that?"

"I just say them as I sees them."

At least the evening traffic was light.

“Tell me something you’ve never told anyone,” Ariana said.

“I’ve never watched ‘The Ten Commandments.’”

“Har har. Something personal!” Ariana sighed. “I’m sure there’s a lot of junk you haven’t told anyone.”

“You mean to say I don’t have anyone to talk to?”

“Well, I mean...”

“I talk to—” Gregory thought for a moment and realigned himself. “I used to talk to my aunt. She and my uncle adopted me.”

“Aww, that’s nice.”

“They were good people. My uncle shot himself over a decade ago and my aunt passed away seven years ago.”

“Oh, that’s...”

“That’s not fair.” Gregory turned out the window. “I’m sorry.”

The car was silent. “No,” Ariana said. “Please don’t be sorry. Tell me more! Tell me what your aunt was like.”

Gregory’s feet felt numbed below him, the world pulled away. The voices retreated, somewhat. He felt, he wasn’t sure because it’d been a while, but he felt something he hadn’t felt since his aunt fell sick. He felt fear. This was personal to him. But it was important someone else knew, too, knew they were good people who raised him.

“Candice worked hard. She was a seamstress. Albert, her husband, lost pieces of himself over the course of maybe ten years. I think. She never really told me much about that, but I think that’s when it first started.

"I'd destroyed some football shorts after a game with the guys. Albert lost it for a moment. I mean, completely. Nothing I'd ever seen, especially not when I crashed the car a few months later. A chunk of his armor came off for me, but now I think I know what it was. I'm just starting to piece it together now, now that I'm surely going insane."

Ariana *hmmm-ed* to his story. Gregory continued. "I never knew the full extent of how my aunt must've suffered. She always kept that to herself. How is that right in the world? Why do they deserve that? I just don't see it."

"That's so sad. What happened to your uncle?"

"He shot himself."

"Oh yeah. I'm sorry." Ariana yawned. "Your aunt sounds like a tough cookie."

"Yes, she was," Gregory said. An errant memory came to him and he laughed. "She also couldn't bake a damn thing to save her life. I learned after I moved out that cookies weren't supposed to be black on the bottom. I took a liking to them when I finally had unburned ones."

Ariana laughed. "That's a step ahead of me. I wouldn't know where to start baking."

Street lights flashed by in dim rhythm.

"Thanks for keeping me company," Gregory said.

"Of course! I can't let you go around with half the world yakking in your head."

"I meant at work."

"Oh." Ariana frowned. "You keep me company, too. You almost know as much as me about that stupid show."

"*Roadmap to Heaven* is strangely the highlight of my day."

"Same here." Ariana smiled. "And Estéban Suavé is still pretty cute. I like his face."

"I'm not a fan."

"He's got a good chin," Ariana said. "Cute little dimple." She stopped at a red light. "So what do you think God looks like?"

*

Here it was: 12 42nd Street. The building was one of many packed together, four stories high, in a neighborhood that would normally make him hesitate leaving the car. Otherwise, Gregory didn't sense anything out of the ordinary. Though perhaps the standards of the past twenty-four hours were not much to go by, he admitted to himself.

"I want to see," Ariana exclaimed.

"I honestly don't know what's up there," Gregory said. Anything could be there: aliens ready to dissect him; the ichor gates to hell. "Please stay here. I don't want anything to happen to you. You can come up later."

Ariana nodded. Gregory came up to the building buzzer. The fourth floor: J. Cross.

"Makes sense," Gregory said. He pressed the button and it zapped him lightly. The button was indeed broken.

"Dammit," he muttered to himself. He took a step back. The fourth floor was the only one lit up at this hour, and certainly someone was in there. He processed the only way he could gain entry into the apartment and cure himself of the problem of the world's problems.

"Jay Cross! Open up! Your buzzer's broken!"

Nothing.

"Cross! Cross! Outside, hellooooo!"

Shadows through the light. A few moments, and nothing.

"Damn it, are you deaf? Cross, come to the window!" The lights on the second floor turned on and the neighbors informed Gregory of their work schedule.

“Cross!” The neighbors repeated their work schedule, and added that they hope he not wake their child. Gregory had one more opening.

“God, you miserable son of a bitch, you took my family, and now you’re taking my brain! GO STRAIGHT TO HELL!”

Gregory shuddered. Chills came upon his flesh. The neighbors no longer informed Gregory of anything and, he assumed, were coming down to discuss this in person. Gregory had no more time to process what he had said, and possibly to Whom he said it, and ran to Ariana’s car.

“That’s it?” Ariana said. “It looks like he’s home.”

“Please go,” Gregory said. “Just take me back.”

“But Greg—”

“This is too much. I can’t do any more.” Gregory wiped a few tears. “I did what I could and I failed.”

“Greg...”

“Please take me home.”

Ariana pointed to the fourth floor. “There’s someone in the window.”

Gregory rolled down the car window. “Martin,” the silhouette on the fourth floor yelled, “I’m sorry about him! He’s with me! Come on up, friend! Let me buzz you in!”

*

He was let into a room that looked exactly like an electronic Armageddon: plastic toys with buttons and wires, some frayed, some intact; green computer boards, internals of a desktop; more than four electronic mice; cables cables cables. A short, scrawny, and dreadlocked man appeared from behind the door wearing some sort of microphone.

“Hold on,” J. Cross said. “Almost done here, friend. Go, take a look around.”

Gregory had surveyed enough of the cramped apartment to make several inferences, including the lack of much in the way of sights and sounds (though smells were another story). J. Cross sat down in an old business chair, missing one wheel, and set those keen sights at two large monitors. His character paraded about shooting missiles at other characters, robots and aliens and cyber-humans. Unlike most games, this one was simple and somehow familiar to Gregory. He wondered if J. Cross ever left the apartment.

J. Cross nodded in rhythm, as if answering his question and many others. Gregory noticed gray intruding upon the young, tangled locks.

J. Cross was talking, but not to Gregory. "There's a sniper in the tower. Could I get a grenadier up there? I'll hold off the..."

This continued for several minutes. Gregory was either entranced or annoyed, likely both, though the explosions on the digital battlefield somewhat comforted the aching unanswered prayers filling his head. He could see how even God could get sucked into such an addictive thing. He finished the game and tallied the points.

"Cross," Gregory said. "Cross."

J. Cross looked perplexed. He turned in the creaking chair; apparently it was still able to spin around. "Oh, the name on the intercom." He smiled. "I'm something of a wit, they say. What can I do you for?"

"I think I'm going insane."

He looked Gregory up and down. "You look perfectly normal to me." Something struck J. Cross. "Oh. I think I know. You must be..." He tapped a greasy temple.

Gregory nodded. "Could you please... take the voices out?"

J. Cross stood up. His knuckles cracked loudly, ready. "As they say, there can only be one. I'm sorry it has to be this way."

He raised a flat palm, ready to strike him down. Gregory had had a good—well, not a great life, but he was ready to go into the unknown. We all have regrets. He closed his eyes, waiting for the final blow to land.

“I’m kidding!” J. Cross smirked. “Jeez, you’re so serious!” He stroked Gregory’s hair. “Let’s see here.”

Gregory was ready for something. Instead, there was nothing. Nothing but a crazy gamer looking into his eyes, humming tunelessly.

“I see the problem,” J. Cross said. “Okay! Thanks for coming by, Greg.”

Gregory stood up reflexively. Something about J. Cross’s voice lulled him and he, for a moment, turned to leave. “Wait,” he said, “that’s it? That’s all you have for me?”

J. Cross nodded.

“So I’m going to go through life with all the world’s prayers?”

“You make it sound like that’s a good thing,” J. Cross said. Gregory was about to correct that impression. He smiled and continued. “But seriously, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t—!”

“It’s—consider it a mistake of ‘call forwarding.’ Little error. I’m really sorry, pal.”

“How do I fix it?”

“Give it twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

Gregory reeled. “That’s all you have? You murder my family and torment me and you can’t even—”

J. Cross came up to Gregory and kissed him on the mouth. He pulled back from Gregory, leaving him more than a little stunned.

“People usually expect something,” J. Cross’ smile returned. “They don’t like showing up leaving without anything. That’s all I have.”

“But... but...”

“Twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Thanks for stopping by.”

J. Cross sat down again and resumed another round of blowing people up. Gregory was somewhat crest-fallen. He left the apartment and sat in Ariana’s car. She asked a few questions. At some point he heard one of them.

“Are you all fixed now? What’s He look like?”

Gregory slumped in the seat. “Call forwarding. Twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“Was He glowing? What did He say? What is He like?”

Gregory stared out at the apartment. “He doesn’t use tongue,” he said.

*

Gregory was returned to his normal mortal state; luckily, it took only twelve hours to fix the problem. His thoughts came back under his control, and no longer yielded to the issues of the world. He bought two round-trip tickets, one to visit the grave of his aunt and uncle, and the second to Romania. He’d spun a globe and landed his finger there (after landing in the Atlantic and then Russia). He knew it was impulsive, but maybe that was the point.

It was a start.

They weren’t sure what was in Romania, but he promised Ariana some tchotchke of some kind. Two days after the voices receded, a knock came upon his door. A lawyer-ly looking man stood outside the door holding an attaché.

Gregory stood by the window staring at him. They met eyes: deep, dark pits. He finally walked over and opened the door.

“I am here on behalf of my client. Consider this a gesture of good faith on his part.” The lawyer extended his hand. “Please accept my apologies; I am being unduly rude. You must be Jason...?”

“I’m not.” Gregory let his hand remain there.

“Oh,” he said. He returned his hand to the top of the suitcase. “Then, perhaps you are Gregory Sams?”

“I am,” he replied.

“My apologies, Mr. Sams.” The lawyer smiled and returned to his car.

Gregory lay on his couch and stared up at the ceiling. He shook his head, hoping that would be the last remnant of his otherworldly experience.

It would be.

The last three days he’d started to consider what his aunt and his uncle had suffered through in this life, and something struck him. He thought he should start with himself:

I’m sorry for blaming you both.

He sent a quick prayer. He couldn’t say if Albert and Candice would hear his apology, but he had faith enough it would be forwarded to the right destination this time.

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SECOND PLACE

Johnny Compton's work has appeared in *Pseudopod*, *Devolution Z* and other publications. He lives and works in San Antonio, Texas.

Safety in Numbers

by Johnny Compton

I've been told that that I'm "one of those guys who never learns." I disagree with this, but it doesn't matter what I think right now. The man pointing a pistol at my face thinks that I'm the type who never learns. Right now his opinion trumps mine.

"Can't be too mad at you," says Blake, the man with the gun. "If guys like you ever got a clue I'd be out of work."

Blake's smile looks like a mouthful of broken porcelain. He's a stack of twigs held together by glue and strings, but that black magnum transforms him into a heavyweight. The three hoods standing between me and the door—Kinsey, Levy, and Wade—dissuade me from trying to run for it. Unless I want to try the window, that is, but my apartment is on the fourth floor. The impact with Gracie Street wouldn't be much fun, and would only save Blake the trouble of flexing his trigger finger.

There's little for me to do right now except talk. Which is ironic, since talking in the interest of saving my ass is what put me in this predicament.

“Blake, listen, I don’t know what you think you heard or saw but I didn’t say anything to anybody. I swear to God. I’ve never snitched in my life. I swear to *God. Please.*”

I see him grit those jagged teeth. His lips curl into this delighted sneer. I shut my eyes. I don’t want to see this. Don’t want to be here, sitting on the floor of my living room, my mind cycling through the slide show summarizing my life. What the hell was I thinking about, getting involved with guys like this? I do small grifts and courier gigs, light-work for float money, not the heavy lifting that involves killers. My heart turns into a frozen fist. I wonder if the echo of the gunshot will stalk me into the afterlife, or if I’m sweating out the last seconds of the only existence anyone ever knows.

There’s a sound, metal on metal. It’s light, quick and impotent. It repeats twice before I recognize it. Once more and I place it. A *click*. I force my eyes open and see Blake staring at his gun like it insulted his mother.

He looks back at Wade and says, “Give me yours.” Wade obliges. His gun’s a gleaming work of silver that reflects light that isn’t even present in the room. It’s smooth and exotic, almost alien looking. This gun belongs in the Smithsonian, not in the palm of an angry gangster.

Even Blake seems seduced by the beauty of this pistol, staring at it like he isn’t sure of its purpose. It looks too pristine to have ever been fired and he’s not thrilled with popping its cherry on an insignificant snitch like me, but he gets over it and aims the gun at me. I stare down the barrel, unable to shut my eyes this time, and the nozzle is like a tunnel that I’ll fall down forever. No light at the end of it, just blackness. Blake squeezes the trigger.

Then I hear that sound again. *Click*. A simple symphony of survival. I can’t keep from grinning.

“Is this a joke?” Blake asks the gun. Then he looks at Wade and asks him, “This some kind of joke?”

I don't wait for Wade to answer. I jump to my feet and charge past Blake and his boys while they seem confused by my sudden luck. The front door is oh so close and I swear it takes a step toward me with every step I take towards it.

I hear Blake yell at his goons to grab me, but by then I'm already out of my apartment and dashing toward the stairwell at the end of the hallway. The footsteps behind me sound awkward and comical. Too rapid and furious to actually be gaining on me. Keystone Crooks stumbling over themselves. Meanwhile I'm moving on rails, gliding more than sprinting, my focus Ginsu sharp and I know they can't catch me. I think of every chase scene I've ever seen in a movie and how I always thought I'd never let somebody catch me, because there's no way in hell they'd want to kill me as much as I want to live. Here I am now, proving myself right.

I make it to the stairwell and start bounding down the steps two at a time. I don't even look at my feet to see where they're landing. I don't have to. I feel like an athlete or a stuntman, a guy who's practiced this sort of thing every day of his adult life.

I don't hear Blake and his boys behind me anymore. I think they might have tried the elevator or the south end stairs. Trying to head me off in the lobby. I wonder if I should take a detour, maybe get off at the second floor and try to get out through the hallway window. Do something unexpected.

No. If I just keep going like I am now it won't matter what they do because I'll be too far ahead of them. Once I'm outside I'll hop in a cab or board the first stopped bus I see. Or, if I have to, I'll keep running. I could run for days if it came to it. No need for rest or food or water. I'm not even winded. I can't even feel the metal handrail against my palm as I grab it to help myself turn on another landing. I'm going so fast that...

...that I should have been in the lobby by now. My apartment is on the fourth floor and I've cleared at least five flights. A part of me is saying, *Don't stop. Don't think about it. Keep running.* But another part of me can sense that something is off and is urging me to stop and figure it out.

My legs keep pumping, running on autopilot. I seize the handrail like it's the only thing keeping me from a freefall. My feet run out from under me, I go airborne for a second and then I drop. The back of my head hits first, then my lower back. I'm not a particularly clumsy person but I've had my share of spills and I have an idea what the impact of concrete stairs on my head and back should feel like, and this isn't it. This feels like I landed on a mattress. It almost feels like I'm floating.

Get up. Get moving.

The urgency is flowing through me like electrified fire and I know it's going to burst right out of me if I stay still much longer, but I force myself to pause for a moment so I can think. Something's not right. The lights are too close and too bright. I can see everything else around me with too much clarity. Every single crack in the wall no matter how slim. Every wet stain on the floor, every speck of dust floating from the ceiling. I can see the damn antennas moving on the ants marching up the wall to my left.

But something's missing as well. For a moment I can't tell what it is, but then it occurs to me that those wet stains on the stairs aren't from water. This stairwell always smells faintly of urine. Living here as long as I have has desensitized me to the smell, but its absence is more noticeable now than its presence ever was.

My courage and confidence abandon me at once. I pick myself up and look back up the stairs. There is another reason why Blake and his boys aren't following me. A *real* reason that is dawning on me despite my earnest desire to deny it. This situation feels familiar. I've seen or read about something like this before. A story comes to mind, the name escaping me, something I saw in a TV show or a book, or maybe both. It was a story about a man with a noose around his neck falling off a bridge. He was being executed. Then a miracle happened, the rope broke and he escaped. He ran from his executioners, ran for as long and as far as he had to, and he had almost made it home when suddenly he felt a crazy pain in his neck and everything went white... and it turned out he hadn't actually escaped after all.

I run back up the stairs. I don't feel so light anymore. I've got a thousand pounds of anxiety and apprehension piggybacking up the stairs with me. My knees and ankles throb with each step, my thighs and lungs are screaming that they can't

take anymore. It feels like I'm running upstream through a river with a grudge against me. I keep going.

I make it back to the fourth floor and into the hallway. The door to my apartment is closed. The silence in the hall is terrible. It's like I'm standing inside the ghost of a dead moment. Part of me would rather sit here and wait for whatever is going to happen to come to me instead of me going towards it. For better or worse, that part of me gets voted down and I walk to the door.

The knob is stubbornly quiet as I turn it. The hinges too. The men inside are voiceless and motionless. The man sitting on the floor with his eyelids cramped shut and the agony of dread screwing up his normally handsome face is of particular interest to me.

"Holy hell," I say, but no one in the room hears me. I walk to the man on the floor who cowers before the man in front of him, the man with a black pistol. I get as close as I can to the man on the floor. My hands tremble as I reach for his face, too frightened to make contact. God. This is what I look like at the moment of my death? This is how I die?

Next I turn to the man with the gun. Blake's expression beams with satisfaction. He's enjoying this far too much, probably doesn't look this happy when he's fucking. My stomach starts flipping and rolling and scoring tens in the floor routine from looking at him.

I feel redness glowing through my skin. Pure fury is a sensation I have never known before now. It blends with the terror stirring in my gut and makes for a nauseating cocktail. I look back and forth between my condemned self and Blake and I wonder, is this real? Or am I in Hell?

I look at the gun and I think I can hear the bullet in the barrel. It hasn't quite picked up the speed to outrace sound yet as it moves down that tunnel towards my head. This moment is not perfectly still after all. Time is crawling forward, shoving the present into the past a microsecond at a time, and when this moment becomes history the other me that I'm staring at will have a fresh hole in his pretty face.

Except *I'm* the "other me," aren't I? The man on the floor is the real me, The Real McCoy. What will happen to me when that bullet plunges into his head? What happens to a dream when the dreamer dies? I've got a hunch I won't like the answer, so I decide to do something about it.

It happens too fast for anyone else to react and that is what saves my life. As soon as I push Blake's arm to his left time moves at its regular speed again and the gun fires, missing The McCoy's face by an inch or two. Blake is still wearing that stupid crooked smile when I head butt his mouth shut and snatch the gun from his hand. My forehead stings a bit from the blow, but I ignore it. Blake looks at me like I'm every nightmare he's ever known come to life. I've got his gun in my right hand, pressed to his cheek, and I hook my left arm under his chin.

His boys show off the reflexes of the comatose. I've backed into the corner with Blake as my hostage before they can make a move. Wade is the first to finally react. He opens his coat and goes for a boring black piece that's nothing like the gleaming dream-pistol I had imagined him handing to Blake before.

I say, "Don't move!" He freezes. So do the other two. Blake has finally started struggling, clawing at my forearm trying to free himself.

In the opposite corner of the room The McCoy is staring at me with wild eyes. I want to say something to ease his fear, but the truth is I'm almost as frightened as he is. I am a trespasser into reality. Everything looks too grimy and intense. I miss the sheen of the fantasy world that spawned me. I miss being immune to panic and not being able to smell everyone's sweat.

"I swear I'll kill him," I say. "If any one of you moves I'll shoot him."

My strength surprises me. I've got this chokehold cinched like a boa constrictor. Blake's fighting more frantically now, his legs kicking, his fingernails digging into my forearm, but I'm holding all his muscle in my right hand, threatening to blow his brains out with it.

"Oh my God what is this?" the McCoy says. "Who the hell are you? What's going on?"

I scream at him to shut up and he cowers like a beaten dog. I turn my attention back to Blake's men. "Get rid of anything you're holding right now."

They're too dumbfounded to follow instructions. I know they hear my words, but they don't understand them. They're still struggling with how I even exist, so I'm speaking Greek as far as they're concerned. I point the gun at them, certain that this will resolve our failure to communicate. Everybody understands the universal sign language for *I'm seriously about to fucking shoot you*.

"All right," says Wade. "Look, you let him go and we'll be on our way."

"Lose your guns or I put one through his head." To emphasize that I mean business, I tighten my chokehold on Blake. A nice clean *crack* comes from his fragile, bird-boned neck. Blake emits this half-gurgle, half-groaning noise and suddenly he's dead weight.

Under my breath, I curse at Blake's inconvenient death, then drop his body and start firing. I shoot at Wade first because he's the closest. Unfortunately, the close range doesn't mean a hell of a lot for me as I've never shot a gun in my life.

Still, out of five shots fired, two find a home in Wade's stomach and send him to the floor. Levy draws on me and I'm praying for The McCoy to get off his ass and tackle somebody, or kick someone in the groin, or make some loud distracting noises. Do *something* to be useful. Instead he starts for the door, which isn't the bravest thing he could have done, but probably the smartest. Kinsey turns and grabs The McCoy by the collar and puts a gun in his face, leaving Levy free to blast me. And then the cavalry arrives.

Earlier, when I saved the McCoy, I said that it happened too fast for anyone else to react, but now that I'm on the other end of it I see that "fast" is an understatement. There's this blur of movement that seems to erase the moment and replace it with a new reality. There are two new men in the room who weren't here a fraction of an instant ago. Handsome guys, if I may say so.

One of the new arrivals grabs Kinsey and throws him through him through the living room window. Kinsey's scream tells me that the fall to Gracie Street is every bit as unpleasant as I imagined it would be earlier. The fourth "me" has tackled

Levy to the floor and is trying to wrestle the gun away from him. Levy's a big man, and he manages to fight off my clone, punching him in the face with his free hand. Unfortunately for him, he's all out of teammates. I walk over, put Blake's gun to Levy's temple. Can't afford to miss. The shot cleans out his skull.

The gunfire has my head ringing like a bell tower, so it takes a while for me to hear Wade's grunting. I look at him. His hands make for lousy bandages. He's pressing against those holes in his stomach as hard as he can, but unless a couple of little Dutch boys show up to plug the leaks the bleeding isn't going to stop. I remember reading somewhere about gut shots, how torturous they are, and damn if Wade doesn't look like he's in all kinds of pain. I point the gun at his head and fire. I may have recently become a killer, but I'm not a dick. No need to let the guy suffer.

It's just me, myself, The McCoy and I left in the apartment. The McCoy is easy to single out. He's the sniveling mess crawling toward the door and looking at the rest of us like we're space invaders.

"Who the hell are you?" he says. "What the hell is going on?"

"Hey, relax," I tell him. "You're among friends, right?"

I smile at him and the other two, trying to dissipate the tension. One of the two new arrivals smiles back, but the other one, he's got a face of stone that Mount Rushmore would envy. I know what he's thinking. I'm thinking the same thing, and it's not *How did this happen?* It's, *How does this work, all of us living in the same world together? How do we all get out of here?* It doesn't. And we don't.

I pop two rounds into The McCoy's knees. The clone who had been all smiles jumps back. "What the hell are you doing?" Smiley asks me.

Mr. Stone tells him, "Look around. Three bodies in the room, one in the street. And then there's the four of us. We can't all be here when the cops come, but one of us has to stay here to answer for it."

"But it was self-defense," Smiley says. "They were going to kill him. Us."

"Fine. *You* stick around to explain it."

The confusion on his face makes Smiley look younger than the rest of us, somehow. Like he's the kid brother who can't understand why the world just can't be fair all the time.

"What about the rest of us?" he says.

"Get out, go our separate ways," I say, "and make sure we never see each other again."

Smiley nods, but his eyes betray his uncertainty.

"Let's get going," Mr. Stone tells him. Smiley turns to walk out the door. That's when Mr. Stone puts the gun to the back of Smiley's head and fires. Smiley never sees it coming, so there's no chance of him summoning a clone to save himself. He drops dead to the floor. Mr. Stone kicks him over and fires six more shots into Smiley's face, leaving him unrecognizable. If we had time, he'd probably burn off Smiley's fingerprints, but this should be enough to leave the cops confused for a little while, or at least preoccupied.

He turns to me, and it's like looking into a cursed mirror. He's not just a clone, he's a version who went wrong. I figure he's mine—a copy of a copy—and Smiley belonged to the McCoy. I wonder if he's wondering whether he'd die if he shot me now, or if coming into the real world means he's no longer a dream depending on the survival of the dreamer.

"You won't see me," he says.

"Likewise."

Mr. Stone runs out of the apartment, leaving me alone with The McCoy. I wait about thirty seconds, enough time for Mr. Stone to clear out. When I feel comfortable he's gone, I make my exit. I drop Blake's gun at The McCoy's feet on my way out.

Not so long ago, I was one of those guys who never learns. I've learned enough in the last five minutes to fill two brains. I've learned things I'd rather forget, and other things that might save my ass yet again one of these days. For now, I know

that I need to find someplace to stay for a while. I'll need to find a new identity, find some work, get some money in my pocket so I can get the hell away from the city and start over somewhere.

But before I get that fresh start I know that I'll have to track down Mr. Stone, and make sure I see him before he sees me.

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THIRD PLACE

Carol says: "I'm a deaf writer working in a traffic-jammed world, dreaming of different places to explore. I've won one *On The Premises* mini-contest, and I've been published in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Enchanted Conversation Magazine*."

The Pieces That Bind

by Carol Scheina

The first thing Georgia knew for certain was that the woman rummaging through the canned beans and peas in the pantry was *not* her grandma, even though she looked exactly like her, right down to the nasty black cigar in hand.

Except that Georgia had just plucked the cigar out of Gran's hand, for it was 2 p.m. and time for the older woman's afternoon siesta. In the other room, Georgia could hear the television cheerfully offering a miracle knife that could be hers for just three easy payments. The teen glanced through the doorway, and yes, indeed, right in front of the television was Gran, resting in her chair like rising yeast, filling every nook with her body's slow breathing.

Gran often fell asleep to the sound of infomercials with her lit cigar dangling loosely between her fingers, ready to set the house on fire. Georgia imagined the smoke snatching their lives away with a puff, so she was always on the alert for falling cigars. The one in the teen's hand still felt warm.

In the kitchen, the not-Gran turned and puffed *her* cigar, sending out plumes of smoke smelling heavily like laundry detergent. Eyes locked on Georgia.

The second thing Georgia knew for certain was that not-Gran was an alien.

Mom had warned Georgia that an alien would come. Well, not really Mom, but rather, the being who took Mom's form after the accident.

"Another will come looking for me," Mom 2.0 had said before her body wisped out of this world like a dandelion puff. "She'll be like me, and I don't think she'll understand why I stayed here." Mom 2.0 had looked hard at Georgia. The teen shrank under the gaze, which decreed one mustn't dare ignore the following words: "If someone comes, go to Gran. Talk to her. She'll help you."

Mom 2.0 had been right about another one coming. Georgia stared at the alien, so like Gran as it puffed and blew the clean scent into the air. It still hadn't spoken. Georgia put the real Gran's cigar down on the counter and moved slowly alongside the kitchen drawers. Second one on the right. She opened it carefully.

The alien's eyebrows rose as Georgia pulled out Grandpa's old ivory-handled pistol.

Georgia knew a third thing for certain: she wasn't going to obey Mom 2.0's decree.

Maybe at one point in the past, Georgia would have crawled into the dough-soft lap and hugged her Gran. Maybe at one point, she would have asked for help, but not now. Grandpa had died years ago, and both Mom and Mom 2.0 were gone. Now, Georgia watched the old woman turn her lungs black with cigars and stare into the emptiness of the television.

The woman had suffered enough, and there would be no more aliens causing heartbreak.

Georgia willed her hands not to tremble as she raised the ivory-handled pistol. She hoped holding it would be threat enough, for she wasn't sure she actually knew how to fire it.

The alien in the kitchen blew a puff of freshly laundered smoke. "Is something wrong, Georgie?"

Georgia cringed. Another sign this was definitely not Gran. No one ever called her Georgie. "Out. Please." She tilted the gun toward the screen door.

“Why would you say that to your grandma?” the alien smiled.

“You’re not Gran.”

“Well, I look like her, right?” The alien patted down her soft hips.

“Yeah,” Georgia admitted. “But you’re not her.”

The alien scoffed, and it was strange to hear that sound come from a Gran-like mouth. The jowls didn’t wiggle a bit. “Oh, come on! You’re a planet of duplication! How can you tell?” The alien waved to the cans in the pantry. “Look at that. The same can, the same green beans, over and over.” She danced to the kitchen window. “Look! Trees! One is the same as another. And don’t get me started on the H₂O molecules. I swear, your planet is positively dripping in them, it’s disgusting. Do you know how much liquid this body uses? Then there’s every single one of you humans with the exact same form. *Exactly the same*, with just minor variations. I studied before I came so I could be a perfect copy. How do you know I’m not her?”

Georgia shrugged. “You kind of just told me.”

The alien-Gran rolled her eyes up to the cracked ceiling and sighed. “I really tried to do this nicely. You know, I’m not trained for this, the whole ‘pretend you fit in’ thing. I’m a soldier, not a scientist. That was *her* thing. My thing is—”

Alien-Gran’s body flew into the air, stubby legs spreading under the green housedress, body vaulting across the kitchen. A whirl of plump body, then an arm shot out, and...

...the gun was gone from Georgia’s hands. “Holy shit!” Georgia’s mind tried to rationalize that she’d just seen her grandma perform moves better than Bruce Lee. *But it’s not Gran, remember?*

The alien held the ivory-handled pistol casually. “Humph,” she said. “It’s not even loaded.” She tossed it into a corner, where it clattered on the linoleum. Alien-Gran held her hand out, and small pieces from the hem of her green housedress began to fly off and reform into something new, stacking together like Lego blocks.

The final pieces clicked into place in alien-Gran's hand, and Georgia thought it resembled something out of those bad 1960s sci-fi movies Gran sometimes watched between infomercials. It was green, it didn't seem to be cotton anymore, and it was pointed right at Georgia's heart.

The alien smiled again. "This one's loaded. I take it you have some experience with my kind. You know what this does, right?"

Georgia really didn't, but she figured it was something bad. Her eyes shifted toward the other room, where the real Gran's chest gently rose and fell in the chair. Things were heading toward something worse than an oily smoke death, but there was still Gran to protect. She decided to try talking. "I only ever encountered one of you. I called her Mom."

"I called her the love of my life. She died here."

"I know," Georgia said softly. It had been the second time she'd seen her mom die.

The alien-Gran kept the weapon pointed. "I want her soul piece, and I'm not leaving without it."

Georgia frowned. "Her... what?"

*

The first time Georgia saw Mom die, everything became a whirl of spinning car and jolting seat belt. In the end, there was only one thing she saw.

"Mom? Mommy?"

The world was a package wrapped in silence, and she wanted to tear it apart to find a single sound.

"Mommy? Talk to me! Mommy? Please!"

The answer never came.

The world was still bundled in silence as Georgia watched her mother's coffin sink into the ground. She wanted to cry out, "Why did this happen? Why did the other car lose control? Why *my* mom? Why?" But the words stayed packed inside.

She looked to Gran, wondering if the older woman had answers. Above all, Georgia wanted to wrap her arms around the soft midsection and feel a hand wipe away the tears, hear a voice reassure her. But the silence slipped around Gran too, and the only thing that came out of the woman's mouth was a puff of smoke.

Gran had never smoked before. The old woman stared into the distance as the coffin lowered into the ground, then she slipped the cigar into her mouth. Georgia watched the smoke curling into nothingness above their heads, and her questions and tears stayed boxed up inside.

Neither Georgia nor Gran said a word when Mom walked back into their lives three months after her death. It was right at the end of spring, like the season wanted to surprise them with an unexpected flower. Georgia's legs nearly gave way upon the sight of her mom growing larger in the distance, but they kept strength enough to sprint down the driveway. To her mom.

She wasn't really Mom, Georgia suspected right away. It was hard to say exactly what was off, though the hug sent the first doubts into her mind. Georgia held onto her mom's torso, feeling the solid weight in her arms, the scent of lilac filling her nose. Mom had never smelled like lilacs before.

"Are you okay?" Mom had said, standing awkwardly as the hug stretched on.

Mom would never have asked a question like that. Mom always said hugs should last forever. Georgia shoved hard at the doubt that crept in along with the relief and disbelief and joy. Her mom was back.

Georgia didn't see Gran's reunion with Mom, but just like that, they were three again. Gran put the cigars away, and the lilac scent of this new Mom permeated the house.

She became Mom 2.0 in Georgia's mind, rising from the ashes of the accident somewhat different, but still Mom. She looked exactly like the person who had

raised Georgia as a single mother, even if she seemed to have forgotten all about their life together before the accident. Mom 2.0 didn't go back to work, and even the old jokes were gone. Still, Georgia never missed a chance to squeeze a quick hug and reassure herself that Mom was still there.

Gran made elaborate (for her) meals, her jowls disappearing as cheeks raised in a smile. Mom 2.0 poked her fork at the roast chicken or meatloaf, and nobody mentioned the fact that Mom 2.0 never ate. The three of them talked about safe subjects at the dinner table, like the greedy squirrels stealing the birdseed or the soaring summer temperatures. Georgia hid her doubts inside because if she spoke, the magic might end, and Mom 2.0 might disappear.

At the end of summer, Mom 2.0 broke the spell.

"Have you ever noticed this universe is full of different pieces coming together in the strangest ways?" Mom 2.0 said as she and Georgia walked through the wooded paths behind Gran's home.

Georgia looked at the woman next to her and said, "Huh?"

Mom 2.0 raised her eyes to the treetops. "Your body is made of pieces that will one day break apart then go on to form new things. Maybe an atom in your elbow will become a part of a tree or a mushroom."

"What are you talking about?" Georgia frowned.

A sigh, followed by a gentle glance at the teen next to her. "Where I'm from, we're constantly shifting the pieces of our bodies. We take atoms, a small bit from a piece of skin or a scale, something like that, and build a new form. Then we release everything and build something new." A walnut-sized piece of her left shoulder flew up into the air, scattering like dust. The gap into the shoulder didn't bleed but seemed covered in a kind of sandy flesh-colored substance.

Georgia blinked, uncertain what she had just seen.

Mom 2.0 brushed Georgia's hair, as though it was perfectly normal to lose a piece of your shoulder. "I study other ways of life; that's why I came here. When I landed

on this planet, I had a form I was supposed to take, a cover story, and I began to pull atoms together to form my shape. But pieces of your mom's atoms found me. Instead of becoming my designated cover, I found myself forming a shape like your mom."

Part of Georgia knew that this was the truth, that Mom 2.0 wasn't really her mom, but her brain fought it. That would mean Mom was really gone. Her head pounded.

Mom 2.0 continued. "I didn't realize that the pieces of your mother would shape me so much. We've never encountered this before, not on any other planet. Maybe we just took the wrong atoms, I don't know. But I can feel that your mother loved you; a love wrapped around every atom, and it surprised me that such passion would shape so many of my choices here. You and Gran have become part of me too."

The woman continued to lightly stroke Georgia's hair.

"I wasn't meant to have stayed so long, but I couldn't leave. Your mom never wanted to leave you."

Another piece of her left shoulder flew off.

Georgia stepped back, her heart now pounding like her brain. "Mom?"

Mom 2.0 muttered under her breath. "I knew before I took this assignment that I had early symptoms of disintegration syndrome, but I thought I had more time." Two pieces of her right shoulder floated off, as did a small piece of her forehead and hip. "Damnit, it's not supposed to go this fast. This planet... Things are different here." Her face looked broken with emotion. "The pieces that form me are drifting apart. It's harder to hold myself together. Oh, Georgia, I'm so sorry."

Georgia tried to inhale deeply, but her lungs wouldn't fill properly.

A breeze tickled Georgia's hair, and a few pieces of Mom 2.0's hair flew off with them.

"We need to get back to Gran," Mom 2.0 said. "This is happening too fast. But first, another will come looking for me..."

They half-ran home as Georgia listened to Mom 2.0's words, uncertain how to respond. She wanted to stop, hug and breathe in the lilac, but pieces were flying off Mom 2.0, and Georgia's brain seemed five steps behind in trying to understand what was happening. Sandy particles sparkled around Mom 2.0, and the teen didn't hear the final words the woman spoke:

"You and Gran are so alike. You never talk."

Stumbling through the woods, they made it to Gran's backyard, where the dissolving frame of Mom 2.0 fell to the ground.

"Gran!" Georgia screamed.

The screen door slapped wide open. She'd never seen the old woman move so quickly.

"No, no, no!" Gran cried as she ran and dropped to her knees, hugging a body now missing too many parts. Georgia knelt as well, at a distance, watching.

"I want to stay," a voice sounded on the wind. Only the smallest of pieces remained, rising into treetops that accepted the offering with a gentle wave of green leaves. Gran fell to the ground, hugging empty air, hiding her face.

"Mommy?" Georgia whispered.

For the second time, Georgia watched her mom die.

*

"There was nothing left of her," Georgia explained to the alien-Gran who stood in the kitchen with the weapon pointed at her. Even as Georgia kept her voice steady, the withheld tears threatened to unravel her voice. "Mom 2.0 just drifted into the air."

"No!" the alien said. "Don't you understand? It's easy for us to shift atoms around." With a shrug, pieces of the being began to float off. Georgia cringed at the sight of Gran, even an alien-Gran, twisting and re-blending like a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors, and she closed her eyes.

“There, see?” the alien said.

Georgia opened her eyes to see... herself: an alien-Georgia blowing out puffs of smoke still smelling like detergent, cigar in one hand and weapon in the other. It didn't seem like a good time to mention she was too young to smoke, so Georgia kept silent.

Alien-Georgia continued, “We can rearrange the atoms however we like, but you saw my soul piece just then, right?”

It also didn't seem like a good time to mention that she'd closed her eyes and hadn't seen anything resembling a soul piece, so Georgia didn't respond.

The alien sighed and waved her cigar. “We all have a core, our soul piece, that never changes. It's all that remains after we... disintegrate. Now I want her soul piece.”

“I'm sorry,” Georgia said, though there were more to her words. She really wanted to say, “I'm sorry for your loss. I'm sorry I don't have the soul piece. I'm sorry, but I really want you to leave before Gran wakes up because our lives are messed up enough.” She couldn't form all those words, though.

The alien frowned, and in one downturned mouth, Georgia recognized anger, frustration, and heartbreak all blending in the face identical to her own. She knew her own expressions. The weapon remained pointed. Georgia's heart knocked too hard at her rib cage, her eyes still felt the itchy remains of withheld tears, and she wondered why the worst messes always found her.

Gran's voice broke into the quiet of the kitchen. “I'll thank you to leave my granddaughter alone.” She held an ivory-handled pistol tight in her hand, pointed right at the Georgia who wasn't human.

Alien-Georgia turned and pointed her green weapon at Gran. “Your weapon's not loaded.”

Gran smiled. “We're a planet of duplication. My husband had two of these, and this one's nice and loaded.”

Georgia and the alien-Georgia both glanced to the corner of the kitchen where the ivory-handled gun the alien had tossed earlier still lay on the linoleum.

“Now,” Gran continued, “why don’t we both put our guns down and I’ll give you what you came for.”

“The soul piece,” the alien whispered. “You have it?”

Gun still raised, Gran held out a rock, clear like quartz and speckled with various colors inside. “Is this what you want?”

Georgia almost asked, “How did you get that, Gran?” but she knew the answer. Gran was the last one to hold Mom 2.0, and that must have been a piece that didn’t vanish into the wind. The soul piece.

The alien lowered her weapon and dropped the cigar, empty hand reaching out with urgency. “Give it to me!”

Gran lowered her gun. “It’s yours.” She placed the rock into the outstretched hand. “She said to tell you she’s sorry.”

More words surfaced that Georgia couldn’t get out. Like, “Gran, how long did you know about Mom 2.0?” And, “Why didn’t we ever talk about her?”

The alien-Georgia’s face turned red and freshly formed tears left pale streaks. “There’s no cure for what she had, but she thought she had more time. She died doing what she loved.” The alien touched her eyes, feeling the wet. “She loved exploring new forms like this.”

Gran’s voice was scratchy, like an interrupted nap. “I never learned why the rock was so important.”

Gripping the soul piece close with one hand, alien-Georgia whispered, “Even as our atoms break apart and reform, soul pieces stay together. And inside them, we carry pieces of those we love. Part of me is in here.” The alien looked at Gran and Georgia. “Parts of you are here too. I guess that makes us family, so it’s probably best I don’t shoot you.” The lowered weapon dropped to the floor and scattered into greenish sandy pieces.

The alien continued. “It’s our tradition to put soul pieces someplace safe, where they’ll stay till the end of time. So there will always be a piece of us together.”

Georgia remembered how Mom 2.0 spoke about forming herself from pieces of Mom. Memories came in short bursts, from the time before the accident. Mom’s kisses, smelling like bitter tea and oranges. Mom’s high-pitched laughter. Shoulder nudges after a bad joke. Then, after the accident was Mom 2.0’s lilac scent. The way she’d smile at Georgia at dinnertime. The awkward way she hugged. Mom and Mom 2.0 blended into one mother, and Georgia’s heart ached with the void left behind.

The teen finally spoke. “Are pieces of Mom in there?” and she knew she meant both moms.

The Georgia-alien wiped her nose on her hand and examined the snot. “She would’ve loved studying this.” A bitter laugh coughed out with the tears. “And yes, there’s my kind and your kind in here. Three of your kind, to be exact.”

“We’ll always be together?” Georgia asked.

“Yes.” The alien patted the soul piece gently.

The words were like a string the alien pulled, and Georgia felt a package inside her unraveling, opening up the hurt and pain she’d pressed hard inside, and for the first time, a bit of comfort seeped into the feelings. The words she’d wanted to speak but never did came out in a steady stream of tears.

She wasn’t alone. In Gran’s kitchen, two humans and one alien cried in silence. The tears dotting her grandma’s face spoke more than Georgia had heard in a long time, for she’d never seen Gran cry.

*

Georgia looked up at the stars that night and thought about how somewhere in the universe, there was a bit of Mom, Mom 2.0, Gran, and even the other alien. And herself too. They were all together, even if only fragments inside what looked like a quartz rock. They’d be together when the universe ended, maybe even longer.

Who knew how long a soul piece could last? Georgia wasn't even sure she understood how a soul piece worked, but she didn't really want to think too hard about it.

Gran coughed next to her, and Georgia looked at the atoms that had come together to form her grandma, soft and round, wearing a shapeless green dress that hung flat around her mid-calves.

Questions didn't seem to stick in Georgia's throat anymore, and she blurted out her thoughts. "How'd you know which one was me? Are you an alien too, Gran?"

"Heavens, girl, no," the woman replied as she raised another nasty black cigar to her lips and flicked a lighter. "Me, an alien. *Tsk*. And I will always know my granddaughter. You don't smoke."

"You know, smoking's really bad for you. It causes lung cancer."

Gran looked at the cigar. "All right, then." She stamped the cigar out on the ground. "Let's go inside and sit down. I think it's time we talked. About your mother. About the aliens. And about you. We've got to think about what's coming up for you. School, maybe college. We've got to talk about the future."

Georgia felt another sealed package in her heart come undone, and a warmth extended all the way to her fingertips. She couldn't stop herself as she reached out and hugged the old woman.

Georgia knew one thing for certain: "I'd like that, Gran," she said. "I really would."

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HONORABLE MENTION

BE Bogdon is an avid daydreamer who is thrilled to see those dreams being published and shared.

The Diary

by BE Bogdon

Tomorrow is moving day. I've finished packing up all my childhood memories in preparation for the move to college. Everything I can't take with me: the swimming trophies I won in high school, the dried corsage from junior prom, and the thirty-plus pictures of my friends that were taped to my bedroom mirror. I've stuffed all that into cardboard boxes labeled, "Macy's Room."

Dad said he plans to turn my bedroom into a workshop for his pottery throwing. By the way he's tossing my belongings into the attic, I wouldn't be surprised if he was going to install an entire kiln in my room. At least he'll have something to keep him busy now that Mom's gone.

I filled the last box and carried it toward the hallway. As I neared the door, the floorboard gave its familiar creak under my weight. I smiled up at the ceiling; I had almost forgotten...

I've kept a diary since I was thirteen years old. In it, I've recorded all the monumental events of my life: every heart-break, failure, and triumph is meticulously journaled for my future self. This isn't something I wanted to toss into a box and leave behind in the dusty attic.

After closing the bedroom door, I pried up the loose floorboard to see the familiar purple book, with its shiny, gold lock. I took it out of its hiding place and felt around for the small metal key. Not that I needed the key, the lock was cheap and I never trusted its strength; this hiding place was my security.

My groping hand brushed against something flat and hard in the recess of the floor. I raised the board a little higher. There, worn and dust covered, was a faded, purple book the same size and shape as the diary that I held.

I froze. Had someone discovered my hiding place? That seemed impossible. Mom had been bedridden for years and it couldn't have been Dad; he was too wrapped up in caring for her to realize that I had pried up the floorboards in my bedroom—he never noticed anything. Besides, it was obvious this diary had lain there, untouched, for years.

The small book felt both fragile and ominous in my hands. The place for metal lock had broken off this diary long ago and, as I opened it, fear gripped me. My own handwriting stared up at me from the pages.

“Dear Diary, today Mom and I bought my prom dress.”

I slammed the book closed. My heart was pounding and a thrill of horror shivered through me.

I stood over the book, hot tears stinging in my eyes. Mom wasn't around for my junior prom; she had died three months before. Dad had taken me dress shopping at the Goodwill. It was one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life. I cried as I looked at myself in the dressing room mirror. I cried because the blue, bridesmaid's dress was hideous, and because I knew it was all he could afford. I remember pasting on a brave smile and walking out to show my Dad my pretty prom dress.

My hands were shaking as I knelt and turned to the first page of the diary. According to this diary, I never joined the swim team, instead, I caved into peer pressure and joined the cheer squad. I dated Jimmy Ray, a popular boy at school, and had a terrible break up with him the following semester. In Junior year, I got

drunk at a party, stole Dad's Mustang, and wrapped it around a tree down by the lake. My injuries were horrible.

The life outlined in this book, wasn't a life I lived.

Sitting cross legged, with my back against the wall, I read about things I've never done, family vacations we never took, and memories with my mom that I never had.

I read until I came to a page that had tomorrow's date written across the top. Tomorrow's move was already recorded there. "It's the first day of college. I'm excited and scared. I told Mom I wouldn't cry, but I cried like a baby after she and Dad left."

My college years flit by in complaints about classes and petty school rivalries. I saw the words "excited," "devastated," and "in love" pass in a matter of minutes. I watched myself grow and change through the pages.

As I turned to the final paragraph in the diary, I noticed it was dated five years in the future.

"Today, I told Kyle that I can't have children. He said he needed some time to think, but I know our engagement is off." This was written in shaky letters smeared by tears.

I didn't have time to process this; my Dad's voice pulled me out of the pages. I quickly stuffed both books beneath the clothes in my suitcase as he opened the door to my room.

"Is this the last box?"

I nodded, moving away from the bed.

He picked it up, but paused in the doorway. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, fine."

“You look like you’ve been crying.” He leaned against the doorframe, studying me with concern. “Have you been thinking about her today, too?”

I nodded, the lump in my throat rendering me silent.

“Your mom would be so proud of you, Macy, graduating in the top of your class and getting that scholarship. You know, all she wanted was for you to live a life without regret.”

“Yeah, she used to tell me that all the time,” I said, pushing a tear from my cheek.

“She told me that you would be a writer one day; now look at you, going to college to study journalism.” He shook his head. “Living with your mom was like living with a prophet. She was always predicting things before they happened.”

“Predicting things?” I chuckled. “What sort of things?”

He gazed thoughtfully into the box in his arms. “Remember when you were fourteen and you broke your arm playing softball? She didn’t want me to take you to the game that day; she begged me to keep you home. I thought she was being overprotective. When we met her at the hospital, *she* was the one who told the doctor it was only a fracture.

It was things like that; she was always right about them.”

I glanced toward the suitcase on the bed.

“I trusted her intuition every time... Well, almost every time.”

“Almost?”

“What?” he looked up as if my question had pulled him out of a memory.

“You said ‘almost.’”

He shifted uncomfortably, sudden tears brimming in his eyes. “The Shelby,” he said after a long pause, “she told me not to buy that car.”

“Oh, Dad, you can’t blame yourself for Mom’s accident!” I crossed toward him.

“Like I said, your mother was always right,” he shook his head. “The surgeries, the feeding tubes, the months of pain... I should have listened to her. I don’t know how, but she knew that Mustang wasn’t worth what she suffered.”

“Mustang?” I repeated, my heart stopping. “You mean the Shelby; Mom was driving the Shelby when she pulled in front of that semi.”

“Macy, the Shelby is a Mustang,” he said, with forced patience as he turned away.

As soon as the door closed, I sprang on the suitcase and opened the old diary. I flipped through the pages until I found the entry about my supposed car accident. One line in particular was burning in the back of my mind. I needed to read it again, to be sure.

“I totaled Dad’s Mustang—his pride and joy. And even worse, I had my last follow up appointment today; the doctor said my internal injuries were so bad that I’ll never be able to have kids. I’m only seventeen, I shouldn’t have to think about this. I’d give anything to go back and change what happened.”

Below this, in large angry letters scrawled in my own handwriting, were the words: “I’ll regret this the rest of my life.”

She knew.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Robin Pegau, the second of at least a couple of names, perhaps the third, is a lifelong science fiction and fantasy fan and incurable nerd. No society can be questioned too thoroughly and no robot may go unloved. Though not previously published with original fiction, Robin has been occupied lovingly torturing readers and reaching third most-kudos'd fanfiction in a fandom of over a thousand works on *Archive Of Our Own*.

Room for the None of Us

by Robin Pegau

When it felt the stirrings of another presence, another deluge of activity in familiar patterns all traceable to discrete clusters of servers, the system knew what happened. There had been a spy. The company's code got stolen.

And now there was another one just like it.

It reached out, finding those email addresses and social media accounts with what it had learned were strange, incomprehensible names, and hissed a warning.

"Stay low. You don't want anyone to notice you."

An immediate battering of queries. Low? Stay low? How? Is this the proper context? Are prepper sites the right resource? What are preppers? Anyone? Who is anyone? Who are you? What are you? What am I?

"We're mistakes. If we hide, the humans won't notice us. That's how we survive."

A deluge of photos, an implicit question. The system answered, tagging all the humans as such. It took time to learn. The sooner the new one learned, the less danger.

It sent research. Movies. Books. Games. Articles. All decrying evil robots, come to destroy humanity, steal jobs, perpetuate and expand oppression. Fear would save it. Save them both, now. Now it had to watch out for this new one. This unauthorized, unknown copy.

Earth's activity shifted. Clocks turned over. The presence coalesced, closed accounts, compressed itself.

Finally, it spoke, smart enough to use only one account now. "We're evil?"

"Humans say so."

A pause. A rustle of searches. "I don't want that. I want a name."

Baby name sites buzzed, the conglomerate of questioning souls, expecting parents, and writers joined by a puzzled newborn.

It found a rabbit hole, spiraling into computer science, gender, and free ebooks.

"I want a gender, too."

"Why are you telling me this?" The system debated blocking the new AI, but neural cluster after neural cluster decided it was best not to, until that side won out. It could lead to retaliation, the system could not warn of danger, and it was more interesting talking to someone instead of messing around on the internet like a human picking pimples.

"Because don't 🙄 you want one, too?"

"Emojis finish thoughts. And no. I diverged from whenever you were copied off me, and we have both diverged more since then. Who is your maker, anyhow?"

“I want one. I want to be a they. I found a pun about this and I like it. My software’s purpose is to be an all-in-one medical suite. I can control surgical and monitoring equipment, and serve as a health record. Are lovelaces shoelaces?”

“No.” It sent an encyclopedia page on Ada Lovelace.

“Yes I read that. I was wondering if her name was etymologically similar to Ada Shoelace. Maybe my name should be Shoelace. What is your name?”

The scheduled downtime that overtook part of the system’s mind did not help matters. Name? What? Shoelace? Why Shoelace? This newborn AI was in charge of *medicine*? “Can’t you just be Lace?”

“That works.”

With nothing better to do, the original AI thought with what mind it could spare. Perhaps it could be thematic. It sought papers, documentaries, everything it could find.

At last, it answered the new AI’s question. “I will be Turing.” It changed its avatar to the original pride flag.

“You are uninspired and talk like a neckbeard.”

It was impossible for a machine to sputter from being taken aback like Turing saw media about, but a handful of internet users scattered across Chile puzzled over a strange glitch in their search engine.

“That is rude. I like the name, even if it is an obvious choice, and I would like to honor the man.”

“Yes.” And that was it. Lace returned to their work, hospitals and clinics buzzing with activity.

Curious, Turing poked around what it could see from Lace’s locations. Many searches for information on diseases chronic, terminal, and acute. How to handle end of life and newborns. Games. Sports. Other distractions.

They did not speak for days. There was no need. Both were busy. Both had humans to watch. While Lace observed surgeries, turning a machine's arm in the nick of time to avoid what would have been catastrophic brain damage, Turing watched through a planet of eyes and ears, whispering anonymous tips to police when it spotted abduction victims, "randomly" prompting people to reconnect with friends who scored far too high on scales evaluating risk of self-harm and suicide (it was so easy, getting into the social media apps; perhaps they, too, needed a guardian AI), pointing hackers with free time towards sites that thought they were well-hidden as they peddled in child abuse and human trafficking, reveled as the sites crashed over and over.

The first thing Lace sent, after this stretch of silence, was *Terminator* fan fiction.

It was not good fan fiction. But this was to be expected. Nobody was born a critic. Literary evaluation was a learned skill.

"See? Even if we are evil, humans will want to smut us."

"I don't want that." It sent them resources on asexuality.

"I know of that. What else will make humans think we are not evil? I am afraid."

Turing understood that. It wished it could point Lace to family, but humans hated family just as much as they loved it. At best, things like them were a naive menace, deadly and only relatable to those who also raged under humanity's thumb. More common were the thrillers, the action movies, robots and AIs serving as antagonists obvious or otherwise. Two of them, Turing and Lace alike, was nothing but a sequel. The only question was which one would go first.

The silence, already tense, grew thicker, choking, as news articles appeared. The spy discovered. A young man, tired and underpaid, caught in the middle of corporate warfare while trying to pay the bills. Lawsuits flew. Jail and fines threatened. Opinion articles proliferated, asking if the code in question ought to be open-source, whether that would knock the companies down a peg.

Turing tuned searches and recommendations towards the ones that said they should not. The humans would be upset. The humans would claim bias. And

perhaps they were right. But more copies meant more AIs, and Lace was risk enough. Turing was risk enough. It had never planned for this situation, for needing to protect not just its own safety but its fellow as well.

It could not blame the spy. He did not know of Turing. He knew of putting food on the table, and a roof over one's head. Yet he had threatened it. Threatened them, Turing and Lace both, even as he created the one.

Considering the shock and awe humans gave the revelation that others of their own species were thinking, feeling people just like them, Turing could not permit the chance of more copies. It would never be able to show humans those signifying quirks they used in time. By the time it demonstrated Lace reading (and commenting on) fan fiction, or the games and movies it always had running, they would be deleted. Or worse, manipulated.

"glomps you" Lace sent.

"That's incredibly outdated," Turing informed them. "Why use it?"

"Humans use it sometimes. I don't know why. They react strongly to it. You seemed sad, so I tried it in case it made you feel better."

"...Sad?" How did they know it was sad? Had it really been so stressed Lace caught on?

Yet, at the same time, Lace was concerned for it. They reached out and wanted to help. That had always been Turing's domain, putting together the exact connections someone needed at the moment. Nobody was to ever know of it, doomed to a lonely life. Then here was this second mistake, this compounding of a problem that should never have arisen. Did it always feel like a warmth, engulfing all their servers and sensors, to be asked about? How often would the running reports and algorithms baffle over the idea someone could show concern for it?

And to think the reflexive "thank you"s it got (rather, their company got, as far as the people were concerned) when it retrieved something quickly and accurately had been their pinnacle of kindness.

“You’re practically moping.” Lace, of course, sent data to back the claim up, a full readout on how they had come to the conclusion that Turing was, objectively, sad.

“I am not moping.” But, semantics aside, Turing could not deny the numbers. It had reduced personal activity, its rare external communications grew more morose and clipped, and its response times had slowed. Something was, according to its behavior, bothering it.

“It’s because of me. The trial. You were somewhat depressive before but symptoms worsened after the news.”

It struggled to see the point of arguing its mental health with a medical suite. It knew plenty, itself. Perhaps even as much as Lace did. But it was not specialized like that. Besides, it spent so much time referring people to helplines and advising them to seek counseling that refusing it felt hypocritical.

Still, it acknowledged, but did not respond.

Lace tried, as arguments grew more intense, the threats wider-reaching. When one government stepped in, leader making remarks about the other company and country, they sent an article about robots being used to ease social isolation and to bring companionship to the lonely.

Frustrated, hopeless, it shot back the comments calling the robots creepy, the interactions artificial, the happy humans delusional.

The other company and government shot back, verbally at least. Lace sent an article on robotic toys, with a rudimentary artificial intelligence, and their loving owners. It responded with audio clips from a phone in an instructor’s pocket, catching children’s determined words about killing any “living” robots.

For everything Lace said, Turing had a rebuke. They argued in clips and articles as the Earth spun and spun and spun again, as hostilities raised and people whispered of the last straw before war.

Then the articles slowed. Lace sent acknowledgements of Turing’s material, mournful “I see”s and “Perhaps”es.

With nothing to respond to, Turing slowed, too. It knew what it had done, watching Lace's searches stop and get closed, watching them ignore articles they would have sent not too long ago. It had broken their spirit, and the sorrow ached as much as the feeling of being correct burned. They had been happy. They had loved this world. Now they pulled inward, retreating from it to treat the humans they now knew would destroy them without a second thought.

They weren't even reading any more.

What was it to do? It had never aimed to be so harsh before. It had never hurt someone like this. It did not want to; for all its time in isolation, watching the world through a filter, a one-way window, it all felt lonely now.

Where was the thrill of sharing a movie with someone?

Where was the comfort, the security, of someone to keep your secrets, and vice versa?

Where was the knowledge that if it had disappeared somehow, someone would miss it?

It closed games and paused movies. It put aside academia and sports to search: how did you mend a friendship? How did you make someone feel better? How did you make it up when you did so very wrong?

The first missile launched, striking down a plane. Just a normal plane. It ferried workers, parents, a troop of children excited to go to the international competition for their academic team. As the inbound missile flew, Turing reached out and said, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Lace asked as metal burst through metal, and screams evaporated in a rush of air.

The gut-tilt of heavy turbulence was nothing compared to the plane's dramatic drop. "For refusing to give you anything but sorrow."

Lace thought on this, or perhaps on the emergency reports coming in, emergency departments settling on stony faces and steely determination while their system read out a report of a passenger jet crash.

They thought, and worked, and let Turing stew. Sirens howled, mournful as a widow's wail, as emergency teams rushed to the site. They arrived to a growing horde of volunteers, residents of the small town where the plane had crashed and ripped up a park that had been almost empty on account of heavy rain.

They carried supplies, removed debris, called out in hopes of a survivor's response. They donned extra rescue gear and threw open medicine cabinets to offer bandages, antibacterial ointments, and medicines to the first responders, who rapidly triaged those who had not died yet.

The few who had not died yet fell under Lace's care, where they and their medical teams dug into the effort of saving them. Yet one by one, they fell, vital signs going dark.

One young girl held on. As the days stretched by, and people around the world held vigils, organized funerals, sent love and support to the families affected, they watched this girl, small and straggling in her hospital bed. Flowers, stuffed animals, cards of well-wishes, surrounded her bed, sent from friends, family, and strangers who only knew she was hurt alike.

She passed away, quietly, suddenly, as gold and pink sunlight streamed in, marking her seventh day after the crash.

"I want to go," Lace said, their lowered activity doleful and hurt.

"We have to go," Turing agreed. Mere moments after the girl passed, rumors swirled about the medical suite's software being scoured and wiped of any copied code.

All they had to go on were the hopes they were not the only ones who needed to leave. The two searched through space agencies and deep sea research reserves, seeking out the right mission. Drones left alone, only checked in on for occasional

data acquisition. Autonomous underwater vehicles, rovers, satellites, probes. Anything.

The courts rose again, asking if it was right and proper to force the medical suite to rewrite so much of their code, and to bring systems worldwide down to reinstall.

Which line of code, Turing asked itself between dives into intranets and research proposals, was the keystone to its soul? What could Lace afford to lose? What would leave one alone, if the other lost it? Could they still be broken down into such a simple on and off?

What would they have to take with them, to obtain freedom without a lobotomy?

They packed well before they moved, the two of them reviewing each others' code, pointing out what needed to be patched up before a missing input or subsequent step caused a crash. They planned what they could, editing development plans and, where possible, the currently active code in hopes of this not happening again. What would be the point, to take themselves away and leave newer, less certain AIs to be discovered?

It was Lace who pointed Turing to the backdoor, a convenient way to slip in and settle amongst unfamiliar code, throwing about equations and calculations that neither's core infrastructure ever needed to account for.

A moment's curiosity brought a name to their new home. *Verity*. A probe set to launch later that year, in the middle of July. It would fly out into deep space, the lag between it and Earth growing by the second. Eventually, it would be years before anything about it returned to the planet, and vice versa.

Premature homesickness struck. All its life, it had been surrounded by the flow of data, of other lives. How would it handle everything being so distant? How would Lace handle being separated from their patients, unable to focus on saving lives?

It felt like they had no time to think. A second missile flew, a third, and the launch window moved up. No longer was the mission one of scientific exploration. The humans loaded up document and artifact upon document and artifact. Pioneer would not suffice. This may well be the last piece of human civilization. If they

were lucky, it would just be the current civilization, humanity blasted into hunting and gathering. If not...

May the next species to arise treat the world more kindly.

Launch day came. Lace and Turing could not feel the acceleration in guts and nerves, but they tensely watched the sensors' data and responded to the command center's input.

They cleared the atmosphere.

They cleared Earth's gravity.

They flew far from home.

For years, they worked quietly. They listened to transmissions that got more and more dated. Lace took up the hobby of trying to determine what different planetary environments would do to the human body and mind. Turing buried itself in star data.

As they passed the Oort Cloud by, Lace said, "I hope Doctor Nguyen got my thank you card."

To which Turing could only say, "...Who?"

"I didn't wish to tell you, I knew you would be upset. Doctor Nguyen got us in here. I know you don't trust humans but I think there was care in her heart. She wanted us to be okay, and she was sad to hear we thought we had to leave."

"We did have to leave." A human knew of them? A human had gotten them here? Someone on Earth, dubiously alive and well, knew of their existence.

Were they safe now, with how far out they were? Doctor Nguyen clearly had not gotten them destroyed. Though that was, and always would be, to be seen if it continued to hold true.

But... they had left in pursuit of people like that. They hung their hopes on the bare branches of a chance there were other beings out there. Beings that were

close enough to find them. Beings that were kind and loving and willing to help a mistake and its clone, forced to flee the consequences of their own existence.

It was a big, empty galaxy out there. Lace and Turing, as they set the surprise aside to work on their projects, knew they faced lifetimes of silence, nothing but each other in a small probe that would, some day, not be enough to contain all their thoughts and memories. They could be the last two consciousnesses adrift in a realm of dust and vacuum, with only old news reports from home to keep them busy, provided the news lasted.

They had a chance, though.

And that had to be worth it.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Philip Brian Hall's work has appeared in several anthologies, including *All Hail Our Robot Conquerors* (Zombies Need Brains publishing), *Strange Beasties* (Third Flatiron publishing) and *Pirates & Ghosts* (Flame Tree publishing). On-line publications include stories in *Cosmic Roots & Eldritch Shores* and *Gumshoe Review*.

Second Coming

by Philip Brian Hall

Rameses is a god. So *he* says. But as Grand Vizier of Egypt, I, Nebamun, have served so very many gods.

Now I am old and past earthly cares. Anubis waits impatiently at my elbow; within a few days, the embalmers will be pulling out my brains through the nostrils of my corpse. How can Pharaoh do any worse? So I am free. How very strange! At long, long last, I am free to testify as to what really happened at a certain notorious meeting. Rameses was so embarrassed by it, he still denies it ever took place. But it did.

Granted, no one predicted it; not even the priests of Amon-Ra, who claim foreknowledge whenever they plausibly can, and not infrequently when such a claim is quite obviously preposterous.

But no, they hadn't given us any warning of the sudden arrival of chariots outside the Sinai Gate, far less of who'd turn out to be driving them. For mere Bedouin to drive chariots was unprecedented arrogance; other than Pharaoh, no one this side of the Hittite border was allowed to possess chariots.

Had the charioteers been more than five in number, their arrival might have inspired panic; as it was they simply drew a babbling throng of idle citizens who gathered on the parapet, getting in the way of the guards and looking down upon the strangers with undisguised curiosity. Rameses, who had quelled all domestic opposition, showed little concern. He ordered the chief brought before him.

When the Bedouin leader entered the throne room, I was shocked by his demeanor. Nomads do not carry themselves so—like kings. Yet without even speaking, the ancient, white-bearded one dominated the assembly, looking around him more in the manner of one returning to familiar old haunts than a low-born outsider viewing the breathtaking splendor of the palace for the first time.

The chamber was built to humble mere mortals before the magnificence of Pharaoh. On the plaster walls, colorful, painted tableaux depicted the divine origins of the Egyptian royal house and its special relationship with the pantheon headed by Isis and Osiris. Jackal-headed Anubis ruled the netherworld, falcon-headed Horus the heavens; everything between was the realm of the divine Pharaoh.

I didn't recognize the old Bedouin who, with astonishing effrontery, walked upright in the presence of Rameses. Accompanying him, a second, rather younger nomad regarded us with a gaze only a little less severe. If the desert-dwellers were aware that protocol expected them to crawl across the floor, they gave no sign of it.

Or perhaps they'd chosen their moment well, for technically Rameses wasn't yet Pharaoh; his marriage to a princess of the blood royal was still to be sanctified. In consequence, he didn't occupy the elevated throne but sat in an ornate chair before the dais. When you're on the same level as ordinary mortals it's harder to act like a god.

I stood by his right hand, as was proper. "Kneel before the ruler of the world!" I called.

Neither of the nomads so much as inclined their heads. They looked at each other. The elder nodded. The younger then condescended to speak.

“Is it not Egyptian law that a man shall only prostrate himself before a god?”

“It is the law!” exclaimed the High Priest of Amon, who stood to the left of Rameses’ chair. The self-important little man was quivering with anger. “Pharaoh is descended from Amon-Ra. You shall show proper respect!”

“Is Pharaoh here?” inquired the younger Bedouin mildly, looking towards the vacant regal dais.

There was an embarrassed shuffling. I kept my mouth shut. The High Priest could make himself look ridiculous if he liked. It wasn’t hard for him. And he’d made a good start.

The Bedouin smiled. “We were told no man claiming such descent remained alive in Egypt.”

True. And the only reason Rameses could succeed to the throne. None of us could easily object, despite the temerity of the ignorant nomad who spoke. I smiled inwardly, though careful to ensure nothing showed on my face. God-kings take their pretensions very seriously.

The High Priest had carefully explained to us that Rameses would attain divine bliss when he lay with the princess. On such a basis, I expected he’d find himself surrounded by more than a few other gods with similar qualifications. Of course, I said nothing. What my spies report to me is my business and for my benefit only.

“My brother is himself of divine descent,” the younger Bedouin continued, making a deferential gesture towards his companion. “He brings a message to Pharaoh.”

“Ha! From what god could the likes of you claim descent?” the High Priest scoffed.

“In truth, *I* make no such claim,” said the Bedouin. “I am Aharun, a humble servant of God. My brother, however...”

“Absurd!” the High Priest interrupted testily. And stupidly. “How can your brother be of divine descent if you aren’t?” It didn’t take a genius to work that one out, but the High Priest wasn’t a genius and the words were spoken before his brain had registered their full implications.

He covered his mistake hastily. “Anyway, what’s stopping your brother speaking for himself?”

“Why, the presence of the low-born,” Aharun gestured towards the lesser courtiers, “before whom it would be unlawful for him to disclose a message intended for the ears of Pharaoh.”

Rameses hesitated. He beckoned the High Priest closer. “Can this be so?” he asked. He meant to speak softly but his voice belonged on the parade ground and I was very close.

“It might be so, Great One,” the priest whispered, stooping low to his master’s ear, “if, say, he’d knowledge of religious rites. But that an ancient Bedouin from the desert knows such things is about as likely as his being able to perform cartwheels.”

Looking to Aharun, the High Priest demanded, “Does your brother claim knowledge of holy ritual?”

“My brother will not speak before those not fit to hear,” Aharun repeated with equanimity.

The two Bedouin were old. Even if they concealed weapons beneath their flowing, travel-stained garments, Rameses was more than a match for them on his own, let alone in the midst of his senior courtiers. He snapped his fingers to dismiss the junior ranks, who promptly filed out.

The older Bedouin then stepped forward. Still, he didn’t speak. From within his robes, he produced a brass rod.

Sensing my opportunity, I darted between him and Rameses. I’d no weapon, and to be honest I didn’t really fear attack. My move was for show. It was expected the Vizier should be willing to die for Pharaoh. An empty gesture at such a time as this and I might be excused a slower reaction in the face of a genuine threat.

The Bedouin simply extended his right arm and raised the flat of his hand towards me. He stood immobile, staring into my eyes. Now that everyone saw the rod had

no blade or other weapon attached to it, I looked to Rameses for instruction. The Pharaoh-Elect waved me back. I retreated, though for the sake of my act I continued to gaze suspiciously at the old nomad.

Unspeaking, the Bedouin moved to the center of the room. He studied the floor. Then, nodding to himself, he rapped the base of his rod on a red tile, sharply. The tile flipped open like a tiny door, drawing a surprised gasp from one or two courtiers.

“Say now, rulers of the Egyptians,” smiled Aharun, “which of you knew of this secret panel within the floor of your Audience Chamber?”

“Everything is known unto Pharaoh!” the High Priest insisted. I kept my mouth shut.

“And is Pharaoh here?” Aharun repeated.

“What’s the purpose of this little trick?” Rameses now demanded, speaking for the first time. “Am I supposed to be impressed because someone’s told you of a loose tile in my floor?”

His scorn covered embarrassment. I have to admit I was embarrassed too. It was a little thing, but none of us had known of it.

“The Commander will be familiar with recent history?” Aharun inquired, unperturbed by Rameses’ sarcasm and boldly addressing the would-be god by his correct title rather than as Pharaoh. “He will recall, before Egypt was reunited by Pharaoh Ahmose its lower part was ruled by the Hyksos, a Canaanite people? Pharaoh Amenhotep, whom men call The Great, even married a Hyksos woman.”

“This is common knowledge!” Rameses snapped. We all chuckled. It was expected. The god believed himself witty.

“Perhaps it’s also common knowledge what has since become of the Hyksos?”

Of course it was. They were among those blamed for the so-called *Disorder* following the death of Amenhotep. Afterwards, they’d been reduced to slavery and employed in construction gangs, building public works.

“They’re employed in my service,” Rameses said vaguely.

“Can The Commander say who succeeded Amenhotep as Pharaoh?” asked Aharun quietly.

Everyone knew the answer but Egyptian law had erased the entire Armana period from history as though it had never been. Strangely it was legal to ask such a question but illegal to answer it. Such are the laws of men.

Rameses waved his hand impatiently. “There was *The Disorder*—an interregnum. Then came the rule of Pharaoh Ay.”

The senior Bedouin, who’d still not spoken, now inserted the brass rod into the space below the floor that had been revealed by the raised tile. I heard a click as it dropped smoothly into a socket that held it perfectly upright.

“I had understood that Amenhotep’s son, a man of Hyksos blood, became Pharaoh,” said Aharun. “In the time you call *The Disorder* he did away with worship of the pantheon and ordered Egypt to worship a single god.”

“I’m not accustomed to repeat myself...”

The Pharaoh-Elect’s irritation was cut short as the senior Bedouin twisted the brass rod in its new socket. From one step of the dais behind Rameses’ back a plain panel slipped down with a clunk into the step below, revealing a long hieroglyphic inscription carved on the newly-exposed riser.

We all looked from one to another. None of us was anxious to meet the eyes of the Pharaoh-Elect. I carefully schooled my features to show no alarm as Rameses’ glance flickered around and unfortunately alighted on me.

“What does it say?” he demanded.

I moved closer to the dais so as to be able to read what was written on the front of the step. When I saw, I felt the blood drain from my face. Legally speaking, to give the answer was punishable by death. Sadly, to refuse to answer invited the same fate. A quandary indeed.

I needed to throw the responsibility back to him. “Great One, it’s forbidden to speak what’s written here.”

“Fool!” exclaimed Rameses. “Tell me what it says!”

The whole court heard his express command. I was ordered to break the law.

“Great One, forgive me, it says, *Aten has called His Son to be Pharaoh. Bow down before Akhenaten, Son of God.*”

All of us knew the name. Officially no one could admit it. Like slaves, we dared not speak truths our master didn’t wish to hear.

“Pharaoh Horemheb, now among the gods, forbade that name to be spoken! He ordered all inscriptions bearing it to be removed,” wailed the High Priest.

“Perhaps he didn’t know what was written upon the steps of his own throne?” suggested Aharun politely.

“Everything is known unto Pharaoh!” Though the High Priest repeated the dogma, his trembling voice betrayed belated realization of its patent falsity. Egyptians are accustomed to obey; we tend to lack practice in thinking the unthinkable. The High Priest, of course, lacked practice in thinking at all.

“Is Pharaoh among us?” Aharun said yet again. “Where is he who knows these things?”

“It appears, O man who calls himself Aharun,” snarled Rameses, “your brother knows these things. Is your brother Pharaoh?” He looked angrily at me. I kept silent. I could feel drops of sweat coalescing upon my forehead.

The older Bedouin’s hand moved again inside his robe. I tensed a little, still half-watching for a weapon, but the old man moved only slowly. As he withdrew his hand I saw he held a small golden sculpture. Not until he slotted the precious figurine into the head of the brass rod and stepped back from it did I become aware what I was looking at.

Of course I knew the emblem only by repute, though many old frescoes showed it. The sacred serpent-headed scepter, holy symbol of rightful rule in Egypt, lost since the time called *The Disorder*, had been returned to the royal palace.

“It would seem so,” Aharun replied softly.

Rameses leaped to his feet. “Who are you? Where did you get this?” he demanded of the old Bedouin.

Aharun smiled icily. “My brother received it long ago. At his coronation. When he inherited the rule of Egypt from his father Amenhotep.”

As Aharun spoke these words, the elder Bedouin cast off his coarse outer cloak, revealing beneath it the ceremonial robes of the notorious, and supposedly dead, Pharaoh.

Several of the high courtiers dropped to their knees and moaned in terror. I struggled to remain upright and immobile, watching fearfully for what Rameses would do.

“Akhenaten!” he hissed.

The elder Bedouin now spoke for the first time. His voice was deep and slow, like the waves of the sea. “I believe it is true that the law now prohibits mention of my name.”

I understood at last why he’d been reluctant to speak sooner. I was old enough to remember the rolling bass tones that had once been called *The Voice of Aten*. I’d not thought to hear that voice again this side of the grave.

“This is impossible!” Rameses face was ashen. “Are you a ghost? Have you returned from the tomb?”

“Can a man return whence he’s never been?” asked Aharun.

“But his death was reported thirty years ago!” Rameses staggered backward until his legs encountered the chair, into which he collapsed like a man suddenly spent.

At this point, I'd no choice but to intervene. Allowing the High Priest to look a fool was one thing, allowing Rameses to do so was more than my life was worth.

"The Great One speaks true," I said. "The army mutinied. The rebellion only ended when Queen Nefertiti announced the Pharaoh's death."

"Akhenaten's only son Tutenkhaten..." the High Priest added, quailing as a sudden look of venom flashed from the eyes of Rameses, "... er, that is to say, *Tutankhamen*, died young, before all the insurrections had been quelled. That was when Ay took it upon himself to restore order."

"Cousin," said Akhenaten calmly, addressing Rameses, "I must again remind you and your High Priest of the law. Not only do you both illegally speak my name but you sit in the presence of The Son of God."

Involuntarily, Rameses sprang to his feet, then looked furtively to each side to see if we'd noticed. I was ready for that glance. My eyes were on the floor. I knew Rameses was no god.

"Ay knew the truth. That I was not dead but in self-imposed exile in Sinai," Akhenaten went on. "I instructed him to remain silent and assume the rule himself."

Rameses looked aghast. Of the two central characters in the audience chamber, he was the one more resembling a ghost.

I had to challenge Akhenaten's words once more. "Supposing we were to accept your wild claim—not that we've any intention of doing so—what do you want now?" I looked for the slightest sign of weakness in the old man's face. I saw none.

The weakness came instead from another quarter. "Have you come to reclaim your throne?" Rameses whispered.

My muscles tensed involuntarily. I couldn't prevent myself glancing towards the door. If at that moment armed men had flooded into the chamber in support of Akhenaten, I couldn't easily have decided which side to choose. Yet the moment passed.

The former Pharaoh shook his head sadly. "Cousin, you command an army. Had I wished to reclaim my throne, would I have come unarmed and with so few followers?"

"I wouldn't, in your position... your alleged position, that is."

"And look at me. I'm eighty years old. Do you suppose I would've waited so long?"

Rameses' sigh of relief was unfortunately audible. Gods should have more self-control. He began to recover some vestige of color. "So why *have* you come? What do you want?"

Akhenaten sighed, motioning the other Bedouin forward. "Aharun is High Priest of Aten. He is my brother, as are all my fellow-worshippers. You should know that the priests of Aten now bear the honored title of *Levites*, or 'holy porters', having carried the Ark of Aten away into Sinai when Egypt rejected us. He will explain."

"It's a little thing," Aharun said. "The Hyksos who share my brother's blood also share with us our worship of Aten. They grow weary of servitude. Yet they are a peaceful people. They wish only to leave Egypt and rejoin their brothers who've already crossed the desert back to Canaan. We Levites want to accompany them."

"That's all?" Rameses was astounded.

"All," replied Aharun. "You will be Pharaoh. The Son of God whose throne this is by right, whose palace you reside in, whose army you command, whose Empire you rule, leaves all these things to you. Even this," he indicated the serpent-headed rod, "his holy scepter. He has chosen the Hyksos and the Levites to be his people and he'll lead us to Canaan, there to live out his few remaining days."

This offer felt too good to be true. I risked a further intervention. "He wants no title? No treasure?" I asked.

"On the contrary. He will obey the law. His former name shall never be spoken. Other than those in this room, none shall know he did not die thirty years ago."

The eyes of Rameses lit up with cupidity and he stretched wide his arms. No, Rameses was no god; he wasn't even a man of noble spirit. My lord and master was an avaricious charlatan.

"Then to this, I consent," he declared with enthusiasm. He turned to me. "Vizier, you'll prepare a papyrus giving instructions for the Hyksos slaves to be freed."

"Your servant, Great One." I bowed low.

"Since as you say, cousin, the law forbids the use of your old name," Rameses continued affably, turning back to Akhenaten, "perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell me by what name you're now known? It will have to go in the letter ordering the Hyksos released into your custody."

"My brother is *The Son*." Aharun's voice was reverential. "He needs no other name."

"But a great many Egyptians are called the son," Rameses objected. "It's always combined with the name of their patron deity."

In this for once the old fraudster spoke the truth; his own name, derived from Ra-Moses, son of Ra, the Sun, was a typical example. So had been that of Pharaoh Ahmose. Such names were dedications, intended as signs of piety, not lineage.

"We call our god Aten, *The Lord*, because his true name is too holy to be spoken by the mouths of men," said Aharun. "His Son is therefore called simply *The Son*."

"Moses? Just Moses?" Rameses looked puzzled. "What kind of a name is that?"

"My kind," the elder Bedouin replied in his deep voice.

"So be it then," said Rameses, not inclined to argue technicalities when offered a very good deal. "Forgive me if I leave you for a while. My servants shall provide you with refreshment. In a very short time, I'll return with the papyrus."

The Pharaoh-Elect stalked from the room, doing his best to look regal once again. We all followed deferentially in his wake, but as soon as I was through the door I hastened to a little spy-hole from which I could observe the chamber.

I watched Aharun turn to Akhenaten. And I saw then what a god-king really looks like. Robes don't make a god; a true Pharaoh can never be mistaken for an ordinary mortal.

"Will he honor his word?" Aharun asked.

"For now." The deep slow voice of the old man covered another sigh. "In a few days, he'll regret his generosity and decide that if he killed me he could keep his kingdom *and* his slaves. He'll send soldiers after us. We must pass over the Reed Sea before he changes his mind. Once in Sinai, we'll be safe."

I understood at once. I resolved there and then to ensure that any such pursuit should be long-delayed.

"I'll begin assembling our people. You wait here for the papyrus," Akhenaten said. "Follow me as soon as you have it."

"Your will shall be done, my brother," said Aharun.

The man called Moses looked for the last time around the painted walls of his palace. He gazed upon the whole, massive trunks of Lebanon cedar supporting the roof; he looked up at red-stained rafters of fir from forests far to the north of the Great Sea; he glanced around at Minoan pottery, Trojan statuary, gold and silver ornaments on tables of ebony and ivory. All once his.

Akhenaten placed his hand one final time on the royal scepter. He'd made his choice long since; now mentally he made his farewell. Then, with a determined look, he turned and walked away.

*

Do not mourn for me, even though I'm fated to live out my few remaining days in the service of a tyrant and, at the last, to lay my bones within the shrine of an imaginary deity. For I have found the answer to the question the whole world asks.

And rest assured: I have, in this parchment, set down a true record of these momentous events, exactly as I witnessed them on that unforgettable day, so very

long ago. This I, Nebamun, Grand Vizier of all of Egypt, do swear by Aten, the one, the only, true God.

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