

WHAT WE HOLD ONTO

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The author is again delighted to find himself in the pages of *Asimov's* with his second novella, his eighth appearance here to date. "I gave up on writing fiction for seventeen years, before deciding I had to collect another hundred rejections—to prove I didn't have it in me. Ten rejects in, I'd sold multiple stories to *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Interzone*, and *Galaxy's Edge*. So, no surprise, I write about second chances, and a future filled with both disappointment and infinite possibility." Jay thanks his family, his workshops, Griffins, B-Spec and the Mechanics, his editors, and his writer warrior BFF, Celeste, for keeping him together. A task that takes a village. He rants about life and the future at www.jayoconnell.com.

I needed help.

Even though I'm not that kind of woman. I don't do personal trainers, life coaches, social media consultants, masseuses or pedicures.

But when it came to Mom . . . well. I was out of my depth. With Michael out of the picture, the boys at school on the West Coast, and the ParaSoft antitrust suit heating up, I didn't feel like I had a choice. So I found a contractor on TaskMaster. A Simplifier. A Nomad.

I paid for an hour and made an appointment to meet him in a public place, to check him out before hiring him.

Faraday's, a real-time café a five-minute walk from my condominium, was blessedly dark and cool after the trek through the blistering August sun. I pinched my sundress away from my body, letting the cool air circulate against my flesh. At least I wasn't having another hot flash.

The café smelled pleasantly of espresso and toasting bread. Invisible wires running through the huge plate glass windows, conductive carbon nanotubes, turned the place into a Faraday cage, hence the name; cell and network signals couldn't penetrate. A local repeater limited to credit transactions made the paypoint work.

I reflexively checked my feed in my overlays, a newish pair of Serendipity Varihues set to camouflage. The network outage icon pulsed a dull orange. Duh. A headline in my news cache caught my eye, because it was the kind of thing I'd taught my news-agent to exclude; a pair of American tourists had been thrown from the balcony of

their honeymoon suite by one of the Climate Coalition's terror cells. I blinked into it, and caught the name of the hotel in a highlight. Oh. We'd honeymooned there ourselves, Michael and I. They kept sending me coupons. I excised them from my address book. I didn't care if I ever heard from the Belize Paradise Suites again.

I was nervous, which was ridiculous. I blinked up Con's profile from a cache. Tall, lean, muscular, arms folded over the typical Nomad black pajamas, clean shaven with his hair tied back in a ponytail. His smile understated, his eyes curiously shining blue-green in a dark skinned face that gave no clue as to his ancestry. Many Nomads used a carcinoma prevention mod that resulted in dark skin.

But I felt self-conscious beside him, as I'd allowed myself to grow pale, let my dirty blonde hair get age-inappropriately long. Not a fashion statement, mostly inertia, but still.

I waited while the young people around me chatted, or ostentatiously read huge, unwieldy, classic and popular hardcover novels, or simply stared off into space, eyeing cached content in their wearables.

At Faraday's, every wall and table surface was laminated with kitschy print-based memorabilia; from the ridiculous to the sublime. Newspaper clippings, comic book pages, advertising flyers, receipts, hand-written letters, postcards from vacation spots long since vanished beneath the waves.

The barista called out my order—a toasted everything bagel with everything, cream cheese, lox, purple onion, and capers. I retrieved it and walked it back to my table. I tapped my foot and sipped an iced cold-brew coffee.

I glanced up to catch Concord pushing through the door. His photos didn't do him justice. He had high cheekbones, a strong chin, and still clean shaven, no piercings or digital skincraft evident, but then, Nomads seldom displayed such things in public.

The novel readers and starers-into-space were sneaking peeks at him but avoiding eye contact, in that age-old, New England way. Prejudice against Nomads was muted in the commonwealth, and oddly I'd picked a man who could work as a model to help me clear away clutter. He was in great shape. When your body is your only permanent possession I guess you maintain it.

His face lit up as he recognized me from my profile pic.

I felt a shiver, head to toe. Not a hot flash. You know within a minute or so of seeing a man if you . . . you know. Now and then, a guy might grow on you, but in general, that's what it takes. Sometimes you change your mind, the guy is a jerk, but if it isn't there in thirty seconds, it is never going to happen. Con had it. A great deal of it.

He closed the distance between us to take my proffered hand in a firm, warm grip. His skin was rougher than Michael's, but then, he did more with his hands than gesture and type.

"Ms. Bauer?"

"Call me Sophia."

He nodded. "I'm Concord. Or Con. If you like one syllable."

I forced myself to look at him. "Can I buy you coffee?"

He laughed. "I should buy it myself."

The barista, a heavily pierced heavy-set woman, in fact, did seem to be giving him side eye. He got up and walked over and paid cash, stuffing a rather impressive tip into the glass jar next to the sales point reader. The barista was unmoved, still frowning. Had she been outsourced, downsized, displaced by Nomadic labor? Or was she simply prejudiced?

"You've eaten?" I said as he reseated himself, holding a tiny ceramic cup.

He nodded. "I'm good," he said. He locked eyes with me. "I'm sorry about your mother," he said.

I attempted a casual shrug. "She's a hundred and two years old. She's had a good

life." Already, she was creeping into the past tense in my thoughts, even though she wasn't exactly dead.

"She's a pack rat?"

Not really, I thought. The house I'd grown up in had been cluttered, but the clutter represented genuine interests and activities. Arts, crafts, fashion, interest in the world around us.

He noticed my frown at the term. "It's not an insult. I'm just trying to get a sense of what you need me for. You've seen my resume. And my bond. What else would you like to know?"

Concord was bonded for five million; should he somehow steal or damage anything while working for me, the collective would reimburse me that amount, no questions asked.

"I wanted to see if we clicked," I said. He'd folded his hands next to the espresso, his posture relaxed but also detached, as if he was a visitor in this tableau. An anthropologist studying a remote Amazonian tribe.

He nodded, smiling, but said nothing. I flashed back horribly on a few weeks of post-separation panic dating. The phrases, "long walks on the beach," and "I enjoy fine dining," flitted through my mind, blotting out temporarily the ability to think of anything to say.

I no longer wanted my huge reeking bagel. I took a small bite anyway, sending a shower of crumbs, poppy, and caraway seeds cascading down the front of my sundress, which I decided to ignore rather than paw at ineffectually.

"You going to drink that?" I asked inanely, focusing on his coffee.

He picked up the small handmade ceramic cup and took a tiny sip, his eyes closing, apparently overwhelmed by the punch of the oily crema floating on top.

"Very good," he said. He set the tiny cup down carefully, still mostly full.

"You had a brain tumor." My statement came as an unpleasant surprise to both of us. I took another bite of my bagel.

He nodded, his expression flickering for only a moment. The tumor had been in his bio. "Yes. I'm in full remission."

"You used to write code?" Many Nomads were coders. Nomads had to have portable skills.

Another cautious nod. "I still code. But I don't do it professionally much anymore."

"So now you do this Simplifying thing."

"I find it satisfying," he said. "And I'm good at it."

I found myself admiring the muscles in his forearms and his broad, strong hands splayed out on the coffee table. I pushed that thought away. I could have specified a woman in my search, but I had to empty both the storage spaces and Mom's place—the condo she'd moved to after selling the home I'd grown up in—so I'd picked a big, healthy young man.

An entirely practical decision.

I cleared my throat. "I'm not sure, exactly, when I'm going to need you."

"I can help with the paperwork for your mother. With suspension, or termination. I've done that before."

"No!" I said, much too loudly. "No. That's my job."

"I understand," he said.

Now I had to explain myself. "There's no advance directive. No granting of medical power of attorney. No will."

"That makes it more difficult. I'm sorry. I'm here to help in any way I can."

His eyes combined blue and green in complex ways. I didn't know exactly what you'd call the color. The word "exquisite" came to mind. Like most Nomads he didn't use a wearable; he had implants, though I wasn't sure of which generation hardware

he had installed. I suppose he wore UV contacts to stave off cataracts, but I couldn't see them.

"What is your current availability?" I said, to fill the silence, after realizing I had nothing else to say.

"I'm finishing up with another client. I'll be wide open next week."

I'd sorted through profiles for an hour and picked Concord after a lot of deliberation. But I'd known I shouldn't hire him from the moment he'd sipped the espresso. The look on his face had torn something loose inside.

I had a life; two mostly grown kids, a career, a condo, a soon-to-be ex-husband. I'd done the romance thing, the wife thing, was still doing the mom thing, technically. I had zero use for the feelings coursing through my body. They were as meaningless as my hot flashes. I realized I was chewing my bottom lip and made a smile instead.

"I'll call you," I said.

* * *

I went to the gym I'd been avoiding for the last few months and swallowed a maximizer tablet that would multiply the health benefits of the work tenfold.

I synced my overlays to the treadmill and ran through a montage of beaches at sunset, redwood forest trails dripping with dew, echoing stone canyons; I set a filter for places that still existed somewhere on the planet, nothing historical. Nothing that was gone. There was a sadness to those views that ate at me, like lists of recently extinct species. Not motivating.

A little bronze medal from my healthcare group lit up after three miles, and I fell into the cooldown. I stumbled as I slowed and felt the padded grippers of the treadmill catch me before I could smash my teeth out.

Then I sat in the sauna longer than was medically advisable, inhaling the thick steam, thankful, as always, for the little break from reality afforded by leaving the overlays in my locker.

Fresh scrubbed and pink, I took inventory in the changing room's full-length mirror. The women dressing and undressing around me fit mostly into one of two easily visible categories; pre and post baby. I looked good . . . for the post baby crowd. Grading on that curve.

I had empirical evidence that I was still technically attractive to men my age from the overwhelming response to my profile during the horrible dating phase; I'd sorted through hundreds of profiles, only half of whom I would categorize as hopeless losers, basement dwellers, players, and sociopaths.

But I didn't see much attractiveness in the mirror.

I saw only the woman I had been in my twenties, when I'd last dated. Not who I was now, except as a set of defects and slippages. I considered, briefly, again, a few of the cosmetic procedures, which were so common now.

So common. I'd looked at the before and the afters.

Did I want to be an after?

The cats swarmed me when I returned to the condo, skimming figure eights around my ankles as I made my way to the kitchen to split a cup of kibble between the two ceramic bowls next to the ever-trickling cat fountain. Cutie, or as I not-so-secretly called her to my kids' dismay, the Fat One, noisily crunched her bowl down, while Cleo, the Skinny One, turned up her nose and hopped up on the counter to pierce me with her fathomless green eyes. She blinked very slowly.

Cutie had already moved over to Cleo's bowl, scarfing down her portion too, lickity-split. I sighed.

My husband had bought them for the kids. Kids needed pets. I liked cats, but that hadn't been my decision. Yet somehow, I'd ended up taking care of them.

Michael's new lady friend was allergic.

I scratched Cleo behind her ears. Why wasn't she eating? She seemed skinnier than I'd remembered. I ran my fingertips through her short gray fur, as she tilted back her head and purred.

I invoked the hospital's patient cam feed and watched Mom sleeping, intubated but still oddly robust looking. Well. A coma isn't sleep. It's more profound. In another week they'd reclassify her as being in a permanent vegetative state, even though her brain wave activity was ambiguous.

Mom hadn't wanted to talk about death, and it hadn't seemed like she needed to, until she did and it was too late.

She'd been a terrible patient for decades. She'd worn out two sets of kidneys, two livers, and a pair of lungs after taking up smoking at age ninety, but time had caught up with her in the form of SOS—sudden-onset, systemic failure—a poorly understood autoimmune disorder caused, maybe, by mismatched body parts.

People lived longer and longer, but they still died. At 102 she was two years older than the median lifespan for those with Platinium Medical.

She wasn't a good candidate for suspension; there were no near-term SOS cures, so her insurance wouldn't pay for it. She hadn't bought a supplemental policy, which in a way was an indication of her wishes.

But a decade's suspension was painfully almost within reach if we spent her entire estate and added a hundred K or so ourselves. There wasn't enough equity left in our condo, since our low-lying neighborhood had been adjudicated a Sacrifice Zone; we might never slip beneath the waves, with geo-engineering and the MBCA (Massachusetts Bay Climate Abatement) and all that, but if we did, there'd be no insurance payout, and that depressed property values, big time. We'd lost a half million in equity overnight.

Half of our neighbors were underwater on their loans. Ha ha.

Still. We could scrape together the money, though the boys would miss at least a semester of classes while they declared themselves financially independent and applied for loans. . . . I had to make this decision for her. The chance of a spontaneous remission, of the paralysis reversing itself, shrank hour by hour, day by day.

I blinked up her medical chart and punched a graph icon in a grid of stats; today's chance of remission was less than one in a hundred. I could see the line sloping away, downward.

She'd left this up to me. Suspension or cessation of life support. I hadn't been able to find any kind of will or medical power of attorney in her effects. I'd turned her place upside down, looking for something. Anything, that would indicate her wishes. Mom had always kept little secrets, choosing to share her thoughts only when she was sure of them.

It shouldn't have been that hard a decision to make.

But it was.

My wearably tingled, a blink from my eldest, Miles, at Berkley. He loved me and needed money. By the time I'd gotten dressed and ready to go, there was a second blink, from Sky, my baby who'd finished his freshman year at USC. He just needed money. They'd stayed on the West Coast this summer, close to their respective universities, rather than witness up close the dissolution of their parents' marriage. They seemed to be taking it pretty well. The eye rolling, when we'd assured them our split had nothing to do with them, had been reassuring.

The next blink pulsed red, high priority, and was from Mom's storage facility. There had been a roof leak, and one of her units had been affected. I needed to come and document any damage for insurance purposes. I felt a shiver of nausea at the thought.

I blinked Con.

"Are you available now?"

His response was nearly instantaneous. "I can be."

I blinked him the address and told him about the water damage.

"Give me an hour," he replied.

"I'll meet you there."

* * *

My Electra runabout took me to the storage place out on the beltway. It was my Mom's parents' stuff that had been leaked on. Christ. Tons of furniture. Paper. Documents. Obsolete cameras and electronics.

To distract myself from the horror of Mom's storage space nightmare I watched a documentary on Nomads on the windshield I tinted to full opaque as the runabout purred through city traffic. I'd picked a sedate one that didn't focus on orgies and consciousness modification.

A majority of Nomads lived in normative exclusive heterosexual marriages. Well, a slim majority, like 55 percent. The lack of community property did seem to accelerate the process of family creation and destruction; a majority of Nomads were Tribe affiliated, but 20 percent were Globalists, unaffiliated. Tribes were like extended families, consciously created, often around language groupings or vocational, creative, or religious beliefs.

What looked an awful lot like class distinctions separated the tribes; different buy-in amounts, differing health care practices . . .

Nomads weren't exactly communists; the collective worked in many ways like a landless nation-state with high taxes and generous if oddly constrained benefits. It issued visas, interceded for its citizens when they ran afoul of other states, and took care of its sick, elderly, and insane with its own healthcare system.

Child rearing arrangements were variable, and felt odd. Many kids divided their time between birth parents and immersive camp-like teaching retreats that were tribe affiliated. Really it was no weirder than the boarding schools, foster parents, and blended families in the wider world, but somehow . . .

I recalled a quote, an author, who said growing up was the realization we were born in the wrong family.

As my runabout exited the beltway, I watched a scene on a beach on the Pacific coast, on the Olympic peninsula, a huge crackling bonfire at sunset.

The flames were encircled by a group of brightly colored men and women singing in a language I'd never heard before, presumably one of the Nomad tongues, the constructed languages.

Their bodies were sheathed in shifting skins of flowing color, seething forms seeming to leap from individual to individual. The waning sun and the glowing skins rendered their nudity somehow irrelevant.

They were arrayed now in nested circles around the fire, dancing in opposite directions. The circle stopped, creating pairs of individuals facing one another. A log shattered sending a spiral of burning embers into the deepening magenta sky.

The runabout approached an oversized garage door that opened, revealing a large parking area. The vehicle slid into a spot as my eyes focused past the pairs of men and women embracing on my windshield at a silhouette of a man walking toward me, arms folded, peering into the darkened windshield. Concord.

I blinked away the screen, my cheeks burning.

* * *

I climbed out of the runabout, glad that the windshield's display was invisible from outside.

He smiled easily. "So. What are we doing?"

"I need to document damage for insurance purposes. The video feed from the unit is crap."

He nodded.

I led him through a glass door that opened to my thumbprint, preceding him down a series of long, echoing concrete corridors lined with roll-up steel doors. Brilliant LED ceiling panels flicked on as we hit each intersection, illuminating the corridor ahead, and only the corridor ahead; the building knew where my mother's unit was, and it lit the way for us.

The cool air smelled of some pungent pine cleaning solution. Our footsteps echoed off the concrete and steel.

We found Mom's unit beside a huge humming portable dryer packed with glowing red heating coils and whisper quiet fans.

I thumbed the lock, and the door opened, releasing a pulse of moist, musty air. The fifteen-by-fifteen-foot space was packed with furniture and towers of cardboard boxes that thankfully sat on wooden pallets. The floor was warm and just barely damp to the touch.

The furniture was some lightweight pine, stained a warm reddish brown and rubbed with butcher's wax for a dull, pleasantly matte finish. My grandfather had built it; Mom had been unable to part with a single piece. The soft wood was easy to work, light, but not durable. He'd done contract work at the end of his life with expensive hard woods, but the stuff he'd built for his own family had been cheaper; practical. Beautiful in its way, but . . .

Not worth preserving.

I flashed the light from my mobile into a crack between the tightly packed tables, chairs, bookcases, cabinets, headboards. It looked okay at first glance. I breathed a sigh of relief. And then wondered why. If it had all been ruined, I'd have known what to do. Throw it out.

Now what?

"I think you lucked out," Con said. He ran a hand along a nut-brown headboard. "This is nice. Shaker inspired, but not exactly . . . mortised joints . . . pegged . . ." His brow furrowed.

"Someone in your family made this?"

"My grandfather."

"Ah," he nodded, like he'd seen this kind of thing before.

My eyes caught on a series of deep scratches, light colored runnels in a bookcase, which I knew were cat scratches. The wood was so soft.

"It's all beat up. Mom kept offering it to me and my brother, whenever we moved, but it never made sense to use it . . . I mean. I never had a relationship with this stuff."

He nodded.

"It meant a lot to her. Her dad was handy. He made things. Fixed things." Unlike my father, who ignored his physical surroundings. He had been a professor of media studies at MIT until his death twenty years ago. "I don't remember my grandfather much. He was dead by the time I was five."

I felt my eyes well up. My face was getting hot, which seemed unfair. "I have no idea what to do with all this crap."

"You'll figure it out," Con said.

"I can't throw it out while she's . . . I can't throw out . . . her life." I could feel sweat beading on my forehead. I knew I was turning red.

"This isn't her life," Con said quietly.

Hot tears ran down my face stupidly. My nose started to run, too, clear watery snot. I wiped it away with the back of my hand. My nose produced more. I'm a really ugly crier.

"I know that!" I snapped.

Con said nothing. I knew he was nodding. I couldn't look at him. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's okay. I get it. Do you want me to document this?"

I blinked back tears. "Now? With what?"

He tapped his temple.

Oh. Nomad. Implants. Optic inputs. Duh.

I helped him as we checked for water damage, not that he needed it, the stuff was so light; we moved the pieces on a dolly we'd passed near the entrance to well-lit open space in front of a bank of elevators. He walked slowly around each piece, his eyes taking in every detail.

"I can build models. Of all this."

He meant computer models.

"What does that cost? How long does it take?"

He paused for a moment, then blinked at me. I checked his alert in my wearable and reviewed the fee schedule. It was surprisingly affordable.

"This is what Nomads do? With their old stuff?"

He nodded. "Sometimes. I could do the boxes, too. Capture all the paper, photos, negatives. Translate and archive any legacy data . . . there's probably obsolete storage media in those boxes."

"What would that cost?"

"I need to take a peek," he said. "For the estimate."

So we did that. We hauled each box out, razored open the packing tape with a tiny multitool Con produced from his backpack. He glanced at it all, riffling through file folders, tax records, photo albums, postcards, letters, magazines, books, calendars, legal documents, medical records, crates of shiny optical disks, thumb drives, clunky old mobile phones, laptops, ancient, heavy data slates.

He blinked me the estimate. The cost was equivalent to two months' storage for both spaces.

"Do it all," I said.

He handed me an old-fashioned cloth handkerchief from his hip bag. Did he carry snot around until he could wash and reuse it? I didn't care. This one seemed clean. I blew my nose.

"Thanks," I said. Unsure of what to do with a used handkerchief, I stuffed it in my pocket.

Con nodded. "You're welcome."

* * *

I gave Con access to both storage spaces, blinked partial payment to TaskMaster, and contacted my mom's attorney to work through the suspension of life support paperwork, and the prep to emancipate the kids, in case I chose suspension. Wasting precious money on needless legal work because I couldn't make a decision.

I am my mother's daughter.

Then I boxed up Cleo and ferried her to the vet myself, eschewing a pick-up drone I could have afforded. She yowled loudly the entire way, super loud, each wail torn from some vast reservoir of fear and rage hidden away in her tiny kitty heart.

"Yes, Cleo, yes." I patted the carrier on the passenger seat uselessly. "I've been taking care of you for seventeen years, but now, now I'm killing you. The jig is up. You're on to me."

Cleo stopped yowling.

"I'm kidding!" I said.

Cleo was uninsured. Without federal subsidy or mandate, pet health insurance was ludicrously expensive, like the human kind had been once upon a time, though I had childless friends who carried it on dogs, cats, and in one case, a twenty-foot-long reticulated python named Doc.

People without kids tell you how free they are, how easy their lives are, as they saddle themselves with exotic pets and other weird ridiculous responsibilities. People like to take care of small, helpless things. People like to be needed.

The vet was a tall young woman who suggested a battery of blood tests after a brief physical during which she pinned Cleo expertly to the stainless steel exam table while I tried and failed to calm her. The yowling painfully echoing from the tiny room's white walls didn't phase the vet in the slightest.

Did I want to test for things that were too expensive to fix? Yes. Of course I did. They wanted to keep her overnight. I blinked the office partial payment, accepted the woman's comforting but vague blandishments, and left.

I got a blink from Con that he'd processed both storage spaces completely. I voiced him from the parking lot, setting down Cleo's empty carrier. "That was fast. Um. How is that even possible?" I asked.

He sounded tired. "We have the equipment in the collective. It's mostly robotic, the software is in the collective too, of course. I've done this a hundred times."

I digested that. "Have you worked for two days straight without sleeping?"

Silence on the line. "Yes," he said.

Maybe he didn't need to sleep. A mod. But he sounded tired. "Stop it. Get some rest. Don't hurt yourself," I said. "This isn't an emergency. I rent the spaces by the month; they're paid up for three more weeks."

"Okay," he said. "Good to know. But I'm fine."

I could have hung up on him then. I should have. But we'd just wrapped up a big project at GlobalGroup, my insipidly named employer. They snapped up the best and the brightest kids right out of MIT and Harvard and rented them out as consultants to the Transnationals. I didn't consult, but integrated the systems that supported them—analyzed solutions, distilled specs, and wrote patch code.

"Can I buy you dinner?" I heard myself say.

Silence again. "If you want," he said. "But it's not necessary."

"It is," I said. "Necessary."

He laughed. He had a good laugh, not fake, not forced, but not endless and tedious either. Michael had laughed too long. I'd gotten tired of his laugh after about a decade.

"You're the boss," he said.

We made an appointment to eat at a place in Harvard Square after work on Friday; he said he had other business to attend to the rest of the week. I approved his revised bill and blinked more funds to Taskmaster. The runabout ferried me home from the vet's feeling strange. Excited.

I spent the rest of the week after work reading about Nomads, watching documentaries, reading their materials online, feeling unsettled and oddly exhausted. I'd always wanted to travel, but somehow, it had never been a priority; we'd visited the Amazonian rain forest, before the kids, and rented lake cabins in the summer in the Central New York lakes region since then. I hadn't been out of the country in decades. The world I'd longed to see had been vanishing under the waves anyway; if not water, then under tides of human migration, making a mess of things. You couldn't see Venice without scuba gear. And there were plenty of places westerners weren't welcome. For obvious reasons.

Nomads were better tolerated. They'd emerged during the first decade following the climate runaway, the arctic methane pulse. Before Project Svalinn stabilized sea level rise.

In the first decades of the climate crisis wary, skilled displaced people had grown reluctant to sink money into real estate. Hacktivists created the collective, ironically using the stateless currency of the offshore libertarian banking havens. Nomads had

roots in dozens of intentional communities—religious and secular, Israeli kibbutzniks, cohousing neo-hippies. Veterans of Woodstock, Starwood, Burning Man, former followers of Phish, and before them, the Grateful Dead, motorcycle clubs—all evolved and dissolved into tribes within the collective, taking advantage of the landless, stateless infrastructure pioneered by its hacktivist, libertarian core.

They owned virtually nothing beyond the tools of whatever trade they practiced, and even those were technically owned in common and shared when feasible. By convention, no Nomad remained in any contract longer than a calendar year without some special dispensation from the collective. Nomads had learned not to grow attached to places, to permanent structures, to cities. To stuff.

Nation states, eager to outsource their refugee crisis, granted the collective rights if Nomads aided in relief. If it helped their citizens wean themselves from places that needed to be abandoned. Flooded, burned, desertified regions of the planet birthed refugees by the tens of millions as the ongoing climate crisis unfolded. Nomads donated a month a year to ongoing relief efforts, which was called “the Work,” their gift to the world.

Theoretically anyone could test into the collective, with a fungible skill through a work exchange, or you could buy your way in while you developed a Nomadic skill. Of course, you had to donate everything you owned to the collective, first.

But the displaced were given preference. A well-off settled person might end up paying a hundred times what a flooded out subsistence farmer would be asked to contribute. There were around 150 million Nomads worldwide; roughly four million were former North Americans, about 5 percent of the old continental U.S. population.

The Fitness app my insurance company used to dole out wellness discounts interrupted my research to let me know I'd been lying around too long again, and suggested a brisk walk down to the river. I swore and took off my overlays and set them on the nightstand instead. Shamelessly, I napped.

Cutie, the fat one, clambered into bed with me and took her position near my feet, flopping against my calf and stretching out on her side. She made her little mewling cry, which I translated as “I would like to always be eating but barring that, you're warm.”

“If I ran away with the circus, who would take care of you?”

Cutie rumbled against my leg. Saying it out loud, even as a joke, the thought of liquidating . . . everything, sent a shiver of delight edged with nausea up my spine.

Burning the empty nest.

My enterprise and analysis skills were portable. True, a lot of my value resided in my knowledge of legacy systems; I'd take a huge pay cut, joining the collective. It would be a step backward, career wise. Money wise. But I had enough equity in my 401k, even if the condo was now next to worthless, to buy into the collective, even if I didn't test in . . .

“I'd never do it,” I said.

I flashed back on a time when the boys had been toddlers and they'd slept on the bed between us, with the cats tucked in here and there at the edges. The futon platform was only ten inches off the wall-to-wall carpet. When you fell out, it didn't hurt.

They were so big now, my man-sized boy-men. Both towered over my five-foot-six frame. Miles had a pretty girlfriend; Sky, a prettier boyfriend. One of each, Michael had joked.

I missed those little boys, even though I remembered full well how exhausting that time of life had been. Michael had been very useful, then. I missed Mom, with similar reservations, even though technically she wasn't quite dead.

Refusing to cry, I had a hot flash instead. Seriously. Why do we still have hot flashes?

* * *

My soon-to-be-ex voiced me to ask about Mom. He'd gotten along well with his mother-in-law, which was odd, as Mom could be a pain in the ass. When I told him what was going on with her, he cried. But Michael cried a lot. He'd cried when he told me about his new lady friend, too.

"Is there anything I can do?" he said.

"Not really," I said. I left out the "but thanks" I would have added, had Michael been a friend. "I hired a Nomad to help me clear out her stuff. Big strapping young guy."

"Huh," said Michael.

We were both silent for a moment.

"Strapping," he said.

"Yeah."

"Bow Chica, Wow Wow," he sang softly.

"It's not like that!" I snapped.

"I'm sure it isn't. Um. Have you been an asshole to him yet?"

My ears got hot. "What are you talking about?"

"When you like someone, when you first meet them, you act like a total asshole. I guess to test them out? Make sure they're worthy of your friendship? You might want to . . . not do that."

I didn't know what to say. I groaned.

"Oh," he said. "You've already done it. Well. Some people find it endearing."

I laughed. "Who?"

"I did," Michael said. "And do."

Suddenly I didn't want to talk to him. Ever again. Which I knew was impractical. "Sure you do," I said. "Why did you leave me again?"

He sighed. We'd been through this before. I'd never spoken of the sense of relief after we'd had *The Conversation*, but I'd admitted to myself that the breakup was more mutual than unilateral. I'd not owned up to this in so many words.

"You know those dumb movies your feed makes? Those retrospective things, for holidays?" Michael said.

"Of course."

"I watched one on our anniversary last year. Wait. Here it is." He blinked me a link. "Scan it, on fast-forward."

"Why? What am I looking for?"

"Just do it. I'll wait."

The quality of the audio and video at the movie's start was a bit grainy, with moments of blocky compression, but the resolution and quality improved quickly as I scanned through the years.

All the obligatory shots—wedding candids where we both looked like children, though we were in our thirties. Obsolete fashion, huge bulky wearables that made us look like TV cyborgs. Goofy grins. Perfect restaurant meals. Hiking in national forests. Sun blasted on a Caribbean beach, with big goofy drinks with umbrellas in them. We looked clueless. And happy.

Miles was born. There was the photo of Michael's, where I'd been so out of it I hadn't noticed one of my boobs hanging out from that first post-birth nursing. My hair was plastered to my forehead with sweat, but my smile was dazzling. Michael's haggard face registered a single emotion: awe.

I fast-forwarded. We knelt on a hillside looking over the city, a blanket before us, newborn Sky screaming on the blanket in a lime green onesie, Miles touching his nose with his fingertip.

The AI had chosen shots where I was a primary focus, so the years sped by quickly, during the time we'd spent mostly staring at the kids. What the hell was this about?

Then I saw it. My smile. Fading. From a kind of genuine sharing, an openness, to a sort of grimace. Finally, it vanished altogether. I looked back at the camera the way you glare at someone cutting ahead of you in line. There was a little flurry, a montage, of my eyes rolling.

Then, for an instant, the smile was back, in full glory, at a work event a year ago.

Only I wasn't looking at Michael.

"This is bullshit," I said. "You did *not* divorce me for my own good." I tried to remember what our anniversary movie had looked like from my POV, but drew a blank.

I hadn't watched it. Which seemed unfair.

"Just give him that smile," Michael said. "When you're done being a jerk. That was part of my evil master plan. You smiling again."

I felt weirdly ambushed and furious. An incoming call from the vet gave me an excuse to end the conversation abruptly.

The news about Cleo wasn't good. She was seventeen, still a pretty good run for a shelter-rescue kitten. You could buy engineered cats and dogs now with longer life spans, though they were pricey. Michael and I had agreed that there was something wrong with that.

"Is she in pain?" I asked.

"Not much," the vet said.

"What would you do?" I asked.

She answered quickly, as if she was asked this often. "Take her home for now," she said. "You'll know when to bring her back. She's okay for the time being."

"Weeks?" I said. "Months?"

"Days, most likely," she said. "I'm very sorry."

I thanked her and hung up, feeling numb. My eyes stung. I washed my face. I had no desire to keep my date with Con, our first social interaction. But I couldn't figure out how to cancel it without sounding like an idiot.

My mother was dying, but the cat's imminent demise was what was flooring me. I was in denial about Mom. But not the cat. Maybe seeing Con would be a good idea. Maybe he'd take my mind off . . . everything.

* * *

Peaceable Kingdom served fabricated meat in an eclectic array of fusion cuisines, Thai-Tamil, Pan Arabic, Neo-Orbital, French Vietnamese. Nothing was authentic; everything was delicious.

Con met me next to the animatronic tableau in front of the restaurant on Church Street; the proverbial lion laying down with a half dozen cute little lambs, whose heads oriented toward yours, their eyes glistening as they blinked up at you. The lion yawned, revealing huge, gleaming incisors. The place was super touristy. Michael had hated it.

Con grinned, seeming remarkably chipper for someone who didn't sleep. The sleeplessness Mod was rare, associated with seriously reduced life spans, and like most mods, it was forbidden in nearly all health insurance networks.

We shook hands. His grip, warm, strong, made my knees tremble. For real. A tiny bit.

We had to wait at the bar a few minutes to be seated; the place was at capacity, filled with middle-aged people from all over the world dropping their kids off at one of the Commonwealth's dozen major universities. Seared meat, aromatic vegetables, pungent chilies and garlic saturated the air-conditioned coolness. I'd been hot-flash-free all day, oddly.

While we waited for the server to escort us to our table, Con stood so close I could feel the heat coming off his body. He took everything in placidly, a perpetual Buddha

smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He'd nicked his Adam's apple shaving, and somehow, this bit of imperfection was comforting. I resisted the urge to touch the tiny reddened scratch.

I took a half step back from him, and his eyes fixed on mine.

"Sorry," he said, also taking a step back. "I . . ."

He mouthed a soundless apology.

"Personal space!" he said. "I forgot for a second. Where I was."

How could he forget that? I wondered again about what the brain tumor had cost him.

I'd spent an hour getting ready to see him. Put on make-up and took it off, except for my tattooed-on eyeliner, souvenir of a odd moment in my twenties I have yet to regret. I'd settled for a silvery sleeveless top and gray slacks with a low heel. I'd let my hair down and brushed it till it fell in shiny waves to my shoulders. I'd had a stem-cell root treatment that eliminated the threads of gray, one of those procedures everyone did, so while my hair was thinner than it once was, it retained its natural, dirty blonde goodness.

At home in the mirror getting ready, the words that came to mind were that detestable acronym ending with the f-word . . . or a large predatory feline. Suddenly I regretted my eyeliner.

"Bow Chicka, Wow Wow," I murmured.

Con glanced back at me, eyebrows elevating.

"Nothing," I said, clarifying. "I didn't say anything."

He nodded.

Perhaps he had super Nomad hearing? I decided to believe he hadn't heard me, or didn't get the reference, so I didn't have to strangle myself to death in the restroom.

The waitress was petite, beautiful, and androgynous in a way that made my exertions feel like a waste of time; she led us to our table near the back, past the huge circular grilling station. Your blinked-order activated clawed arms that plucked marinated meats and prepped vegetables from bins near the vast circular grill's central well and laid them sizzling on the hot steel that was ridged into wedges to contain juices and marinades; powerful ventilation whisked away most of the out-gassing, but a hint of chili in the air made my eyes briefly blur and tear up. The vat-grown meat could be eaten raw—it was pathogen free—but nobody did that, thank God.

Flashing robot arms tended the cooking meat and vegetables, added spices and sauces, worried at the little crusted-on caramelized bits as they deglazed the surface with plumes of roaring flame. It was fun to watch; the grill was like a huge steam-punk spider. They'd resisted the urge to anthropomorphize the experience, which I appreciated.

I blinked up a Malaysian curried chicken thing with tiny baby broccoli and cauliflower (the entire heads were the size of walnuts, covered in tiny fractal swirls) and added a scoop of zero-calorie brown rice.

For a second, I could see a look of . . . shock? Disgust? on Con's face, before he blinked up a bowl of tofu and sweated Asian greens flecked with slivers of caramelized garlic.

We collected our warm plates and took our seats at a crappy table near the rest rooms. My knee collided with his under the table.

We both said sorry in unison.

"Tell me where you are," he said. "With your mother."

I filled him in on the details; I'd be able to terminate life support when my lawyer finished the paperwork and the Eldercare ombudsman signed off on the request, probably in a day or two. If that was what I was doing. Ditto on the suspension, if I went that direction.

I told him about my kids, how I didn't think they needed to be there, for either

option. They'd spent a lot of time with their grandmother, growing up a short subway hop away from her condo. They didn't need to remember her like this.

Con soaked it in, nodding, looking thoughtful.

The waitress brought us the pitcher of beer I'd ordered, which was larger than I'd recalled them being. The pale ale was delicious, brewed on-site, the glasses frosted with condensation.

I told Con about Cleo, how I was worried about her, too. I told him how tired I was of my job, helping consultants help big companies get away with doing questionable things. Then I talked about Michael. The waitress brought a second pitcher.

I couldn't stop myself. I'd spent my dating life, the first time around, mostly listening. Listening to men. Their hopes, their dreams, their epic struggles; their passions, their hobbies, their professional aspirations. Being careful not to interrupt, distract, or minimize. I never wanted to do that again. By the time I realized I was drunk, I had picked up an unholy head of steam.

"Now you," I said. "Tell me about yourself, Nomad."

His smile seemed genuine. He'd listened and nodded and paid attention better than any therapist I'd paid two hundred an hour.

"Not much to tell that wasn't in my bio."

I raised my eyebrows at him. Sure, I was dressed for a job interview, but I'd expected a little more . . . candor. Authenticity, from the Zen fool traveler dude.

My look got through to him. He laughed. "Okay. Personal stuff. Fair is fair." He sipped his beer. "Doing the work in Viet Nam, there was an accident. A reactor breach. We were exposed. I survived. Raine didn't."

He radiated calm. Acceptance. The smile was gone but he wasn't registering any pain in his facial expression. I couldn't understand it. Grown ups, I guess, processed difficult things? Grown ups got on with their lives.

I wanted to touch his hand on the table between us, slip mine into it. Instead, I asked, "What is your current situation?"

"My situation?"

I nodded, refusing to elaborate. He knew what I meant. Oh God. He had to know what I meant?

"I'm single now," he said, looking like there was more to be said. "And. Well. Single I guess sums it up."

I waited for him to tell me more, and when he said nothing, I gradually began to feel like a idiot. My head throbbed. A tiny bit of blood-warm, acidic beer backed up in my mouth. I was pathetic. My face grew hot, not from a flash; it was just ordinary embarrassment, shame, and humiliation.

"Well, it's a good thing you're a Nomad," I said. "Plenty of fish in the sea." The room was now rotating, I noticed. Not fast enough to be nauseating, yet, but still, the movement felt unpleasant before I remembered I was drunk. I hadn't been this drunk in many years. Or maybe ever. Had I just said "plenty of fish in the sea"?

Con's expression had gone flat. He nodded and cleared his throat.

"I wanted your permission to use your data to build a memory palace." He blinked me a document that showed up in my overlays. The signature required icon blinked red.

"How much would that cost?" I asked.

He shook his head, a flash of annoyance creasing his brow. "No charge," he said. "It's a thing I like to do, sometimes."

Some Nomad thing? I closed my eyes. The room spun faster. "Sure. Sounds great," I said. I blinked the signature button on the document in my overlay without even opening it and blinked it back to him.

That's when I excused myself and wobbled off on heels that seemed suddenly

much higher than they'd been an hour earlier. In the ladies' room, I threw up in a ladylike fashion. I'm pretty good at vomiting. I got nothing on my shoes. Dating, as it turned out, hadn't really changed at all in the last twenty years.

* * *

Miles and Sky called me two days later after work. In their side-by-side windows in conference the pair looked skinny, tired, but robust in that barely twenty-something way.

Miles's make-up was stunning, smokey eyes with green irises that glowed behind bioluminescent contacts, his waist length hair fading from a metallic blonde into vivid tequila sunrise magenta.

"I'm changing my major," he said. "From sequential art to technical theater."

"Big bucks in the theater," I said. "Wise move."

I'd studied theater. It was an old joke.

Sky snorted.

"Game architect is even stupider, you feeble snit," Miles snarled.

My first born was hard-working, empathetic, and loving—with everyone but his little brother—but he calmed himself almost instantly. A trait of his father's, these brief spasms of intense emotion.

Sky scratched the side of his nose with his middle finger, glaring at his brother's window. That one could hold a grudge. He was more like me.

No joke I could make would derail Miles. We'd told them to follow their passions, ground it into their DNA. They'd been stupid enough to believe us.

Sky folded his arms over his olive flack jacket, a synthetic breeze rippling through his close-cropped black hair. His avatar was only loosely based on his appearance. His pink chrome aviator goggles glinted in some dying digital sunlight; the avatar's face was blandly handsome, in that anime hero way. His real face was boney and beautiful—high cheekbones, cleft chin, oddly full lips—but he wasn't fond of it.

"We're flying up," he said. "This weekend. To visit."

"You don't have to do that," I said. The money could be better spent elsewhere. But I wouldn't say no. I wanted to see them. Badly. I sniffed.

"We're sorry. About Gramma. And Dad," Miles said. "Really sorry."

"I know. I'll be fine. I mean, I *am* fine."

"We were thinking you should move to the West Coast. To be near us."

"What?"

Sky nodded, his expression grim. "Yeah. We both think so."

"Your company has offices in San Diego, right?" Miles asked.

I nodded, dumbstruck. What twenty-something young adult wanted their mother underfoot? Where had we gone wrong? Or had we done something right?

"We mean after. After Gramma. After she's gone," Miles added quietly.

"She might not be going any time soon," I said. I told them then. About her missing will, about her potential suspension. About them having to take out student loans, if I went that way.

"Whatever you think is right," Sky said the second after I stopped talking. Miles looked annoyed to have been beaten to the punch. "Yeah. What he said. We'll be fine."

I held back tears, thanked them, blinked them the cash for the trip, and signed off, claiming I had an urgent work issue to resolve.

Cutie galumphed into my lap and I patted her and cried and had a hot flash, all at the same time. That's what I call productivity.

* * *

I had unpleasant voice calls with the Hospital Liaison, the eldercare ombudsman, the hospital counselor, and a social worker affiliated with a government agency I'd never heard of. I said I hadn't made up my mind. I signed a document detailing my

liability for the full cost of the hospital stay past the end of the week. The figure was nauseating. I had to make a decision.

So I went to see Mom in person during visiting hours.

She didn't look all that sick, nestled in her auto bed in the tiny single windowless room. The tubes keeping her alive, one down her nose, one in her mouth, and several hooked to permanent fittings in her chest and abdomen, were shiny, pearlescent—that nanofabricated rainbow look atomically manufactured stuff has. The machinery buzzed, hissed, and gurgled gently. The bed shifted under her, repositioning her body to prevent bedsores, changing shape like a fabric-sheathed amoeba. Her knees rose up, her head pivoted toward me.

She'd kept most of her hair over the years, in a style that hadn't changed in decades, a permed pixie-type thing, wrapping her head in a white frizzy halo. Her skin was deeply wrinkled, as if she had deflated over time, sallow, but you could tell there was life in her yet, somewhere deep inside, life that didn't seem to want to end.

I held her hand for forty-five minutes.

"Oh, Mom," I said. "You should have told me what you wanted."

She made a sound. One of those little sighs, meaningless, but my heart leaped to my throat, and I held my ear to her mouth, trying to make sense out of the exhalation.

She was silent again.

I knew I should sign the cessation of life support documents. Then she sighed and squeezed my hand at the same time.

I did a search; yes, this was just another thing that sometimes happened. It didn't mean anything, necessarily. I couldn't stand being there another second. There was nothing I could do.

I kissed her forehead, aching inside in a way that was new to me. "I'm going to go make a fool of myself," I said. I had another date with Con. His idea. God knew why.

Mom said nothing. Which I took as her approval.

* * *

Con met me in front of the Proprio's on Newbury Street. I'd paid TaskMaster in full, he was no longer my employee, I was no longer his boss.

Proprio's was a chain of telepresence suites; pricey, with advanced haptics, meaning you could touch things in the shared simulated environment. You've seen the vids, the gridded monochrome rapid-printed props and crash test dummy bots, with the goggled and gloved clients milling about; their POV in the split screen, all the surfaces exquisitely rendered, realer than real, the bots they were interacting with indistinguishable from business people. Of course, I'd always had a hard time, telling business people from bots. Hah. Hah.

Con arrived on foot and opened the outer door for me, a solid slab of glass, faintly glowing amber with flickering nature porn panoramas, desert sunsets dotted with towers of eroded stone.

"This has to be expensive," I said, trying not to look annoyed. "I should reimburse you. They're holograms of my stuff, after all."

Con shook his head. "I'd have spent the money anyway. This is for me. A thing I do. I thought you might enjoy it."

"Thanks," I said.

There was a pretty, young non-simulated receptionist inside, which gives you an idea of how expensive the place was. She had a headset and gloves for me. She recommended using their isolating headset rather than my overlays; the rounded goggles were a featureless soft, white plastic with dome shaped earpieces. Weirdly body temperature, they adjusted themselves as I slipped them on, snuggling up just enough to completely seal out the world.

The white skintight gloves also adjusted themselves to fit, flashing through a

series of auto-test textures; I felt glass, metal, bark, earth, grass, paper, ice, and flesh pressed against my fingertips in rapid succession as the blackness inside the headset pulsed blue, and then vanished. Or rather, the audio video feed of the reception area they displayed was indistinguishable from real time. I swung my head back and forth. There was no detectable lag.

She led the two of us down a wide corridor floored in bamboo matting; the wall displays were flat, dimensionless, but the arctic feeds displayed were compelling, endless plains of ice and blowing snow. She left us in front of a pair of wide white doors, suite number nine, and excused herself.

“Why?” I said. “Why do you do this? Make palaces out of other people’s stuff?”

“Sometimes for the money. Sometimes, because I want to. When the stuff I’m imagining calls out for it.”

A thought struck me. “Do you look at everything you image?”

He nodded. “It’s in the contract.”

The one I didn’t read, when I was drinking myself sick.

“Right.” Oh dear God. What juvenilia of mine had he immersed himself in? I’d been so focused on the first storage space, my grandparents’ stuff, I’d forgotten that Mom had been just as nutty about saving everything from my own heavily documented childhood.

Oh. My. God. My teenage journals? On paper, an absurd affectation. Poetry! My songwriting period! My time as a photography major! The inevitable art-school nude self portraits!

My avatar was by default echoing my emotional state; I looked for and found a Poker Face mode. I selected it and Con smiled, detecting the move instantly. Busted.

“You had a good childhood,” he said. “Maybe a great one. I’ve seen many.”

“It’s all so edited . . . curated. Surely you can’t tell.”

He shrugged. “I suppose,” he said. “I like to think I can. My childhood was interrupted. We joined the collective after they abandoned New Orleans. I was nine. I was a little hoarder. Cheap stuff, from yard sales or picked out of the garbage; video game cartridges. Obsolete cameras. I was obsessed with film, vinyl, magnetic tape. The movements inside the players and cameras. The tiny motors and gears . . .”

His expression grew dark. “We lost everything but our lives when they blew the levees, trying to save downtown. We were the lucky ones.”

I blinked up the drowning of New Orleans. The death toll, an estimate, topped ten thousand. One of the world’s most foreseeable disasters, about which the world had done nothing to prepare.

“My father opted into the collective with nothing, which you could do then, by doing the Work. We spent the next fifteen years doing relief, all over the world. Southeast Asia. Bangladesh. Brazil.”

The recitation was oddly paced; it didn’t have that “I’ve told this story a million times” quality. I was fascinated. But he wasn’t answering my question. It just didn’t make sense, him giving away his time, using collective resources.

“I appreciate this, I really do. But I still don’t understand. Why work for free? For me?” I wasn’t sure what I was digging for. But I couldn’t let it go.

Con sighed. What would losing everything do to a person? I tried to imagine it.

“Somewhere inside, there’s this kid who misses his collections. His stuff.”

“That must be embarrassing,” I said.

“It is,” he said seriously. “I’m a terrible Nomad. In more ways than one.”

“I think you’re—” I trailed off. “Nice. Like, ah, super nice. You seem so calm. Nobody I know is calm.”

He was nodding, looking guilty, which made no sense. “Thank you. I think you’re nice too.”

Liar.

"Shall we take a look at 1966?"

Mom would have been six. A nice round century back in time. I nodded, a flutter of fear in my belly. I'd seen this house a few times, according to Mom, before it had been torn down, but I had no memory of its interior. I'd never been inside, though I'd seen snapshots.

He took my hand in his, and the sensation was everything I'd thought it might be, tingling waves of some deep, animal pleasure rolling through me.

I shuddered and followed him through the door.

* * *

We stood on the warm tarmac of a suburban street out of a postwar boom documentary, buttery morning sunlight splashing the tidy white clapboard ranch house nestled in the grassy sward before us. It smelled like late spring, fresh mown grass mingling with the barest whiff of a charcoal barbecue. The yard's single diminutive maple was fully leafed in emerald. The front door was painted a darker, kelly green and sported a shining brass knocker beneath a mullioned window.

The simulation was breathtaking, superior to every immersive experience I'd ever had. How did they do it? Massive oversampling? Super high frame rates? Was it more olfactory, audio, or kinesthetic? I couldn't tell. I was just there. On a deserted suburban street in 1966.

It took me a second to notice I'd let go of Concord's hand. I took a deep breath.

That front door tickled memories that may have arisen from snapshots. My mom said she'd driven me out here, to show me where she'd grown up before it was torn down and replaced by a McMansion. I would have been barely five years old.

Concord stood beside me, rapt, and completely nude, six feet of dark-skinned, sculpted muscle. I glanced at him and then quickly back at the house; he seemed unaware that he was naked, his eyes alight as he basked in the glow of his creation.

"Kit houses were popular the first half of the twentieth cee." Con's voice radiated a strange enthusiasm. "Thirty or forty thousand pieces of pre-cut lumber, drywall, plywood; all the materials for a balloon-framed bungalow or ranch or colonial would fit in a railroad box car. Foundations were mixed and poured locally. Your grandfather built this house in 1960."

He folded his arms across his heavily muscled chest. "This model was called 'The Reliant,' from the 1959 Aladdin Modern Home Catalog. Your grandfather added the sun room hanging off the family room there." He gestured at a smallish outcropping with windows on all sides. "The outer walls and roof went up in three days, not quite 'a house in a day,' as the brochure promised, but still, amazing for the period. Practically nomadic."

I remembered a documentary I'd watched. Nomads doing relief work built, lived in, and left behind contour crafted structures extruded by computer-controlled gantries. The cement was concocted on site, nano stuff and polymers added to the local clay. Roofed in carbon fiber solar cells, the structures went up in hours and would stand for a century. Or so they said.

"I'm toggling off the notes for the walk-through. They're distracting, but you can turn them on later. You can drill into any piece, check its provenance, the receipt for its purchase, see the photograph it's based on, all the documentation. Your mom kept all your grandparents' records, everything, perfectly organized. I can see why she couldn't shred it. It's beautiful. The handwriting alone . . ."

His eyes were shining; I could see he loved this stuff. Junk, the way archeologists reveled in ancient trash dumps. Forbidden fruit, for a people who didn't do clutter.

He looked down at himself and frowned.

"Oh," he said. His image shivered, the inevitable black pajamas abruptly cloaking

his athletic frame. “That was not intentional. A workplace preset. I apologize.”

“No charge for the show?” I asked, pleased that I’d left my avatar in poker face mode.

Con looked genuinely distressed, running his hands through his hair, eyes closed.

“I’ve never done a walkthrough with a client. I tend to just, um. Deliver the model and move on.”

“Oh,” I said. “Do you ever stay in touch, with clients?”

“No,” he met my eyes. “I mean. I haven’t. I don’t usually.” He gave himself a little shake. I found myself wishing I’d let myself get a better look at his body. I’d not get the chance again.

“Let’s go inside,” he said.

* * *

The gestalt as we entered the living/family room was disorienting, like walking into a game world set in a black and white sitcom—but it was in color. Because life is in color.

The hues here were mostly earth tones; the scuffed hardwood floors, goldenrod-painted walls, the artless, heavily worn fabric rug covering the floor in a twisting beige on brown spiral. A big freestanding television shared the wall to my right with a brick fireplace behind bronze-clad glass doors. Gold fabric covered speakers flanked the set’s twenty inch milky gray tube. Beside it another furniture-esque object, the hifi, shared the television’s graceful lines and golden speakercloth, its hinged lid propped open to reveal a platter the size of an apple pie stacked with black vinyl record albums.

The lingering scent of baked glazed ham and fried cabbage and onions curled in my nostrils. Mom had hated onions; she’d said her mother put them in practically everything. The room felt like home, which was ridiculous, because I’d never lived here, never seen a TV or hifi like these IRL. We’d played the vinyl records we’d collected with a laser, not a tiny needle scraping a groove.

I settled into the slightly lumpy softness of an upholstered sofa whose yellowed colonial themed print matched the two wing chairs flanking it on either side. I set my heels on the coffee table, a thick curved slab of cool lacquered wood strewn with slick magazines and a boxy TV remote the size of a deck of cards.

I shivered. The lonely house evoked the Christian rapture, or some other weird holocaust. There was a feeling, that people were nearby, just out of sight. But forever out of reach. My back pebbled into gooseflesh. Con kneeled to flip through stacks of LPs stored beneath the hifi cabinet. He found one and slid the liner-wrapped disk out of the cardboard sleeve, which read *Time Out Take Five* by the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

I touched the TV remote, picked it up, toggled the power switch. The TV sputtered on like an old man awakening from an unplanned nap, a glowing spot of brilliance blooming into a jittering image which sharpened in seconds into Ed Sullivan introducing four mop top lads from Liverpool.

“That’s a cheat,” Con said. “1964, not 66. But it’s iconic.”

I flicked the channel. A balding man in a gray suit (well, the TV was black and white, everything was gray) was talking about project Gemini, pointing at a painted graphic on an easel of a man joined to a space capsule shaped like a badminton shuttlecock by a snaking umbilicus.

“Gemini 12. That really was ’66. Buzz Aldrin’s first spacewalk.”

I shut off the TV, which frizzled back to a milky gray. Con dropped the hifi’s needle onto the Brubeck, flooding the room with a cacophony of hissing, fizzling pops that quickly resolved into a warm saxophone as the needle spun through the first few seconds of the damaged groove. The music dimmed as I led us through the open arched doorway to the kitchen, which was outfitted in matching olive green appliances: a fridge freezer with freezer in the bottom, stainless steel sink stacked with a

few earthenware dishes, a free-standing dishwasher covered in heavily scuffed butcher's block, a four-burner stove with a big analog clock built into the backstop. Clean but not new-looking, the enameled surface was lightly patinaed with fine scratches from scouring with steel wool. I ran a finger along the inside of the exhaust hood over the stove top and felt a thin film of grease build up on my fingertip. I wiped it off on my slacks.

I went from room to room in a kind of daze. The contents of the storage space felt strangely alive here. A mediocre oil painting of a donkey and cart seen through an adobe arch caught my eye in the dining room. My mom still had the original hanging in her living room. She knew it was a terrible painting, but she loved it anyway.

Con followed me from room to room, saying nothing as I explored the space. I picked up stuffed animals, spools of thread, books. I played with an audiocassette player I found on a desk in my mother's brother's room. Uncle John who had died before I was born, a military casualty in peacetime, his fighter jet plunging for no known reason into the South China Sea.

I flipped through a stack of audiocassettes in hand-labeled plastic boxes beside the player.

"Your grandfather told stories about a squirrel. Did you ever hear them?"

"I heard one once," I said. "There are more?"

Con double-tapped the tape that spat out a glowing window with a scrolling list of audio files. Nutty the Squirrel Goes to School. Nutty the Squirrel Makes a Friend. Nutty the Squirrel did Lots of Things. Nuttily.

"You can play the tapes on this, or access the files through a browser." He backed out a level, and I saw directories for photos, documents, books, films (no video, digitized super 8 and 16 mm) audiotape—cassette and reel-to-reel, and vinyl.

"It's all here," he said. "There are transcripts, too. It's keyword searchable, of course."

The master bedroom was twice the size of the kids' rooms and had its own private bath and a small walk-in closet packed with neatly hung clothing, the right side men's suits, the left side colorful women's dresses and pantsuits.

A giant mirror above the low dresser revealed the two of us, interlopers from the future, the towering black-pajamaed Zen warrior and the pale, petite, stunned-looking woman at his side. The dresser doubled as a vanity, and was covered in woman stuff; lipsticks, hairspray, jewelry boxes open and overflowing with silver and turquoise.

"There's a Nomad thing," he said. "When you clear a space, you pick an object as an icon. Something small you can carry with you. Jewelry is good."

I picked up a chunky silver necklace. Con frowned. "Too big," he said. Then he laughed. "You're not a Nomad. I'm sorry. I'm being ridiculous."

"What do you carry with you?" I asked.

He was silent for a moment. "Maybe I'll show you sometime."

Embarrassed that I'd crossed some cultural red line, I looked away from him, back at the queen size bed neatly made with a checkerboard quilt, the enclosed headboard packed with books and magazines.

"Check this out," Con said.

He slid back a panel in the headboard which revealed a folded knitting project of some sort. I reached in and tugged it out, the needlepoint matrix rough against my fingertips, a huge oak tree half rendered in fuzzy yarn pixels, muted greens and browns.

"That's not it," he said. The panel he had slid had three dowels set in an oval opening; he grasped the center dowel and shoved it down into the hole that held it, and the headboard clicked. A pane of wood had pivoted underneath.

"Abracadabra," he said.

I pressed it open, revealing a secret compartment. I groped around inside. It was empty, nothing, no texture, no dust, just perfectly smooth body temperature surfaces.

"Birth control," I whispered.

"What?"

"This was where my grandparents hid their birth control. There were secret compartments in all the furniture." I felt a tightening in my chest. My heart beat a little faster. "Did you find anything? In any of the compartments?"

"No," he said. "I made this piece from blueprints, but I checked the compartments for the pieces in storage. There was nothing inside."

I stared at the bed.

"My mom still uses this bed." I grabbed him by one arm, sinking my fingers into the flesh of his bicep. "It's in her condo. I never looked inside the compartment."

"Oh," Con said. "Oh!"

* * *

Con and I took my runabout to Mom's place. He'd smiled at my gushing over the quality of the simulation. I'd felt embarrassed somehow, asking him to empty the contents of his backpack, so I could see what he carried, see his icons.

"I was going to ask you to image the stuff in here, too," I said ten minutes later, as I tapped the code into the keypad that let us into the one bedroom efficiency in the Fenway Assisted Living Tower.

"I can't. I'm so sorry." For a half-second, I thought he might put his hand on my shoulder. But he didn't. "The Work. I'm overdue for a tour."

"Oh," I said. Right. He had a life, and work to do. As did we all.

"I can make a referral," he said.

"No need. I can find someone myself." My voice sounded brittle in my ears. My God I was obvious.

Having canceled the cleaning service, Mom's place was exactly as I'd left it. The real horrible painting of the donkey and the arch graced the wall beside the grandfather clock, the Waterbury Regulator, which hadn't worked in decades. This had been my grandfather's, a real clock maker's clock, the clock by which all other clocks in a clockmaker's shop were set.

Mom's place was just as eerie as my grandparents' bungalow from the sixties. Mom would never come back here. I'd never find her asleep in the big automatic chair by the balcony, a slate in her lap. Mom had often left the sliding glass doors to the balcony open, when the weather wasn't awful, and listened to the roar of the crowds at Fenway Park percolating across the hissing highway ten stories below. You could just barely glimpse the corner of right field from her balcony.

I hadn't made her bed, and Mom had been between maid services, so her sheets were still rumpled, the quilt flipped aside, not the same quilt as the one in the simulation. This was one I'd made for her when the kids were young, to replace the worn out one she'd made once upon a time.

Con shadowed me silently, a comforting presence in my peripheral vision.

I slid the headboard panel into position with difficulty, the board sticking in its groove, and pushed down on the dowel. Nothing happened. I pushed harder, and the compartment below cracked open.

The thumb drive inside was old, and it was shaped like a human thumb. The kind of gag my mom's father would have loved. I'd been told he was a chattering teeth, nose-and-glasses kind of guy.

Con smiled. "That's an icon," he said.

I pressed the nail in, which pushed the old, chunky connector from the red-painted severed bottom of the thumb. I had to root around in a desk drawer to find an adapter that slimmed the clumsy connector down to the shiny metal peg that I plugged into

Mom's slate.

The drive was encrypted. A password window popped up. The cheap, decades-old piece of plastic didn't use a biometric, of course. I tried my father's name; he'd been the love of her life, and when he'd passed she'd never looked at another man that way. Not something she'd ever lamented, either. She insisted she'd gotten the best deal imaginable. Then I tried typing my name, and pet names. Street names. Birthdates. My kids' names. Nothing worked. Panic crept in, and with it, another damned hot flash.

I wiped sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. Con handed me another clean handkerchief, reminding me I hadn't returned the one he'd given me earlier in the week.

"Can you crack it?"

Con took the slate from my hands, tapping into the drive. "This was last modified six weeks ago; it's modern encryption. Mind if I try guessing her password?"

Did he really think he knew my mother better than I did? He'd captured everything. Looked at our lives from the outside. Maybe it gave him perspective. He typed the word "prunella," an infuriating nickname my mom had used on me when I was a toddler. I'd loved prunes. The name didn't work.

I sighed.

He tried again, with the initial cap, and the drive blossomed open, revealing two documents.

"She told that Prunella story a lot," Con murmured, handing the slate back to me.

"Yeah. I remember."

The medical power of attorney was there, and a last Will and Testament. I opened the first, my heart hammering in my temples.

Mom didn't want to be suspended. Period. It didn't matter to her if a projected cure was right around the corner (and it wasn't), she wasn't interested. I looked for something more personal, some letter or note or video file, but there was nothing there but the legal docs. I had to remind myself that she hadn't planned on dying. The relief I felt was short lived, a momentary spasm of release that faded into a new horrible sensation, like someone compressing my ribcage.

"My mom is *dying*," I said.

Con nodded.

"I wasn't going to let her," I whispered. "I was going to suspend her. Now I *can't*."

"I know," Con said. "I'm sorry."

"My kids are flying in," I said. "They'll be here tomorrow." I sniffed but avoided rubbing my nose, not wanting to collect another handkerchief from Con. "Can you, um, recycle the contents of my spaces? Get rid of it all?"

Con nodded gravely. "You don't want to save anything?"

I thought of the house in 1966. My childhood, the contents of the second space, hadn't been assembled into a palace; it existed as a file view with thumbnail icons inside a browser. Did I want a palace? Of the house I had grown up in? I wasn't sure. The thought of pawing through it, deciding what to keep, what to save, was intolerable.

"Just get rid of it. We've saved enough," I said. "Thank you."

A silence opened up between us. Con looked like he wanted to say something. I hugged myself and didn't cry.

"I should be going," Con said. He didn't move. He just stood there, looking down at me with compassion shining from those exquisite, absurdly green eyes. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand.

"Bye," I said. I wondered what he did exactly, in the Work. Instead I asked, "Am I crazy or do you like me?"

He smiled. "Are the two exclusive?"

I resisted the urge to say assholeish things. "Could I see your memory palace?" I

said, wondering if the request was completely out of line. Why didn't I know that? "You saw mine."

I'd learned to read his minimalist facial expressions; I was making him nervous, I could see it at the corners of his mouth, a tiny notch between his eyebrows.

"We don't . . ." He sighed. "It's not a Nomad thing. To share them."

Did he mean with settlers? Or at all?

"They're a part of letting go. An adaptation, to terrible loss. But they're another place people get stuck. I get stuck."

I'd read of nostalgia freaks inhabiting augmented reality skins, and their psychosis when they forgot they lived in a dream.

"Here," he said. He'd blinked me an invitation, a little envelope with a red seal. "It's a pass. To my palace."

"I thought you didn't share them."

"I'm an imperfect Nomad," he said.

And suddenly it hit me again as I eyed the row of interface icons in my overlays. The will. Mom's last wishes. I found Mom's slate on the network and copied the file into my cloud.

Con could see the pain on my face. "Would you like me to stay while you call the hospital?"

"No," I said. "No, thank you."

I realized I could lose the documents. Delete them. I could chuck the drive down the garbage chute in the hallway. Only Con would ever know. If I wanted to suspend Mom, I still could.

Our parting was as awkward a moment as I could recall having in years. We ended up shaking hands.

After I'd closed the door I stood for a while, eyes closed, inhaling the scent of Mom's place, a mix of air freshener tinged with the barest whisper of her lilac-esque perfume, which I guess came from the unwashed bed sheets. I opened the fridge and stared at a half-full jar of black olives for a solid minute. I checked her kitchen cabinets. She had four boxes of an orange-spice tea. What was I going to do with that? A creaky drawer was full of age-stained kitchen clutter; tarnished garlic presses and coffee scoops and mismatched measuring spoons.

I blinked the liaison named in Mom's documents while poking through a drawer full of cloth napkins and wicker placemats.

The liaison voiced me a minute or two later. She said all the right things. I asked when this should happen and was told that if we wanted to say goodbye, I should come by tomorrow morning. I didn't want to postpone it so the kids could be there. This was nothing they needed to see. I thanked her. Then I crawled into Mom's unmade bed and fell abruptly into a leaden, dreamless sleep.

* * *

I awoke with a foul taste in my mouth at three A.M. and drove home, trying to work a crick out of my neck. I'd slept on it funny.

I'd been blinked a video explaining what would happen when they cut off life support, but I didn't watch it. I read the transcript instead and looked at the table of outcomes as they intersected with my mother's chart. There was a 5 percent chance of her not dying when they removed support.

Of course, that's what happened. She didn't die. But she didn't wake up, either.

I refused to see the counselor afterward.

* * *

After the not dying, I waited at home for the kids, letting the runabout pick them up without me. It would barely hold them and their luggage; we could save a cab fare.

Cutie stropped against my legs, demanding sustenance, and I fed her. Cleo didn't come at the sound of the kibble rattling in the bowl. I found her under the sofa in the living room curled in a little ball. She opened one endlessly deep green vertical irised eye and peered into me. I picked her up gently and set her in my lap. Late afternoon sun fluttered through the leaves of the tall birch in the courtyard, dappling the bookshelf wall of the condo. Michael and I had been into paper books, and vinyl, for a time, though I think what we'd loved most was the hunt, finding the things in the vanishing bookshops, in the yard sales, abandoned in boxes set out on the curb. We had yet to divvy them up.

I confess, I'd read ebooks of volumes I owned on paper because locating the book on the huge shelf was too much work.

I felt the rise and fall of Cleo's chest, the warmth in her fur. Ten minutes later the doorbell chimed. Sky had always loved doorbells. He pressed them even when he had a key. I didn't get up. The condo recognized the two of them and unlocked itself. The front door swung open.

I met their eyes and then looked down at Cleo. The boys set down their bags and sat on either side of me on the sofa, our hands joining on Cleo's warm fur. She wriggled and purred but didn't open her eyes. She vibrated softly for ten minutes and then grew still.

Miles cried extravagantly, clutching at me while I ran my hands through his long colorful hair, which had the effect of shutting off my own tears as I consoled him. Sky was silent, but his nose turned beet red. He held my hand. We sat together on the couch until the sky outside the courtyard faded to indigo. The condo switched on the indirect lighting, and I told it to shut it off. We sat together in the dimness until Sky apologized and said he was starving.

Con messaged me, a short note, saying he'd taken care of the contents of both spaces. They'd been recycled. Whatever that meant. I didn't want to know. My grandparents' stuff, the stuff from my childhood, was gone. I could look at it, if I wanted to, but I wasn't carrying it around anymore. I felt a spasm of release, lightness, an exhilaration tinged with loss. My sketchbooks. My terrible poetry. The comforting feel of the lined paper under my fingertips. No. It was good. It was gone.

We were getting ready to go out to eat when the hospital called—the liaison, who sounded oddly worried to tell me that Mom was now awake.

* * *

On the way to the hospital I blinked Con an ICU access, with no note, no explanation, just the permission to meet us there. I resisted the urge to drill into Mom's chart and check the projections, what this spontaneous remission meant, longer term.

I just wanted us to have a moment together.

Mom was sitting up, or her bed had propped her up; either way, she was down to a single shining tube running down her nostril, and the modular bank of machinery beside her bed seemed to have slimmed. The hairdresser had yet to arrive, but she'd managed to finger comb it enough to look something like her former frizzy-haired self.

Mom's face brightened, decades falling away with her smile, and there were awkward bent over hugs and kisses, and many things said so banal they don't bear repeating. The boilerplate of human emotion. We loved each other. We were happy to be together. The boys' lives on the West Coast, by their accounts, were all sunshine and good fortune.

When had they learned, exactly, to tell these sorts of kind lies? It didn't matter. Mom beamed with exhausted delight. She praised them, and lectured them on the joys of perseverance. She'd always known they'd take the world by storm. She indirectly took credit for how well they'd done. They'd gotten everything they needed

from their mother. But she was the one who had given it to me.

The door slid open behind me. A strong hand whisked the plastic privacy curtain back.

“Who is he?” Mom blinked up at Concord. Her eyes narrowed to slits. “Why is he wearing pajamas?”

“My name is Concord,” Con said. “I’ve been helping your daughter.”

She took his offered hand and held onto it, a sly smile slowly creeping across her wrinkled face. “Dear lord, he’s pretty,” she said finally, still staring. “Is he stupid?”

Snorts of poorly stifled laughter erupted from Sky and Miles. Mom had always been blunt. After she’d turned a hundred, she’d gotten worse.

“He’s not stupid,” I said. “He’s amazing. He’s been wonderful.”

Miles and Sky shared a look. Con seemed agitated, avoiding my gaze. “It was nice to meet you,” he said. “I don’t want to intrude on family time. I’ll wait in the lobby.”

I’d wanted him to stay, to talk about the house on Pleasant Street, but he was gone before I could say a word.

“What did you need him for? Don’t tell me you’ve emptied my unit,” she said. “I wasn’t asleep that long.”

I shook my head, experiencing an odd mix of happiness, relief, and irritation.

“What’s he for, then?”

“The storage spaces. Your parents’ stuff. My kid stuff.”

Mom harrumphed. “Nonsense. I got rid of that junk months ago,” she said. “What are you talking about?”

In the conversation that followed it turned out my mother had paid a college student to donate the contents of both spaces to charity. She’d removed a handful of items as keepsakes, which were in boxes in her closet. The student had assured her that she’d retrieved what I wanted from the space with my childhood in it and had it delivered to Michael. She’d done all this while I was away at a technical conference and not thought it worth mentioning when I returned.

Mom had been screwed. She hadn’t been closely reviewing her bills for years. She paid for top-notch identity theft protection and glanced at the line items at tax time. She hadn’t noticed the auto-pays to the storage facility continuing. She should have hired a Nomad.

“Well, crap,” she said after we’d worked through the details. “I’m sorry about that.” Her expression softened uncharacteristically. “I know this has been hard on you. You’ve had a tough year.”

Her eyelids drooped. A sigh rattled through her, but the monitor at her side didn’t emit a warning, so I choked back a wave of panic.

“I wanted to say thank you,” I whispered. “For being a great mom.”

She shook her head without opening her eyes. “No. You don’t.” Her eyes opened and were strangely clear. “That’s ridiculous. You don’t *thank* me. I was always doing exactly what I wanted. My whole life. Understand? We didn’t *have* to have children. We wanted you.”

She closed her eyes again. “And you turned out fine.”

I produced Mom’s overlays from my handbag. I’d loaded the model of the house on Pleasant Street. There would be no haptics or olfactory notes, and the resolution in Mom’s aging Orinoco Immersives was far from state of the art. I left them on an end table with the plastic water pitcher. Mom didn’t notice as her eyes were closed.

“Check out the house on Pleasant Street,” I whispered. She nodded. It was time to let her sleep. We took turns kissing her goodbye.

Retrieved from the lobby, Con said, “You’re a fortunate woman, to have this time with her.” His eyes were unfocused, his face oddly slack. “You have no idea how lucky you are. But that’s not your fault.”

It seemed a strange thing to say to someone with a gravely ill parent. He tagged along as I stopped in for a meeting with the liaison, keeping the kids company in the waiting area.

You might think that a ten-day coma would warrant a conversation with the human doctors handling my mother's case, but then, you'd be wrong. Their time was much too valuable to be spent with bystanders. I wasn't a caregiver, and I would never be. If everything went well, my mom would be able to move back into her unit in a week, maybe two.

Since getting Mom's documents, the liaison had grown even more irritatingly upbeat. "She's going to need an RRU. It's covered under her insurance."

"What's an RRU?" I asked.

"A med drone; a rapid response unit."

"Then say 'med drone.' Don't use cryptic acronyms."

She was immune to my bile. "Of course," she said. "Sorry."

I wanted to ask her about Mom's prognosis, but I knew it was all in her charts; every statistic, every scenario. All the odds. There was nothing about my Mom that she knew that I couldn't discover on my own, laid out in colorful infographics.

"It's wonderful that you were able to find the directive," she said. I nodded. Yes, my mother's decision to die the next time she coded was fabulous. I blinked her an approval on the RRU, shook her hand, then collected my kids and Con from the waiting area outside her office.

The runabout wouldn't hold all four of us, so we walked home. It was only a mile and a half, from Beth Israel to Cambridgeport, and the heat wave had broken. A sea breeze had wafted in, bringing with it a delightful autumnal cool and the tang of sea salt. In a few more days the city would be swarming with students returning for the fall term, but for now, it was depopulated, just handfuls of students or tourists on the sidewalk, ambling by, lost in their wearables, or speeding past on motorized scooters or bicycles.

I blinked payment to the hospital's parking garage and had the runabout drive itself home. As we walked, my kids pestered Concord.

"It must be terrible, spending your life in just the one outfit," Miles said. My boy lived for fashion.

Con laughed. "This is a work uniform. I've authored hundreds of skins."

"That's programmable skincraft," Sky said.

"Don't explain things," Miles snapped. "I knew what he meant."

"Show us one," Sky said.

I sighed. Miles groaned. "Sky, please," I said. Sky's social skills left something to be desired.

"What?" Sky said. "It's not like I asked him to take his shirt off."

Con looked bemused. "Okay. Right. Something dramatic. Oh! Here's an oldie. My father gave me this one." He furrowed his brow, and his face grew darker, losing all warmth. As we stared the color drained away leaving only an inky, matte black, washing away the contours of his face. His eyes, electric blue in the darkness, were surreal. He closed them, becoming a silhouette.

Stars emerged, a rainbow hued nebula spreading and shifting over his face, neck, and hands. I'd wanted to ask him about his tribe but hadn't had the nerve. Something about the star field felt familiar.

"Space. The final frontier . . ." Sky said in a stentorian baritone. Miles punched him in the shoulder. Sky punched him back.

"You're an Alphan?" I said, inserting myself between them.

"Infinite diversity in infinite combinations," Con intoned, steepling his fingers under his chin, eyes still closed. "No. Well, Dad was. I don't practice. I'm only culturally Alphan. I'm Globalist. Unaffiliated."

“Do you have a shunt?” Sky asked. Miles groaned again.

Con lifted his shirt from his waistband to reveal a metallic fitting where his navel should have been on his flat stomach. The device allowed him to live off pressurized nutrient cartridges that eliminated the need for, ah, elimination. One of the reasons Nomads were so useful in relief work. They could survive with practically no infrastructure. Did he have blood-cooling and warming implants as well? I couldn't ask.

Sky reached out to touch the metal fitting but Miles slapped his hand away.

“No hitting,” I said reflexively, before Sky could retaliate.

“Right,” Miles said. “Mom, Sky and I had a thing we were going to do for a few hours. Maybe we could hook up later for dinner?”

“What thing?” Sky asked. “We have a thing?”

“Shut up,” Miles said. “You're an idiot.”

And after a blinkable beat, Sky nodded his head. “Oh. Right. The thing.”

* * *

There was this lonely little park a few blocks from our condo toward the river that commemorated an unimportant battle during the Revolutionary War, a grassy circle ringed with a cast iron picket fence. Real cannons and flat cast iron cutouts of soldiers were scattered around the park's periphery. Nobody ever came here. Cambridge was full of inexplicable public art weirdly off the beaten path, in lonely places near the remnants of obsolete infrastructure.

One of the oldest MIT freshman dorms rose up on the other side of the commuter rail tracks. It looked something like a grounded alien spaceship, a giant tarnished metal trapezoid speckled with little square windows, a self-consciously ugly millennial construction nicknamed the Spongebob Squaredorm, after an old cartoon character. A trash collection drone hummed by dangling a huge transparent sack of litter. It tarried to snatch a crushed coffee cup from beneath a nearby cannon before buzzing away down a footpath.

Concord laid a hand on the shoulder of a rusted steel solder silhouette. Suddenly, public art felt to me like just another kind of useless junk with which we cluttered the landscape. I watched him circle each piece, each cannon, his eyes taking it all in, before realizing that he was recording it. Archiving it. Which seemed odd. It was a boring little place.

“What do you carry?” I asked. “You said you'd show me.”

He nodded and slipped off his pack and set it in the grass. He thumbed open a compartment to remove a handful of small objects.

There was a pinky-long sliver of what looked like bamboo, a gold ring, and a plastic doohickey.

“This is a clarinet reed. My father was a musician, before he became a relief worker.” He touched the gold band. “This belonged to Mom.”

I nudged the cerulean blue lozenge to wake up its colorful display, upon which a tiny furry thing was sleeping, pulsing cartoon Zs floating above its curled form. “That's a Net Pet. What's left of my childhood collections.”

I looked at the three objects.

“What did you save from your wife?”

He looked up at me, his eyes filling with some bottomless well of pain, which faded even as I caught sight of it. His forehead smoothed. He blinked.

“I remember her,” he said. “I have nothing of hers.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I said. There it was. My being an asshole thing. Out in the open. Again.

He blinked and pursed his lips. “My consciousness is modified,” he said.

“In what way?”

He swallowed. “I have several mods in place. I have suppressed memories. And I

have emotion control mods; certain memories trigger them, disrupting deep brain centers. Anxiety, panic, and libido are all suppressed."

"Oh," I said. I wasn't sure whether I felt more embarrassed or relieved. Both, I guess, at the same time.

"Is that . . . healthy?"

"No," he said. "It isn't. I'm long overdue for permanent treatment. I'm held together with duct tape. I told you. I'm a crap Nomad."

"What's in your Palace?"

He snorted. "Everything! Everything I've ever seen. Every moment of my sensory feed. Every person I've seen, every client, every passerby, every meal I've ever eaten. I revisit them and annotate them, layer them with my endless kundalini monkey-mind chatter. My suppressed memories are there, too."

"Did you suppress her? Raine? Her death?"

"No," he said. "I live with that." He rubbed his neck. "Badly."

And before I could stop myself, the selfish question. "Have you ever thought of settling down?"

He nodded. "I used to. But I borrowed from the collective. Experimental treatments, to treat Raine's cancer. They didn't work. I've also been fined for avoiding long-term treatment. So. That's that. I'm not getting out of the collective anytime soon."

He'd turned his collectivist utopia into a company store? That figured. I took a step closer. We stood toe to toe. I'd pushed him into my bubble of personal space, but maybe I hadn't ever been in his. My chest ached. I inhaled his scent, mixed with the traces of fall in the air. Con didn't move.

"That's that," I agreed. I raised myself up on tiptoe and brushed his cheek with my lips. "Thanks for all your help."

His eyes held mine for a longish time. "You're very welcome," he said softly.

* * *

We had ten days with Mom; the kids delayed going back for classes, watching lectures in their wearables and postponing group learning sessions. I spoke with the dean of students at both universities and was promised they wouldn't be penalized.

Mom spent most of three days in the house on Pleasant Street, making minor edits, fixing small details Con had gotten wrong, before pressing her overlays back into my hand.

"Get rid of it," she sighed. "We keep dreaming up new ways to drive ourselves crazy."

"Delete it yourself." I said. "I won't mind."

She scowled. "That's the problem. I can't. Do me this small favor, child."

So I revoked her access, without deleting the Palace itself.

There is no doubt in my mind that the model stimulated memories, which turned into the stories she told, which we all shared for an hour or two each day. We all recorded those sessions. Things I'd forgotten that she brought back to me. Things I'd never heard her talk about before.

Then there were the three bad days. I won't speak of them. I sent the kids home. I held her hand. She passed suddenly on a Sunday night, five minutes after I stepped out to get a bite to eat at the cafeteria. SOS again. The RRU did not take extraordinary measures, obeying its end-of-life program.

The kids stayed for the funeral, and I invited Michael, but of course Con was gone, working a six-week tour in Viet Nam. I invited him anyway, but he politely declined. I'd restrained myself from looking at his memory palace. It felt wrong, like a distraction. I wasn't ready. Maybe I never would be.

We snuck Mom's ashes into Fenway Park and scattered them onto the field handful

by discreet handful during a game. As I let go of the last handful, a bat cracked and I looked up to catch a glimpse of a ball sailing over the Green Monster as the crowd erupted into howls of pleasure, and I saw her again, sleeping in her chair, the balcony doors open, a puff of breeze nudging the nimbus of her frizzy white hair.

“Goodbye, Mom,” I said.

The maudlin comment set Miles off. Which set me off. Which made Sky hug us both. Which made Miles shove us both away. “We’re in public!” he cried. He’d smudged his eye makeup badly. “You’re embarrassing me!”

Michael ended up moving back in with me afterward, and we enjoyed each other’s company for a week or so. Then we fought like cats and dogs for ten days more before I broke up with him. Mostly mutual, but this time around I was the one who called it quits. A pleasing symmetry, I thought. Michael didn’t concur.

I’d hired another Nomad, a young woman, to liquidate Mom’s space, and model it, as well as the home I’d grown up in, the pieces Con had imaged. Someday I might visit one of my three virtual properties. But not for a long, long time. I didn’t want to be in any of these places anymore.

I asked her about her tribe affiliation and she scowled at me before answering, “That’s private. Sorry.”

I apologized. “What can you tell me about the Globalists?” I said.

Of course I’d read about them. Their prophet had been a petty criminal before coming to the collective, and had written a manifesto that had been discovered posthumously in his memory palace. He’d prophesied that the Nomads would spread humanity beyond the Solar System. He called the climate crisis a necessary evil, a catalyst, transforming the Nomads into an interstellar species. One day, he said, the assets in the collective would be used to build humanity’s first generation ship.

“Globalists are weird,” she said. “Hermits. Loners. Losers.”

* * *

I filled one last half-sized storage space with my kids’ stuff, and prepaid for a month. After that, the cost would come out of their allowances. I shipped Cutie off to live with Miles. I fought to get rid of as much of my own stuff as I could and ended up with a single steamer trunk full of necessities. A bare bones week’s worth of business attire, compressed in vacuum bags. A subset of my jewelry, my keepsakes. I bought a sherpa-bot from REI and created an account on ProLancer, a work exchange designed for a person of my advanced age and skill sets. I kept a first edition of *Franzy and Zoey* with a coffee ring on the cover, from my father, and a CD my mom had loved, of Janis Joplin music.

Then I imaged and liquidated the condo, splitting the cash with Michael. We got more than we’d imagined possible. Prices had recovered over the last few months. People were beginning to think that we had a grip on the global climate crisis. Lucky me.

I bought a one-year pass for two on the Noram Maglev. For me and my sherpa-bot. I booked short-term contracts in cities I’d always planned on visiting. Austin, Santa Fe, Seattle, Chicago, Montreal, DC. I was nervous about traveling outside the continental U.S., though statistically I was more likely to be thrill killed by a mucker drone within my own country’s borders. Still. The grisly stories that slipped into my news feed from friends and coworkers were enough to give me pause about international travel.

The decades the U.S. spent dithering, doing next to nothing about the climate crisis, had sparked a potent and justified rage. Kidnapping. Murder. Torture. While statistically unlikely, they were still daily occurrences. And while I’d been fortunate, there was no way I could retire. So I’d planned a working tour of the continent. I loved it.

I don’t really know how every city can feel so different, with so many national

franchises; we buy the same wearables, wear the same fashion, our media feeds weave us all together into what you might think was a uniform fabric. You can't feel the difference through a video feed; you can't see it in Streetview. But it's real. Every city has its own soul. You feel it, walking the streets alone. My life-insurance policy flagged high-risk regions in my overlays, and by and large I followed their lead as I explored, only occasionally accepting a premium bump to check out some higher-risk neighborhood.

I slept in public housing grids designed for guest workers, shipping container-based units remarkably similar to my old storage spaces. I executed IT contracts at a fraction of my old salary, but my expenses had been scaled to match. I saved less than I had in Cambridge, but I still put money away for a rainy day. And in almost every spare moment, I haunted Concord's memory palace.

I relived his life for the better part of that year. Scanning through his archived feeds in my wearables. Reading the books he'd read, listening to the music he'd listened to. I sought out the food he'd eaten, in various immigrant enclaves, Chinatowns and Little Koreas. I developed a passion for kimchee.

I created a filter that blocked out his sexual experiences early on, and locked it. There were times when I regretted that decision. But I knew that my visits in his memories left footprints. I wanted to be able to look him in the eye, if I ever saw him again.

I ate a single real meal a day, supplemented by *Manna*, the nomadic sustainable algae-based nutraceutical. The stuff was indescribably vile, green and thick. I've seen it called Chthulu Spunk. Millions of the displaced subsist entirely on the stuff for years at a time. I almost got used to it.

If I wanted to join the collective, this was good prep. But I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted. Mom was right—you had to do what you wanted, if you could, if you were lucky enough to get that chance. The hard part was figuring out what it was you really wanted to do.

Concord's palace was dark and surrealist, a series of stone arches along a perfect beach by a motionless, glowering sea. Through each arch lay another tour of duty, another disaster, another migration. Brilliant flaming hillsides, flooded cities with the upper stories of buildings protruding from filthy water, tent-cities packed with half-starved refugees, ruined cities piled high with debris under smoke filled skies. And one archway, the last one, or the first, depending on how you came at it, closed by a wooden doorway plastered with eroded flyers for a welter of jazz acts. I opened that door, one day, onto a flooded city like others I'd seen Con visit. A date stamp revealed this as the oldest.

Con's first disaster, New Orleans.

My avatar walked on the water toward a Nomadic relief station, an elaborate tent city peopled by black pajamaed men and women and throngs of displaced people in varying degrees of shock and despair. I was locked into the avatar's footsteps. I could look around me, but I couldn't control where I went.

I ended up in a medical tent with a school age boy sat before a tall, big boned bald woman in a subtly different black uniform. PsyCorp, her badge read. I recognized the equipment from a documentary I'd watched. A memory clinic. Headsets, vials of medication in portable refrigerator units, and of course, the usual hardware inside the woman herself.

"You're going to tell me what happened and I'm going to record it. Then we're going to remove the memory."

"Why?"

"The memory is too sad," she said. "It would hurt you."

"I don't want to forget my mom."

"You will never forget your mother," she said. "Only an hour or two of a very bad day."

"Do I have a choice?" he said.

She shook her head. "No. You don't. You're a minor. Your father has given us permission. This is for your own good."

His nostrils flared. I saw the man in the boy, in his eyes, in his clenched fists. He folded his arms.

"When you're twenty, you can access this recording. So you can hear this story."

"Does the memory come back?" the boy asked.

"No. Probably not," she said. "It will just be this movie, you telling your older self what happened. The sad thing."

"Dad wants me to do this," he said. "So I will. But not because you said so. I think it's stupid."

She nodded. "I understand. But I have to do it anyway."

"I don't like you people," Concord said. "You're weird."

She laughed. "We are at that."

So I watched that little boy relive the drowning of New Orleans and tell his story, his little piece of that tragedy. It would be obscene to repeat what he said in detail, but I'll say that his mother was trapped in their collapsing home and the boy could do nothing to save her, though he tried. Desperately and ineffectually to the point of exhaustion. His father was out of town at a gig when the storm hit, and the levees blew. The boy's mother pressed her wedding ring into her son's hand before pushing him away from where she lay trapped in the rising water.

It was a simple gold band, which she told him was worth a hundred dollars. She recited the boilerplate that is human emotion. The words you'd expect. Then she ordered him away. Again and again, until he left, and was rescued six hours later, crying on the roof of a nearby building. Clutching the ring and a small plastic toy.

And I knew, finally, how lucky I was. And had always been.

* * *

The kids chose to have Christmas dinner in our Cambridgeport condo, our home that I'd liquidated, and even though it was absurdly pricey, I booked six hours at a Proprio's in San Jose.

Brilliant snow mounded the courtyard through the living room's two-story windows. I hadn't paid to model the courtyard, so there was no way to play in it, but the window panes were suitably cold to the touch, and it was calming to watch the wind whip the mist of ice crystals into little whirlwinds dancing among the moguls the kids had sculpted in their snowsuits ten years before.

Of course my kids hadn't played in the courtyard for years. Hadn't tunneled and built forts until their noses went red and runny and their fingers became pink and snow clumped in their long, perpetually snarling hair. We sat in the living room together. Michael joined us for an hour but then excused himself to be with his on-again, off-again friend in her family's cabin outside of Zurich. He made his apologies and exited the simulation through the imaginary courtyard, letting in a blast of convincingly frigid air and a puff of snow that resolved into nothing. We'd skipped presents this year, by mutual consent, but a previous pile of Christmas presents was piled under the tree. Empty boxes, I supposed.

"So," said Miles, deliberately casual. "This tour thing. How much longer are you going to be schlepping around like a hobo?"

"Schlep," Sky said, savoring the archaic word. "Hobo. Good one."

"I needed to get away," I said.

"I get it," Sky said, which seemed to irritate Miles. So he elaborated. "You imaged everything so you could get rid of it, to start fresh, and now you're traveling." He frowned. He looked at an ink stain on the robot-woven oriental carpet he'd made a

decade ago. "This place isn't working for me. It's like, 99 percent perfect and 1 percent awful."

I looked at the sparkling tree, dense with ornaments. We hadn't trimmed it. It was just here, when we opened the door. The costs to cook within the simulation had been silly, so we'd ordered a turkey dinner and all the trimmings for delivery, but the smell of cooking and food preparation hung in the air; roasting fowl, broiled mushrooms, sweet potatoes in brown sugar, fresh baked cornbread for the oyster leek dressing.

"We appreciate the thought, Mom," Miles said. "But yeah. This is creepy."

We took off the headsets and looked at each other in the flat pale light, the grid-ded stage set all around us like some faded printout taped up in a convenience store window.

We rerouted the food delivery to a nearby homeless shelter, and went out to eat instead.

* * *

I'm not a political person.

Most of the huge companies I worked for, directly or indirectly, did things I found objectionable. I tended to vote for political candidates upper management despised—not that I'd ever noticed my vote making much difference. But when my overlays popped up a warning about a Pangea protest outside the Nomadic geodesic where I'd booked a visit, it gave me pause. When my life insurance tagged the visit with their maximum rate bump, I felt sick to my stomach.

Pangea was a mixed bag of malcontents; more of a flashmob tag than a political organization. In general, they opposed borders and boundaries; they promoted universal access to the passport status enjoyed by Nomads, especially for guest workers. Trapped within the old geopolitik, guest workers made lower wages, were taxed by their states of origin *and* their host states—and were disenfranchised by both. Resentments between Nomads and guest workers ran high. Global Nomadic relief efforts eased the sting without erasing it. I'd been postponing visiting a Nomadic geodesic for months, the pressure gradually building as I'd explored Concord's memories. That thing I'd felt, about every city having its own soul, that thing you couldn't capture in an overlay, was haunting me. I needed to experience how Concord's people lived. In the flesh.

I decided to risk the visit.

Nomads weren't restricted to beltway housing, but they often set up camps within the bulldozed remnants of failed premillennial suburbs for economic reasons—the virtually free land. I checked my sherpa at the NorAm station. The Pangea protest made me nervous, and frankly sherpa-bots were embarrassing; an upper-middle class faux Nomadism, a rich camper's affectation, like a golfer's caddy-bot.

The rental runabout carried me through the desert to the geodesic on the outskirts of Santa Fe. The dome crowned a hillside covered in browned native grasses and stunted shrubbery. Its scale was hard to grasp—bigger than any single building I could recall seeing; smaller than the smallest suburban subdivision.

Maybe a hundred protesters milled around the entryway. I made my way through them without incident, wincing at the ding from my life insurance. It hardly seemed fair. These people didn't *look* dangerous. The Pangean protesters were young and old, some apparently well-heeled, others seemingly destitute, shrouded in layers of thrift-store clothing, overdressed for the warmth of the afternoon but doubtlessly useful during the cold desert night. There were no guest workers among them, of course. Guest workers couldn't afford to engage in political protests.

I did a double take, thinking I'd glimpsed a sherpa-bot in the crowd before recognizing the motorized chassis of a geriatric walker. The white-haired, bird-like woman strapped into it gave me a thumbs up as I caught her eye.

I looked away, toward the tall glowing woman standing guard in the geodesic's archway. I raised my hands, palms turned upward, the greeting I'd learned in my research.

The guard's broad, tan face was expressionless. She wore a kind of sports bra and briefs and a utility belt from which hung a half dozen zippered pockets, like Batman's utility belt. What did they hold? Restraints? Sedative injectors? Her skin glowed dull orange, her irises crimson rings, an easily identifiable security uniform.

She gave me a little nod. I'd registered in her implants, my visitation request had been acknowledged. They'd known I was coming. But I was still afraid of being mistaken for a protester.

"I've come to thank you for the Work." I'm sure my Esperanto was poorly inflected. I suck at languages, but I hoped that my using a Nomadic tongue might be appreciated.

"We accept your thanks and offer hospitality." Her reply was rote, and in English. "Are you carrying any weapons?"

"No." I said. This was the other reason to leave the sherpa, with its integrated defenses, behind.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

I nodded.

"We offer refuge." These words, also rote, were edged with feeling. She gave me the smallest of smiles. I knew that for a settled visitor "refuge" meant a single meal, and a single hour, before I'd be escorted from the enclave. A handful of Nomads in black uniforms blew past us unchallenged, talking excitedly among themselves. Of course, they'd be identifiable by their transponders, their implants. Whereas I lit up on their systems as a potentially dangerous intruder.

Triangular solar panels a meter on a side suspended within the geodesic's tubular skeleton formed the outer shell of the dome. This huge outer ring-shaped space was called the common—interior rings would be divided into chambers affording greater privacy to individuals, couples, or family groups. The sun was lowering in the sky, radiating warm light throughout the huge curved space. I could smell bodies, cooking food, and a whiff of some fruity, piney incense. Myrrh?

Clusters of men and women sat or reclined on colored mats and cushions around low tables, chatting and laughing, drinking and eating, with frequent touches. They nestled together easily. Babies were nursed. Toddlers crawled over adults. When they caught me watching, their eyes didn't meet mine for long. I was flashed blank looks. Restrained smiles. Tiny nods of acknowledgement. Skincraft colors and patterns were muted, and more than once I saw a motif engulf a table, as they all shared a single design. I couldn't ID anyone in my wearables. The little rectangles lit up around each face, flashed a question mark, and faded. My network connection was flickering on and off.

A boy of maybe twelve or thirteen presented himself.

"Your feed's blocked here," the boy said. "Mostly." He wore shorts but no shirt or shoes, and his head was shaved. A gauntlet-style wearable encircled his left forearm. His skin was clean and unmarked, a perfect even tan, except for his feet, which were calloused and darkened with dirt. "You wanted to eat?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm your host." He shook my hand gravely.

He led me to one of the low tables, where I settled myself into a cushion. Then he left and returned a minute later with a lightweight carbon fiber bowl of lentil potato soup with some sort of printed meat substitute and a carafe of clear liquid covered in a hand-blown glass. The soup was spicy, tasty, and filling. I could have eaten more but would never have asked. The water in the carafe was room temperature, but

fresh and somehow delicious.

The boy asked me where I came from, and what I did, and between eating and answering, I found little time to press him past monosyllabic answers about himself and his family. I learned he had two mothers, both developers, and that they'd been here, near Santa Fe, for six months, but not much else.

I tried to imagine myself here. Living like this. With these people. As one of them. I could almost imagine it. I asked him if he enjoyed traveling.

He cocked an eyebrow. "What do you mean?" he said. "Oh. You're asking if I'd rather be settled?"

"No," I lied.

He shrugged, and then consulted his wearable, which must have tapped him; he'd not be implanted until his twentieth birthday most likely. He chewed his lip and fidgeted, obviously eager to be free of me. I thanked him for the food, and for his Work, and let him show me out. He led me by the hand back to the entry arch. His eyes widened at the sight of the protest, which seemed to have gotten larger and louder as the sun had set.

"Do you want to stay the night?" he said.

"You can offer that?"

He looked offended. "Of course," he said. He tapped on his forearm gauntlet, calling up a window, then looked back at me expectantly.

I was tempted. "No thank you," I said. "I should be on my way."

He shrugged. "Be careful. Those people out there are crazy."

* * *

The protest had grown exponentially. A bonfire crackled fifty meters from the archway with hundreds of people clumped around it in small groups. The woodsmoke smell mixed with the stench of plastic as people tossed garbage into the flames. The mood had shifted, from something carnival-like to something more foreboding. By the time I reached the fire I'd regretted my decision not to stay the night. Behind me the geodesic's entryway was now blocked by a wall of carbon fiber shields held by red-eyed security personnel. My overlays flashed orange. Total outage.

I pushed into the crowd. The old woman I'd seen before in the walker laid a skinny hand on my shoulder. She wore a monocle, a borg-eye, wearable tech a full ten years out of fashion.

"You were visiting?" she said.

I nodded. It seemed pointless to lie.

"Hm," she said. "Bad timing. This is about to get ugly."

I caught my breath. "What?"

"Oh, it won't be us. Pangea is nonviolent. Might be the USAN unionists. Or the Deep Greens." She scanned the crowd. "You get a feel for these things after a while. This is going to blow up. Soon."

I felt the throbbing of the HSEC choppers' approach before I heard them. The crowd roared. I turned to see a spurt of fire splash against the geodesic, accompanied by the tinkle of breaking glass. A fire-control drone whizzed up to douse the flame in clouds of fine white powder.

"Molotov cocktail," the old woman said. She turned to me. "Scoot! Run!" An errant breeze pushed her frizzy white hair into her face. She swept it back with a gnarled hand. I hesitated.

The woman scowled. "Ever been dispersed? It hurts!"

"No," I said. "Never. I'm not political."

She laughed. "Everyone's political. Whether they know it or not."

"You'll be okay?" I said.

She nodded her head, saying something lost in the roar of the copters arriving

overhead. Searchlights blared down along with the wash of hot dusty air. We were ordered to disperse, in one language after another, but the crowd was jammed in tight. There was nowhere to run.

The old woman stopped moving. She looked down, frowning. The walker had frozen. Red tell-tales lit up along its control surfaces at her waist. "Damn it," she whispered. Had it been jammed by whatever was messing up my overlays?

"I can carry you," I said.

She blinked. "What? No. Scoot."

"It's going to get ugly," I said.

She nodded and then sighed. "Okay. All right." She said it as if she was doing me a favor.

I unstrapped her from the walker. "Piggyback," she said. I knelt down, turned my back, and let her climb on board. She didn't weigh a hundred pounds, and I'd never been stronger in my life. I could manage. I shoved through the crowd with the woman on my back, her bony arms wrapped around my torso. "Medical emergency!" I barked. "Let me through!"

A lie. But people got out of my way.

The burning sensation hit about halfway down the hillside. I staggered but didn't go down. The crowd made a sound, this collective roar of pain. A man screamed somewhere behind me, a high-pitched falsetto. This was an HSEC microwave dispersal weapon; a pain ray. The molten agony rained down on us and I felt the old woman stiffen against my back, clutching me painfully tight. The crowd moved as one, like a huge single-celled organism, down the hill.

"Keep moving," she rasped, her breath hot in my ear. The pain was directional, designed to sweep us away, and it worked. The crowd was now flowing away from the geodesic in all directions; I felt the unbearable heat, the burning prickle, on my neck and the backs of my legs, but the old woman's body was shielding me from the worst of it.

A row of HSEC buses awaited us at the base of the hill. More commands were barked from megaphones by the row of agents in body armor lined up there. When the crowd reached them and the pain stopped, I crouched down and slid the woman off onto the ground as gently as possible.

"Are you all right?" I asked, panting.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Not really. Not your fault." She tried and failed to catch her breath. She wheezed. "Give me a minute."

I sat with her in the dust. I put my arm around her and took her hand. She squeezed it. People muttered and moaned as agents tagged them and put them on the buses.

"You're a strong girl," the old woman murmured. She put her head on my shoulder. "Thank you."

A minute later I asked her her name. She didn't answer. Her grip on my hand loosened.

"Hello?" I said.

Her eyes were closed. She wasn't moving. Eventually I realized she wasn't breathing. Heart attack, I found out later.

It turns out there's really no such thing as a nonlethal weapon.

* * *

HSEC processed me quickly; my social web had zero points of contact with any of the organizations under investigation. The agent suggested I avoid protests and stay in temporary corporate housing in the future. Back in my rack-unit, I lay in bed and thought about Mom and the house on Pleasant Street. About the kids and the home we'd shared, which I'd sold. I thought about the stranger who'd died in my arms outside the geodesic.

And I thought about Con. I tried not to. I dug out my father's hardcover copy of *Franny and Zooey* and read the first part, "Franny", and half of "Zooey" before giving up, putting the book away, and slipping on my overlays.

Moments later I was walking on Con's beach, under his darkening sky. I went to the furthest arch, tapped into his latest sensory feeds, and found he'd checked himself into a facility outside Seattle three weeks before, a Nomadic psychiatric colony. He was due for release in two days.

I abandoned my contract and hopped the maglev the following morning, dinging my professional reputation at ProLancer in the process, incurring a painful penalty. I could have gotten away with it if Con had been a sick family member, but of course he wasn't. I didn't know what he was. But I had to find out.

* * *

Hospitals love rules.

Nomadic psychotherapy colonies, it turned out, were no exception. I knew Concord had put my name on a short list of people he'd granted access for visiting purposes. He'd made that info public. Just two names on that list, me and his father.

I knew I should get settled, claim my housing, before going to the hospital, but I was impatient and nervous so I decided to walk to calm my nerves. From a high hillside outside the train station, the city of Seattle sparkled like a jewel on the horizon. The countryside here was so lush, so green, every square inch of space flush with grasses, weeds, shrubs, and wildflowers. It smelled like spring, and growing things. It smelled like being in my twenties again.

As I climbed a glass-covered stairway to a rails-to-trails path that would take me to the Psych Colony, my eyes were drawn to Mount Rainier rearing up into the clear blue sky, impossibly huge and lonely, like some alien artifact, the American Mount Fuji. The vision evoked Concord's contemplation of the mountain, from a park at the colony. He'd spent hours looking at it. I'd spent hours inside his feed, meditating with him, trying to calm the places in me rubbed raw by the protest outside the geodesic.

Seeing the mountain in real time, in person, was different. Better. I can't describe that difference.

The sherpa followed me as always, its perfectly regular footsteps reassuring as always, the ambulatory wardrobe of matte gray carbon fiber easily matching my pace on its ostrich-like, backward jointed legs. When we reached the bike path I extruded the sherpa's wheels, flipped out its saddle, and climbed on. As much as I'd grown to love walking, I was in a hurry.

In the end I hadn't needed any cosmetic procedures to start feeling like my old self. I'd explored the cities I toured on foot, I'd taken maximizers and practiced the isometric Nomadic Yoga I'd learned by watching Concord's feed. I'm sure my form was terrible; I had no human teachers. But my bad form aside, it worked. I grew lean and hard. I had the body I'd more or less remembered having when I was younger—and never ever exercised. Well. I was *like* that person, a little worn around the edges.

I sang as I rode along the tree-lined path, which was odd, as I hadn't sung a note since my kids were babies. There were places where my voice wanted to fail, to cut out, but I bulled through by not caring what I sounded like. The Janis Joplin song was from the antique CD, my mother's icon, one of those best sung at the top of your lungs. In it Janice prayed fervently for God to give her a Mercedes Benz, a color TV, and other unearned riches.

I maxed out the sherpa's speed, all of fifteen miles an hour, and shouted the words into the breeze.

* * *

The Nomadic woman who met me at the visitor's desk at the psychiatric colony glowed blue and white; her slender figure wrapped in clouds, the animation stately

and hypnotic. Her head was shaved, and her irises slowly faded through every hue in the rainbow.

"I'm here to see Concord." I rattled off the hexadecimal string. "2.3C6EF372FE95."

Nomads' names were handles of convenience. Each had a number in the collective. I'd memorized Con's.

She stared past me for a half second, calling up the ID, nodding.

"He'll see you. But . . ."

"But what?"

"It's very rare," she said. "For settlers to visit a retreat."

"Okay," I said.

"You'll need to take off your costume," she said coolly.

My costume? I was wearing a perfectly respectable casual outfit, good for walking in temperate weather or working in a temp cube farm, slacks and a top made of some synthetic fabric. I could change my shoes and slip on a jacket and bill hours in this without anyone batting an eye.

"Oh. Do you have black pajamas for me?"

She shook her head. "We don't wear them here. It's a *Nomadic* retreat."

"Oh." I got it. I stripped down, and found a pair of sandals in the sherpa-bot while I packed my clothes.

The nurse nodded but seemed unimpressed. Her face flickered in that half-moment of divided attention. "He says he'll see you now. I'll take you to him."

I resisted the urge to cover myself. I was a bit worn around the edges. But I'd come this far. I followed her.

* * *

We walked through the main building and out the back door into a park-like area that extended as far as the eye could see. Paths paved with recycled tires ran through an artfully reclaimed wilderness, native grasses filled with wildflowers, with huge leafy trees scattered here and there creating little pools of shade. The spaces around the trees were manicured, like putting greens, and small groups of Nomads sat zazen, or lounged casually in the dappled sunlight.

My Memory Palace access hadn't lit Concord's location up in my overlays; Nomadic love of open source software aside, the collective was a walled garden. Concord was not permitted to share his geodata with settlers here.

"What exactly is your relationship with the patient?" the woman leading me asked as we passed through a small copse of evergreens. She'd stopped walking.

"I hired him, in Cambridge. We became friends."

Her expression was unreadable. The blue sky that had surrounded the clouds flowing over her skin was gone, replaced by a churning murk. Her torso seethed with thunderheads.

"Friends," she said.

I shuffled my sandals in the bed of pine needles. A small cloud of gnats, who apparently preferred the smell of my sweat to Cloud Girl's, swarmed around my face. I resisted the urge to bat at them. "Friends," I said.

"He's not your servant. He's not your spirit animal. And I'm betting he isn't really your friend, either."

I held her gaze. I suppressed the unfair desire to kick her in her shin. "I'm glad he has people like you taking care of him," I said. Truthfully. Because I understood what she was saying, I understood what she was thinking, and I'd have thought it myself in her place. But she was wrong. God, I hoped she was wrong.

She didn't warm to me. Lightning flashed between her breasts. "Go home," she whispered.

I gave her a grim little smile. "I don't have one anymore," I said.

That shut her up.

* * *

I found him at the top of a small hill, sitting zazen under a dwarf maple freshly leafed in vivid green.

I hunkered down in front of him, squatting on the putting lawn stuff. It was cool and soft. He patted the grass in front of him. His skin was unadorned. His eyes were lucid, present, as they met mine. There was a certain tension in the way he held himself that was unfamiliar. He was also absurdly beautiful, more so than I'd been able to remember. I folded myself into a cross-legged position.

"Hello," he said, without moving a muscle. "It's good to see you."

I caught him up on my recent movements. I talked about the protest outside the geodesic. He looked disturbed. "My news feed is blocked," he said. "We don't do news here." He made a fist in the grass, tearing up a handful. "You shouldn't have been there," he said finally.

"I'm fine. It was no big deal."

He nodded, some of the self-recrimination draining away from his features. He still looked tense. "I've seen you. In my palace," he said.

I nodded. I'd never seen him there. That had to have been by design. He'd never blinked me, messaged me, contacted me in any way. My God. What was I doing here? I placed his folded handkerchief on the grass between us. I'd retrieved it from the sherpa when I stripped, and carried it all this way.

"I came to return this," I said. My hilarious ice breaker.

Con glanced at the square of fabric, then back at me. There were no gales of laughter. Instead he reached for his day pack and opened it, withdrawing a slim silver chain from which hung a cheap, mass-produced locket I hadn't thought about in decades. He laid it carefully in the grass beside his handkerchief.

I picked the lozenge of display up by its chain and tapped it, waking it up. These had been big in middle school, among girls of my set; you completed an online interview with a cartoon avatar, detailing your passions, your heroes, your likes and dislikes, and the service created a montage that played back in the locket. They'd been free, the data used to create customized marketing.

A pop diva belted out a lusty ballad, her lips so red they hurt to look at; a sepia toned Amelia Earhart smiled, sun glinting off her aviator goggles, followed by, God help me, a cascade of horses with streaming manes running into a sunset, and then, there I was, thirteen years old, sitting on my bed with a guitar in my lap, singing a disturbingly explicit love song. A subject I'd known next to nothing about. But my voice was clear and sweet, my playing deft if simple. Singing and dancing and performing music were things one did in school, in college. . . . Developmental things. I'd not had the time in decades.

"Embarrassing," I said.

"Makes it a good icon. You can have it back," Concord said. "I'll keep a copy. If that's okay with you."

I nodded, double tapping the locket, toggling it off.

We sat a minute looking at each other.

"You saw my confessional." Not a question; he knew where I'd been in his palace. A confessional was what they called the sequestered memory recordings. I nodded, unsure of what his reaction to that would be. He could have locked me out of any part of his palace, at any time. But he hadn't.

"I'm clear now." The smile that spread across his face lacked the detachment I'd grown used to. "Only fifteen years late."

"What does that mean? You're clear?"

"I watched the recording. Mom's death. I purged the data. I'm not experiencing PTSD symptoms. Nomads are supposed to clear these memories at twenty. A coming

of age thing.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I’m a crap Nomad.” His eyes were shining. “It’s the first thing I’ve ever let go of. Well. Other than you.”

I failed to bite back a little gasp. So obvious. “How are you feeling now?”

“I’ll never be as calm as when I was modded.” His eyes flicked up and down my body and I felt a pang of warmth. A muscle clenched in his jaw. He glanced away, back at my sherpa-bot, which had deployed its solar canopy, a shining hemisphere of photovoltaic petals that trembled in the breeze.

“Is that—?”

“Everything I own? Yes. Well, other than my data in the cloud and my money in the bank. I have a lot of money.”

He nodded, his face a mask of conflicting emotions. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I’m not for sale,” he said.

“Don’t be an ass,” I said. “It just means we have options.” I could join the collective. Or he could leave it.

He gave me that smile again. The non-detached one. “Maybe you should see if you can even stand me,” he said, squinting. “The real me, I mean.”

“That’s why I’m here.” I said. “We’ll figure it out. No pressure.”

That cracked him up. “No pressure!” he said. He laughed in a way that made his whole body quake. When he had himself under control, he laid a hand on my knee, and I was suddenly acutely aware that we weren’t wearing any clothes.

“Can I kiss you?” he said. No joking tone now. Very serious expression. He smelled wonderful.

“I think you have to.” My voice cracked.

We both leaned forward, toward each other. Our lips met.

And oh! It was good.