

THE EMPTY

Ray Nayler

Called “One of the up-and-coming masters of SF short fiction” by Locus Online, Ray Nayler got his SF start in the pages of *Asimov’s* in 2015 with his story “Mutability.” Since then, his critically acclaimed stories have seen print regularly in *Asimov’s*, as well as in *Clarksword*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, and many “Best Of” anthologies, including *The Very Best of the Best: 35 Years of The Year’s Best Science Fiction*. The author’s debut novel, *The Mountain in the Sea*, was released on October 4 by MCD x FSG. For nearly half his life, Ray has lived and worked outside the United States in the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps, including a stint as Environment, Science, Technology, and Health Officer at the U.S. consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. He currently serves as the international advisor to the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. His latest story looks at the personal cost of compassion and the difference an individual can make out in . . .

THE EMPTY

Sal looked at the motionless red dot on the screen. With two fingers she zoomed in. The dot was on U.S. 50 in Nevada, miles from anything that even had a name. She grabbed the GPS coordinates. The nearest service station was seventy kilometers from there.

Sal zoomed back out. Everything else was green. The constant audio stream of data in her earbud—reports of tire pressures, fuel cell levels, maintenance schedules—was a background weave of normal. Everything was normal except that red dot. She touched it with a finger, brought up the diagnostics. What even *was* that error code?

SUPERVISOR TO 15, she typed.

TYPING . . .

HI! ALL SUPERVISORS ARE CURRENTLY ASSISTING OTHER DRIVERS.

TYPING . . .

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM?

RED DOT, she typed. ERROR CODE 8230.

TYPING . . .

I'VE LOGGED THE CODE AND PINGED THE NEXT AVAILABLE SUPERVISOR IN THE CHAIN.

THANKS FOR NOTHING, she typed.

TYPING . . .

YOU ARE WELCOME.

Sal knew "all supervisors" weren't "currently assisting other drivers." There was one supervisor, and Sal knew exactly what she was doing.

Sal pressed the full autopilot "break" square on the right-hand menu.

The clock started its countdown: 10:00 . . . 9:59 . . .

The same countdown began on Sal's company watch. She opened the door to her module and stepped out, boots clanking on the metal steps.

The twenty modules, each with its number neatly stenciled on its door, were shipping-container-sized portables on insulated feet, with small metal staircases to doors in their sides. Cables ran out of them to a central container bristling with comms shit none of the drivers understood. Everyone called the central container "Brain."

The modules and "Brain" occupied just one corner of a massive parking lot. The rest was empty except for, a hundred meters off, the lit-up bolus of the autoshuttle at its charging station, waiting to take the drivers back to camp when their shift ended.

Beyond that, the gigantic box of the Wal-Mart rotted. You could tell what it used to be by the trace of its sign, but also by how enormous it was, and by the endless parking lot.

The plywood used to board up its glass doors was gray with age.

The Sun was low. Although you could still feel the desert heat if you stood in the light, Sal knew metal in the shade would already be cool to the touch. Once night came, this time of year, the temperature would drop fast.

Number 19 was the breakroom. One vending machine popped out awful coffee. The other one popped out awful snack crap that made you wish you'd packed your lunch.

Andi was sitting at the breakroom's plastic table in a plastic chair, bent over her terminal.

"If you keep telling the chatbot you're busy helping someone else, eventually something bad is going to happen and they'll fire you," Sal said.

Andi didn't even look at her. She had turned sixty last week. Before second shift they'd had a little party. Someone up the supervisory chain had actually dronedropped a cake into the parking lot. A pretty good cake.

Sal heard all kinds of stories about Andi—even that she'd been a real driver, in the days of actual steering wheels. Sal had also heard Andi had been other things back then: that she maybe had another name, but she ignored that crap. The miges at the camp were up in each other's business all the time. Nothing else to do in the camps except run other miges' pics through facial rec and see what you could dig up.

Read a book. That's what she said whenever people started in about Andi or anyone else. Read a book, you're so bored.

Well, whatever was or wasn't true about Andi's past, at present she was addicted to some open-world videogame that kept her from giving a shit about her job.

But if they were dronedropping cakes for her, Sal guessed Andi had friends up the chain covering her ass, and pumping her ratings.

"I have a red dot."

"Deal with it. Code?"

"8230."

"Bad charge. Not fixable."

Andi knew all the codes by heart. For someone who seemed like they didn't give a shit, she knew her stuff. "They'll have to run a spider out from the nearest service station. Spider'll crawl in there and hook its own battery up to the system, give it a couple hundred kilometers of charge. Then you can take it off to the station."

"The nearest station's seventy kilometers from the dot!"

Now Andi did look up at her.

"Where are you?"

"Out on 50."

"Well, crap. That's a lot of overtime, though. Look, there might be another way. If you want, you can use the diagnostic bee and take a look. If it's just a bad connection, the truck monkey might be able to reconnect it. Did you take the training?"

"Yeah, I took it. It's mandatory. Of course I took it."

"That's why they like you."

"Yeah right. They couldn't care less about me."

"Wait—you didn't hear?" Andi asked. "You don't read your feeds? You're going to be the new Andi at this pile."

"What?"

"That's right. A promotion. You start next week."

"Where are you going?"

"To the company node in Butte."

Sal looked at her watch. 00:56. "Shit. I'm gonna get dinged."

Andi swiped the dashboard of her management terminal. "Taken care of. I've distributed all your greens. Just clear your red and collect your overtime."

"What about the bonuses on my greens?"

"Fractioned for distance traveled, but you'll make the loss up in overtime."

"Break even, you mean. And do more work for it."

"They get you coming and going."

"Congrats on Butte. Be nice to settle down at a node."

"Six-month rotation—that'll feel like forever. Congrats on this pile. And on the seventeen mandatory trainings you need to complete by Friday, sucker."

"Seventeen?"

"Coming and going, bud. But don't worry. They only take about an hour each. And you aren't allowed to do them while you're driving, so it's on your own time. Have fun!"

* * *

Sal guided the bee around the side of the truck. For this you used the VR headset. It was a high-res feed: She was a real-world, real-time flying insect wobbling along the side of the truck in desert sun. It was overwhelming—like being high. She was suddenly just "elsewhere." And the high-res feed fooled her senses well enough that she even got dizzy.

The shadows were growing long, out on 5. The truck had pulled itself off the road—that was an autoroutine. There was the ruin, here, of a diner. One of those chrome-clad retro things. Maybe it wasn't retro. Maybe it was the real thing. It was old, anyway. Tumbleweeds had blown up against it and stuck in places where the metal paneling had warped or pulled away. One of the diner's windows was cracked. The rest of them were boarded up. Broken glass glittered here and there in the sun. The parking lot was empty, except for the burned skeleton of a manually driven car.

She flew to the front of the truck, swooped down underneath to where the coupling would be that would cause an 8230, according to the diagnostic manual Andi had forwarded her. And yeah—there it was.

But it wasn't just a bad connection. It looked like something had bounced up off the road and ripped out the junction box. There was frayed wire dangling, and a deep scrape along the undercarriage. Something metal. There was white paint in the

scrapes. And—she floated the bee through the shade of the truck's undercarriage—yeah, here it was. It had bounced up and lodged under the back bumper.

It was a jagged hunk of metal with the remnants of white paint on it. More than one truck must have hit it. Once it had been a Kawasaki drone, the kind short-distance delivery companies used. When she was a kid they'd called them pizzabots. But this one was white, which wasn't the usual pizzabot color. They were almost always red.

What had it been doing out here? Picking up a meal from the diner, before it closed forever?

Maybe. Or maybe it had just fallen off the back of a junk truck.

Whatever the reason was, that thing had become a time bomb. Now it had red-dotted her.

She snapped a few angle shots of the metal wreck jammed in the undercarriage and forwarded it to the monkey, then floated out from under the truck.

Weird out here. Little sounds became enlarged—the tapping of some loose wire against the side of the diner, the hiss of sand.

And then the VOOM! of a truck passing, the displaced air wobbling the bee off course, flipping it almost upside down. The headset's haptics made her *feel* the wind of that truck on her face.

Two hundred kilometers an hour on the straightaways. On the screen, the trucks barely seemed to crawl across the landscape. Because of the green color, and because almost nothing ever happened, the drivers called it "turtle watching."

That was no turtle.

The monkey dropped out of its hatch on the right side of the truck. Sal hovered the bee, pulled the monkey's visuals up on the display as it crawled under the chassis and started wrestling with the pizzabot. Finally the bot came untangled. The monkey dragged it out of the road. Then Sal walked the monkey over to the junction box. Maybe there was a spare part? Or?

The monkey scanned the mess.

NOT LOCALLY RESOLVABLE. REPORT?

YES.

SERVICE STATION REPORT FILED.

ETA?

LOADING . . .

9 HOURS.

Sal yanked off the headset. Nine hours. Goddamned spiders. No—goddamned company, ripping out half their service stations and two-thirds of the rapid-response carts. And goddamned regulators, for letting them do it.

Okay, think of something to do. Use it for something. At least, at nine hours plus, the overtime would more than make up for her fractioned greens. Maybe she could sleep through some of it? But she didn't feel like sleeping.

She tried to think about her promotion, but it wasn't real yet. And anyway, what did it mean? Trainings, more responsibility. They would up her pay, yeah, but not enough to cover the new stress, and she wouldn't have her own greens: she'd be vampiring off the team's bonuses. The managers took a percentage. Which is why everyone hated the managers. Oh, sorry, "team leads." That was the jargon.

No, she wanted the promotion. *Needed* the promotion, more like. How long had she been working shifts in these portable drive centers? Three years now. It was better when they still had local centers, in an actual building—now the company just rented corners of parking lots, out in the middle of nowhere. Who did they even pay for these places? Who do you rent an abandoned parking lot from? And the "camps"—they were usually some abandoned motel, barely reopened and cleaned up by the "hospitality team," parking lot filled with vans and campers.

Sal was one of two people in her family with a job—the rest were on Automation Relief Act subsidies. Everyone knew how poor that kept you. Poor, and tapping a scanblock at the local food depot for their sack of vacuum-packed basics every week.

Two people in the family left with jobs. Sal, who had flunked out of university and instead gone to vocational school to train as a remote hauler—and their cousin Jamie, who hadn't sent a remittance home from Canada since last year. Everyone had given up on Jamie. So thank God for vocational school and for the government regs that still required one human operator for every twenty trucks. Andi had told her, the other day, that the company was lobbying against that number. They wanted it pushed to fifty. And maybe—there were rumors—the company was lobbying against having human drivers at all.

Sal rolled her stiff neck and looked around at the walls—steel with some recycled rubber insulation blown on them, so it looked like you were inside a tire.

They moved the remote drive centers and their support camps every three months. Moved them, swapped out crews, re-upped some contracts, renegotiated others, fired people whose numbers were down (which was mostly just bad luck, anyway). Why? Sal tried to understand the economics of it, but couldn't. It felt like it was all just to keep you off-center. Keep you from getting comfortable. Bad beds in bad motels, or in the back of some shitty van conversion, some deathtrap of a camper older than its driver. And you were always temporary. Seasonal.

If you were management, you got a six-month contract. And maybe, like Andi, you got elevated, and got to live in a node. Rent a real apartment. You had to vampire, and the other miges hated you—but Sal thought she could be a decent manager.

Yeah, she needed the promotion. Mostly so she could just be a little less tired.

Might as well take a walk-around. Better out there than in here.

She put the headset back on.

The shadows were longer. The daylight was dying. She'd practice walking the monkey around, just to do something with the time. She walked it over to the pizzabot.

There really wasn't much left of that thing. Her truck must have been the third or fourth one to hit it. Something that small, it would barely register on their sensors. The trucks weren't going to slam on the brakes for every jackrabbit that launched itself into their grills. Sal heard the stories from the drivers who had worked their way up from the service depots: You power-washed a lot of gore off these things. Blood, bits of bone, quills, hooves, and antlers. At two hundred kilometers an hour, at least it was over quickly for the animals.

The trucks were failsafed to spot humans near the road and brake—but she'd heard things. And they weren't going to stop for anything, human or otherwise, out here on U.S. 50. This was the Empty. Population density below the safety threshold. The trucks automatically turned the failsafe off. Whoever lived out here (did anyone live out here?) knew you'd better look both ways when you cross these roads. And look again.

White paint, though. She'd never seen that.

Sal walked the monkey over to the diner and practiced manually maneuvering the steps. This was one of the hardest things to do, as a drone operator. Gyros or no, keeping balance in operator mode was almost impossible. You always just let the autopilot do it.

She didn't make it up the stairs the first time, but on the second time she did. She had the monkey jump up and down at the top. Rockying it, monkey tool-fists to the sky while Sal hummed “du-du-duh! du-du-duuuuuuh!” back in her rubberized cube.

Then she saw it.

The one window of the diner that wasn't boarded up was layered with years of

desert dust, so opaque you couldn't see anything inside.

And in that dust, clearly stroked with a human finger:

HELP

If there was any doubt it was a human that had written the word, it disappeared when Sal saw the handprint next to it.

After the handprint an arrow, pointing out into the desert.

When had that word been written? It looked fresh. Today? Not more than a few days, max—no dust had settled in the letters at all.

She pulled the headset off.

"Shit." She said it out loud, to nobody. And then: "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

She considered going to Andi again. But what would she say? This was the Empty. There were no regs, no obligation to do anything. Andi would glance up from her terminal and tell Sal to go check it out, if she wanted to: it was her time. Or don't. Up to her.

Up to her.

Okay. Nothing else to do but wait, anyway. Probably it was some kind of prank—some local scrapper fucking around with shut-ins who spent their days zooming in on random details in Streets. Like those kids who lately had been amusing themselves by taking shovels or even backhoes and sketching out what looked like castle walls in the earth out in the middle of nowhere, to excite the satellite archaeologists.

People had way too much time.

Wait.

She put the headset on and had the monkey scan the handprint, then enlarged each of the fingertips. Yep—pretty legible prints.

What was the name of that app? She'd bought it to figure out who was drinking her milk from the camp refrigerator, but then had never been able to lift a print.

Here the app was. Galton. With some bad graphic of a fingerprint in the G. She'd deleted it from her home screen, but it was still on her terminal. Police database access, but just names and dates of birth and stuff. Not the juicy bits you want, unless you climbed a big paywall.

The monkey forwarded the scan to her personal terminal.

The hit came up five seconds later.

BAKSHI, JANNAT.

Then the date of birth, eighty-seven years ago. And then: DECEASED.

Wait, what?

She scanned another fingerprint off the window.

Same thing. BAKSHI, JANNAT. DECEASED.

The date of death was six months ago.

A message came up, violet letters scrolling across the desert sky:

WARNING: YOU HAVE EXPENDED 80% OF YOUR OPERATOR LIMIT ON DIAGNOSTIC AND REPAIR DRONE USAGE. USAGE OVER THE LIMIT WILL BE CHARGED AGAINST YOUR ACCOUNT.

She looked at the arrow, smeared into the diner window by a human finger.

The shadows were filling with the color of twilight. The earth was taking on a red tinge, and she could see the sunset sky reflected in the diner window.

HELP.

No dust in those letters. That mark wasn't made six months ago.

She could call in a search and rescue drone. That would mean supervisor approval, and if it found nothing . . .

If it found nothing, they would charge it against her account. She'd end up in a debt contract. And the bad decision would probably mean they'd strip her promotion, as well.

"Fuck you, pizzabot." She said it out loud, and heard the dead, rubberized sound of it here, in *this world*, standing in front of the diner out on U.S. 50. Her own voice like

a ghost, or some deity from the sky, about to light a tumbleweed on fire. “Why red-dot me? Why *my* truck?”

A really whiny deity.

Okay, let’s take a look. She could at least do that. Whatever the charge was for over-using the diagnostic and repair drones was, it would be dwarfed by the cost of calling in a search and rescue drone.

Leaving the monkey on pause, she switched back over to the bee.

She swung away from the truck and hovered over the diner for a moment, looking at the paused monkey just standing there, like someone window-shopping. Then she arced off over the desert.

The first thing she saw were the tracks, in the desert soil. She swooped down close to them. They led in a line out from the diner parking lot and straight back into the desert. Wheel and tread marks from the pizza bot—but a bunch of them, as if it had gone back and forth to the road many times. And there on top of most of those tracks—human footprints. In shoes. Uneven looking—you didn’t have to be an expert to see the person wasn’t walking straight, was laboring, staggering from side to side.

There was a slight ridge just behind the diner—little more than a hump in the earth. After the ridge, the tracks went on.

And now Sal could see where they were coming and going from. A cluster of white-painted portable units—double-wides, and big. They would have been dropped by big cargo hexcopters out here, they couldn’t have traveled by road. There were four of them, in a plus-sign shape.

WARNING: YOU HAVE EXPENDED 100% OF YOUR OPERATOR LIMIT ON DIAGNOSTIC AND REPAIR DRONE USAGE. CONTINUED USAGE IS NOW BEING CHARGED AGAINST YOUR ACCOUNT.

That fast?

The sun was a warped ball, smearing itself out over the ragged teeth of some distant mountains, staining the snow on their caps pink. Looking directly at it glitched the bee’s visuals, and the landscape filled with bands of black shadow and weird echoes of mountain and sun, like pieces cut out of sky and ground.

Sal paused the bee in hover and snatched the headset off.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. This has to be more than just my problem. I’m not taking the hit for this.”

Outside she stood still for a moment, breathing in and then releasing a cloud of breath into the cold air.

What color is this?

That is what she always asked herself, at this strange hour of the day. What color was the sky, what color were the mountains? There was purple there, and blue, sure. Pink, of any of a hundred shades, some of them reds. And yellow sometimes, haloing the mountains. But really all of it was this darkening hue in which black was growing, expanding to become night. That color didn’t have a name.

So many things didn’t have names—and if they didn’t have names, it was hard to even think about them, to concentrate the mind on them. Like all the feelings you have that are like this—some color you know everyone else sees, too—but that there are no words to describe.

She clanked up the steps to Unit 19.

And of course, Andi was not there. Sal glanced at her personal terminal. It was an hour past the end of her shift. She hadn’t even noticed.

Sal opened the company app.

SUPERVISOR.

TYPING . . .

THE THIRD SHIFT SUPERVISOR IS CURRENTLY OUT OF OFFICE DUE TO PERSONAL REASONS. PLEASE REFER TO YOUR MANUALS FOR NON-URGENT CONCERNS. IF THIS IS AN EMERGENCY,

YOU MAY ELEVATE THE CONCERN TO A SUPERVISOR AT THE NODE.

Even hovering that bee out there was costing her. Probably one Christmas present every fifteen minutes or so. In her head, she could see her savings dwindling. And running the drones over the limit would bring her numbers down as well. Then of course there was the loss of all her greens that had been fractioned before getting to their destination.

Andi should have taken this crap over—that's what a good supervisor would do.

No—Andi knew how to duck bullshit. That's why she was headed to Butte. That's how you moved up.

"Goddamnit," Sal said aloud to the dispensers and the rubberized walls, "This is not my problem."

But it was her problem. Hers and nobody else's.

Back in her unit, she put the headset on. Now there was a violet counter up in the left top corner, tallying up the cost to her as the bee ran. She was already at more than a hundred dollars—a good shift, without bonuses for hazmat or rushes.

She tried not to look at it.

The bee floated toward the containers. Sal could see that something strange had happened here: first of all, there were what looked like garden plots all around the place, but they were covered with desert dust, everything in them dead. There was a combined communications and power cluster at the center of the complex—but it looked like a storm had wrecked it: the mast was blown over, the comms broken, the solar panels covered in dirt. It must have happened a while ago. And two of the units had broken windows.

What was this place?

Then she saw the sign.

A Sun Settlement. The sign had been retro neon, a rhombus with curved corners. The faux-neon tubes were dead—but they read *Desert Sunset Villas* in a cursive script Sal could barely read.

She could hear the voice of the advertiser in her ear, as if he were standing right there in the Empty, right at her shoulder.

"Join a Sun Settlement! Live out your golden years in self-sufficiency, part of a community of senior citizens who have made the choice to blaze their own trail. A team of self-maintaining robots . . ."

Sal saw the graves—a row of six of them, just lumps of earth. The first five had a cube of carboplast for a marker. The last one had nothing at all. Next to them was one of those all-purpose service bots, kneeling in the dust next to a shovel, its core dead.

Maybe the Sun Settlements had seemed appealing to a few weirdos, but Sal remembered the intrusive audio ads smeared all over her podcasts. She'd seen right through them: More automation to account for the "labor shortage." Labor shortage my ass—induced labor shortage caused by banning immigration, and once bots became 100 percent printable, they were cheaper than messing with meat nurses. Meat nurses complain. Their backs and feet hurt. They need worker's comp. They have unions. Had them, anyway.

The ads made it seem like the Sun Settlements were trying to attract some upscale, adventurous clientele, but being attended to in some pod in the middle of nowhere by a bunch of robots who knew how to maintain a vegetable garden sounded like what someone does when they have limited mobility, a fixed income, and no other options.

Next to the downed mast, a single solar panel someone had wiped clean of dust.

Sal floated over the graves and circled the portable units. The furthest one had a clean doorknob.

Sal hovered there a moment. The violet script counting up her debt was at three days now—three days of good shifts. And they were probably looking at her numbers

up in Butte right now, reconsidering that promotion.

The bee couldn't open the door to this module. She'd need the monkey—and walking that over here would mean what? A month and a half of debt contract.

SUPERVISOR.

TYPING . . .

THE THIRD SHIFT SUPERVISOR IS CURRENTLY . . .

Of course they are. Of course.

Whoever was in that portable was dead. They had to be dead. Sal had heard that all these Sun Settlements were shut down, the company bought out, the portables and robots sold for scrap. What was anyone even doing out here?

They were dead, for sure. And what was the difference? They were supposed to be dead six months ago, glitched out of existence. Now they would really be dead. It was a bad way to go, sure. But look at this place: the drop pad was completely obscured by dust. Nobody could be alive.

They were alive a few days ago.

Jesus. That wasn't a pizzabot her truck had hit. White. Clinical white.

It had been a medical service bot, on a suicide mission.

A last chance to make someone give a shit. Someone had messed up bigtime, pulled the plug on a Sun Settlement that still had people in it. And they must have been out here alone, with their mast down, running out of power, eking things out on one panel. For how long?

Sal thought of the graves, the last one unmarked.

Okay, they are dead. Fine. But someone needs to know, right? Just march the monkey over here and find out. Calling in a rescue could mean years of debt contract. But if they were dead, she'd just log it, and let them deal with it on their own time. And what was a few months of debt? No big deal, right? Not such a big hole you couldn't dig your way out.

Not such a big deal. It's only my life. Months of my life.

She put the bee in hover and walked the monkey over, tracing the tracks of the service bot's tread and those staggering footsteps. Sal walked the monkey past the graves, the downed mast. The sun was below the horizon now, the light almost gone. The monkey's headlamp picked the door out against the growing dark.

Inside, there was a little sitting room. Two bedrooms off of it. Sal was glad nobody simulated smells—there were empty emergency rations scattered around, dirty clothes. In the room to the left, a neatly made bed.

In the room to the right, in the spotlight of the monkey's helmet, a crumpled shape on the bed lay unmoving.

The violet ticker in the corner of the VR headset said—Christmas is gone, and for what? That promotion is gone—and for what? You knew they would be dead. They were dead when you got red-dotted, and now what? They are still dead. And nobody cared about them enough to verify their death, and nobody will care now, beyond the scandal of some company *forgetting* that these old people were out here. But hadn't everyone already forgotten about them anyway? Dumped them out here in the Empty with some bots to wipe their butts and take their temperature and play pretend pioneer with them until the world was rid of them?

You idiot, Sal. You idiot.

The monkey didn't have any diagnostic tools for humans. It could scan an engine for an error code, but whatever error code had made this person stop moving forever, the monkey would never know.

The woman's eyes opened.

"You came," she said. "You came."

Sal made the monkey nod. Then she punched the emergency rescue code in, and

tore the VR headset off.

Across her screen, the standard warning flashed over the map, blotting out the single red dot that was all that was left of Sal's shift.

YOU HAVE CALLED FOR AN EMERGENCY RESCUE DRONE. REGULATIONS STATE THAT ANY PERSON LOGGING A FALSE CALL WILL BE FULLY RESPONSIBLE . . .

Oh, shut up.

* * *

Sal sat on the steps of her unit. It was freezing cold out here, but with her hands in her pockets it was tolerable enough. Without any greens, and with her red dot now hauled off to the station, Sal had nothing to do. Dawn was coming, the Sun rising over the abandoned Wal-Mart. The sky over a distant range of mountains Sal didn't know the name of was tinted yellow, paling toward its edges and then suddenly becoming a pale blue. In the parking lot, which just a few minutes ago had been grays and browns, that yellow and blue were flowing into things, pushing color back into the world.

But "yellow" or "blue" didn't describe it. Nothing described any of it. And that didn't matter, really. You didn't need words for any of these things because nobody tried to describe them to anyone else. Most people never even saw them. Never looked.

But I still look, thought Sal.

The bolus of the shuttle came soundlessly into the parking lot and pulled up at the station. Andi was among its passengers. She sat down next to Sal. The rest of the miges went to their units to do their shift-change handoffs.

"Quite an adventure you had last night," Andi said.

"Yeah."

"Looks like you saved a life. That's really something."

Sal felt like she wanted to say something to Andi—something about how she should have taken over the red dot herself. But then she realized that if Andi had taken over the red dot, Jannat Bakshi would still be dying in that bed.

I still look. I still see things. And that's why that woman is alive.

"Anyway—no matter what the company says about any of it, I want you to know—I think what you did was amazing."

Sal looked at Andi's face—the crow's feet around her eyes. Jesus, she really thought she meant it. Andi really thought she was sincere.

"And if you ever need a reference, hit me up."

"What?"

"Oh . . . yeah, that's right. You never read your feeds. That's why I'm here, on the early shift. I have to escort you back to camp to collect your things."

On the way back to the shuttle, Andi leaned in close to her. "They'll say it's just your numbers—but you should know: those Sun Settlements? They were a company subsidiary."

* * *

It was hard to track you down, which is why it's been so many months, but I wanted you to know—you saved my life that day. And with the out-of-court settlement they paid out, I'm doing well, in whatever time I have left. I have a little house outside of Tucson. You could come and visit. . . . You would be so welcome. I'm alive, because of you. And I can never repay you.

Sal placed her personal terminal back on the table and looked up at the screen, where fifty green dots crawled their way across a map of fields, barely seeming to move. In her earbud there was a rolling audio report of wheat yields, obstruction reports, slight course adjustments.

Running the automated harvesters was seasonal, but at least it was something. She had been lucky to get anything at all.

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I'm alive, because of you.

That was something, right? A person was alive, because of her. Sal felt like crying. But she was just too tired.