

AÑO NUEVO

Ray Nayler

Ray Nayler's speculative fiction debut was in 2015 in the pages of *Asimov's* with the short story "Mutability." Since then, his critically acclaimed stories have seen print in *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *The F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, and several Best of the Year anthologies. Born in Quebec and raised in California, Ray has lived and worked in Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans for nearly two decades. He is a Foreign Service Officer, and previously worked in international development, as well as serving in the Peace Corps in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. In his latest story, an unusual alien invasion leads to an . . .

AÑO NUEVO

"So, what do you think?"

"I think they are the crappiest aliens ever."

The dunes, as well, were nothing like Bo had imagined dunes ought to be. They were just ugly humps of sand with grass, mostly dead, sticking out of them in patches. The vague path wound between them. You couldn't see the ocean at all from here, but you could smell it: a salt-rot smell. A gray mist hung in the sky, bleeding the color out of things. If you licked your lips, the air tasted exactly like it smelled.

"You're so ungrateful."

Bo was carrying the picnic basket. Every time he took a step the bottles inside clanked. The basket wasn't heavy, but he resented carrying it. That made it seem heavy.

"I guess I'm not allowed to have opinions."

That was the right answer. It would leave her with nothing to say for a while. Bo paused a second, pretending to adjust the laces on his shoe. His mom walked past him.

He could barely hear the waves. The sand deadened everything, even the sounds of Bo's own feet. Each depression between the dunes was like its own boring little world, cut off from everything else. Insects chattered and sawed in the clumps of grass.

He thought for a moment of turning around and going back to the car. Make her wait, worry, come look for him. She would be in a panic by the time she got to the parking lot.

No. Childish. He walked on.

When he crested the next dune there was the beach, smeared with haze. The water and sky and sand were three indistinct layers, blended at their borders. Bo had tried to get this effect in painting class. It was impossible to capture this kind of light—the way things shaded off from a tawny sand to the color of the water, the way the color was without a clear border, but somehow different at every point. The sky was a mist-blue you always mixed too much white in. On his canvas it would all look flat.

And then the sun came out, a million shattered angles of light on the water, causing Bo's eyes to dilate so suddenly it hurt. A second later, the mist flowed back.

Dark rock formations jutted up everywhere, and piles of seaweed with bladders like swollen glands.

His mom was near the water line, poking at something with a stick. It was a dead jellyfish, half lodged in the sand.

"Do you think this is a part of one of them?" she said, looking up at Bo.

She knew it wasn't a part of one of them. She just wanted Bo to be excited about something.

What Bo wanted, more than anything else, was to throw the picnic basket into the ocean.

Then Bo saw it.

It was up the beach from them, around a little point of wave-worn stone, just a bit above the tide line. It was massive. As Bo walked toward it, he thought: *Now there's something you could never paint.* But he wished he had his field easel with him.

The misty light of the beach warped when it hit the surface of the alien, bent back and forth as it traveled through the thing's translucent mass. There were forms inside it the eye could not make out, organs or other structures. Again, the mist thinned, and the sun came out with that shattering light. In the brightness the alien looked like beach glass rounded by the sea—a piece of beach glass larger than a passenger van, a fragment of a bottle dropped by giants. The light refracted from its body sent wobbly streaks out onto the sand.

Bo's mom came out from behind the point.

"Whoa. How did it get up here?"

"The park rangers said sometimes they find one or two of them even as far north as the lighthouse."

"Why do they separate from the others?"

"We don't know," Bo said, mocking the park ranger's didactic teaching voice: "The truth is, that's yet another thing we don't know about these creatures. We have so few answers."

But seeing one of them this close up was amazing. It finally made him feel how he had wanted to feel down at Año Nuevo, but hadn't. There, the visitors' path had been far away from the aliens. They had looked like a bunch of vague, glass sausages, motionless on the beach. The ranger had droned on and on, talking about their sudden appearance from nobody-knows-where over three decades ago, and some biology facts about them. Most of the facts were better explained on the visitor display signs.

From those signs Bo had learned a few interesting things. They weren't single creatures at all, but rather colonial organisms made up of dozens of different kinds of single-celled animals, none of which could make it on its own. They didn't have DNA like Earth life did; instead, they had some sort of other system, more like RNA, but using different amino acids.

Biology was not really Bo's "thing."

"What is your *thing*?" One of his teachers had asked him once. "Being sarcastic? How much do you think that's going to pay?"

They processed sand. Or rather, they processed chemicals in the sand and seawater that filtered down through it. Most of their mass was underneath the sand, blended in with it. They had huge rootlike structures down there, grown down into the beach. It was strange to think of: They were gigantic already, but actually they were much bigger than they looked.

"I guess there wasn't enough sand on their planet," Bo had said in the middle of the presentation.

A couple of the visitors had laughed. The ranger had given Bo a tired look. Bo knew that look well: It said the ranger would have loved to push Bo off a cliff, but was too tired to bother—and being arrested for his murder wasn't worth it.

"What we do know is that they are completely harmless. Their structure is so different, they aren't even consuming the same food as the creatures native to our planet."

The visitors' signs had diagrams of different "organs" inside the aliens. The "organs" were really separate swarms of unicellular animals. The signs also had comparisons of the aliens to creatures people knew better: size comparisons to elephants (some of the larger aliens were bigger than elephants) and comparisons to the Portuguese man-of-war and the coral, because apparently those were like these things: colonies of smaller creatures, not individuals.

Even though the aliens looked like a bunch of oversized plastic garbage bags from the distance of the ranger trail, a few people were excited about them.

It probably helped that a lot of the other visitors had brought binoculars. His mom had forgotten theirs on the kitchen counter.

"Don't touch it, Beaulac!"

Bo already had his hand on it.

The ranger had said they were harmless: that the reason the park kept visitors at a distance was because if everyone was walking around down there on the beach it would be a hazard, and it might disturb the aliens—although really, the ranger had said, nothing much seemed to disturb them.

Some tech company jerk in a five-hundred-dollar windbreaker laughed at that. "Like me when I'm watching *The Saturn Diaries*. Feedstream and chill."

Die in a fire, Bo had thought at him.

The alien was as cold as the air around it, maybe colder. Its surface gave slightly to his touch. It was perfectly smooth. Bo had expected it to be slimy. It was not: it was like touching soft glass. It had a coating on it of mist off the ocean, like a window in the cool of early morning. There was a spiral of color deep inside it—a purple curl, like one of the shapes inside a blown glass paperweight. There were other shapes as well, colorless and ghostly, indistinct from the rest of it.

He walked around it, dragging his hand along its body. His hand left a clearer smear, exactly like it would on a pane of glass. At one side, the side the rangers called the "head," there was a perfectly smooth concave surface, slightly protruding from the rest of it, almost like a lens. Some scientists thought it was some kind of sensory organ. But of course they couldn't say for sure.

Bo stood back a bit, crossed his arms.

"I bet you could paint that," his mom said.

"No," he said. "I'm not good enough yet."

They had lunch there in the inlet, looking at it the whole time. Bo's mom had made tuna fish sandwiches and cut up a couple of apples. The bottles were orange cream soda, a fancy brand that was Bo's favorite, but which they almost never got.

They didn't talk about anything but the aliens. That was good. The rest of it faded away: his mother's affair, the divorce, the boarding school, all of it. After lunch Bo made several sketches of the alien. His mother walked a bit up the beach by herself.

By the time she came back, Bo had filled his notebook with sketches. He only had

a pencil and the notebook with him, so he couldn't capture the colors of it, or of the beach itself, but he thought he would be able to remember them. They seemed lodged in his mind.

That whole part of the day was almost perfect. Everything was good until they got back to the car, and Bo's mom said, "Beaulac, I just want you to understand."

"Don't call me that."

"What? Your name?"

"I didn't ask to be named some stupid made-up French name. Beautiful Lake. What a stupid thing to name someone."

"It's your father's name, Bo. And it's a lovely name. And you were born near that lake. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"You haven't had to drag this stupid name around with you and get beat up over it."

"No. I haven't." For a moment, her face was totally blank.

"I hope she was worth it," Bo said ten minutes later. They were coming into Half Moon Bay.

His mother didn't look at him. "I wish you could understand. It was never about her. It was about me. At least now . . . look . . . I know how hard it has all been for you, and I know how much I hurt everyone . . . but . . . I never felt whole before. I was hiding the truth about myself. At least now I know who I really am."

Yeah. Now that everything is ruined. But Bo found himself unable to say it. It was just one more hurtful thing, and although he could feel the anger underneath the surface of his skin—feel it so intensely it seemed he was *made* of anger—he didn't want to hurt her anymore.

Instead he looked out the window.

* * *

The Visitors' Center had a lock at the base of its sliding glass door that was the bane of Illyriana's existence. At the end of a long day—especially, it seemed, at the end of a day when the visitors had been particularly rude, and she was doubting the entire direction and purpose of her life—the lock's hasp would not slide into place.

When she had run out of curse words in English, she tried a few in Albanian, and then Turkish.

Finally, it clicked.

"Thank you," she said to the lock. Then: "asshole."

She walked up the hill. She still did not understand people. Their lack of interest in the world around them. The aliens were a miracle, but you wouldn't think it the way most people reacted. Most people just seemed bored, or disappointed, or impatient when they visited Año Nuevo. Withdrawn into themselves, glancing constantly at their terminals.

Why had they come at all? Nobody was forcing them to come. If they did not want to be here, why go through all the effort?

It was as if they felt obligated. Felt like it was their duty, a box they had to tick on a list of "must see" things in the world.

But almost without exception, only children or the elderly were truly excited by the aliens.

Saturdays and Mondays Illyriana led tours. Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays she sold coloring books, refrigerator magnets, and fancy bamboo terminal cases with abstract screen-prints of the aliens.

There were days she thought the tours were worse, and days she thought working in the gift shop would kill her.

"Why aren't people more . . . interested?" she had asked one of the other docents.

He'd shrugged. "If unicorns were real, people would think they sucked. Some dumb

horse with a horn sticking out of its head. The problem with the aliens is that they exist. They were more interesting when they weren't around."

As the trail back to the parking lot wound to the overlook, Illyriana took a deep breath of ocean air. Well, *she* still had a sense of wonder. Every day, without fail, she spent a few minutes at the overlook, watching them.

She leaned on the rail.

If you closed your eyes, and then opened them and saw them there on the beach, it was like seeing them again for the first time.

She opened her eyes.

They were gone.

* * *

"What I always wonder is where the elephant seals went. The ones that used to come to Año Nuevo every year, before the aliens."

"Oh, the rangers answered that," Bo said. "In the beginning, the elephant seals kept on coming, sharing the beach with the aliens. But after a few years, they shifted their patterns. The elephant seals moved south, to other parts of the coast. The state had to extend the marine mammal preserve almost all the way down to Santa Barbara."

Bo and Aliyah were sitting on the swings in the park they called "Ugly Park." They would often come here, to this little forgotten clump of steel play equipment behind an abandoned housing tract. They came whenever Bo was back from boarding school staying with his mother, and Aliyah's parents were working the same shift. They would sit for hours and just talk.

"I guess the elephant seals didn't feel like sharing," Aliyah said.

"Or maybe they were weirded out. Those things would make pretty weird neighbors."

"I can't believe you got to see one up close. I'm so jealous."

"I'm not going to lie: It was amazing. I'm going to try to paint it."

"I can't wait to see that . . . When do you have to get back?"

"Doesn't really matter. I didn't give my mom a time. Why?"

"My parents are gone. I was just thinking you could come over."

* * *

It seemed like every ranger in California was on the beach. The sun had set, and the beams of dozens of flashlights streaked the gloaming.

Gone. They were really gone. All over the beach, you could see depressions where the aliens had lain. You could see the holes their roots had made—hundreds of holes stretching deep into the sand, already filling in as the water table below rose and shifted the sand back into them, erased them. Once high tide came and went, there would be almost no sign the aliens had ever been on the beach at all.

For the past three hours, Illyriana had felt like she wanted to cry. The feeling, maintained for so long without being released, was exhausting. The first thing she was going to do, she thought, when she got back to her car, was turn on the heater and just sit there and cry.

Out on the water she could see the searchlights of several boats as well.

Where could they have gone?

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. Illyriana turned. It was a park ranger she had never seen before: a tall woman, with gray hair clipped close to her head.

"Hi," the woman said. Her badge read: *F. Kosalapova*. "You must be Illyriana. The one who called this in."

"Yes."

"I was wondering: what about Beach Ball?"

"My god, I completely forgot about him!"

"Can we go and take a look?"

“Yes. Of course!”

Beach Ball was the littlest of the aliens. The rangers had found him far south, down at the edge of the state preserve, all by himself. He'd been scuffed and gray-looking when they found him, and nearly opaque, which they guessed meant he was ill, or injured. A flock of seagulls had been dive-bombing him, pecking at his surface.

Because he had seemed so fragile, Beach Ball had been placed in a tank in a back area of the Visitors' Center. The area had originally been a first aid station and holding pen for injured elephant seals.

Thirty years later, Beach Ball continued to live there in his big plexiglass tank, with plenty of sand to root down into and a complicated sea-water filtration system. Beach Ball seemed fine now—nearly transparent, with a vibrant violet spiral visible inside him. But he had not grown at all.

The excuse for keeping him was that the park used him for VIP visits (or the occasional really charming group of schoolkids) as a teaching tool: a way to get an up-close look at the aliens without disturbing their habitat on the beach.

Mostly, though, Beach Ball was the rangers' unofficial mascot and pet. Although he did nothing at all, over the decades the walls of the room where he lived had been covered with hand-drawn cartoons of him giving lectures, leading tours, solving equations, playing volleyball with a smaller version of himself as the ball, and doing all kinds of other stuff.

The employees at the Visitor's Center attributed everything to Beach Ball. The sign over the coffee maker said, “Beach Ball asks that you clean up after yourself.” A sign by the cash register read: “Beach Ball wants to know if you've run the credit card receipts.”

The rangers' running joke was WWBBD? “What Would Beach Ball Do?” The answer, of course, was always “nothing.” Beach Ball would do nothing at all. Because Beach Ball was totally Zen.

How could she have forgotten him?

She struggled with the lock at the bottom of the door. The same one. Her hands were shaking.

F. Kosalapova put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey. Take it easy. Seriously. We're all going to be feeling upset for a long time about this. We need to pace ourselves.”

Beach Ball was gone. Except for the depression in his sand, it was like he had never been there at all.

“Gone. They are really all gone.”

“It appears so,” F. Kosalapova said. And into her radio: “Someone needs to send a tech up to the visitors' center for samples. Actually, several techs.”

Illyriana was standing in front of the plexiglass, looking in at the dent where Beach Ball had sat for thirty years. She put a hand on the glass.

“What did he do? Teleport?”

“I don't think so.”

“Then what happened?”

“Let's just wait for the techs. I've got a theory.”

“You're a scientist?”

“I used to be.”

* * *

Bo sat on the swing. He had been sitting there a long time. The sun was down, but it was one of those days when the temperature didn't drop at all at night. It felt like the slight breeze that blew over his skin had weight to it. The weight of a silk cloth. He swung back and forth a few inches. He had never felt so . . . what? So still.

A few blocks away Aliyah was in her room. Asleep, yet? Yes, he thought she was. But he felt her here with him, too. He could still feel her, like a part of the breeze that

blew through him. Through him? Okay. That was nuts. I guess you might feel a little nuts after, Bo thought. After the first time.

He felt like he had been . . . what? Opened. This was probably love, right? It had been there before, with her, but now the feeling ran through everything, like a bloodstream. Like he was in love not just with Aliyah, but with the backyard dogs barking their signals from block to block. Like he was in love with the pavement, or the black rubber of the swing he was sitting on, the galvanized steel chain curved and angled in his hands.

Maybe the warmth wasn't in the air at all. Maybe it was in him. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He could hear his own blood in his ears, thundering through him, and the insects in the cracks in the cement.

Love.

On his skateboard, heading home, the air against his face felt like it went through every cell in his body. He felt not like he was moving through the world, but like he was staying in one place, and the world was moving through him. He landed every trick—every little ollie up a curb, every shove-it, every kickflip. The smooth black pavement of his home street hummed to him under the urethane wheels.

"Perfect," he said to himself as he came up into the house. "Everything is perfect."

* * *

"Hey. You okay?"

F. Kosalapova was leaning into the window of Illyriana's beat-up Civic. Illyriana gave the ignition another twist, just to make sure. A click. Nothing at all.

"Hey. This is embarrassing. I think I turned my fog lamps on this morning coming in and left them on."

"This thing's a classic. Still running on gasoline."

"It's not a *classic*. It's just a poor person's car. Do you have . . . jumper cables?"

"No. Does anyone, anymore? But I can give you a ride home. You can rideshare down with someone and take care of it later."

"I'm up in Half Moon Bay."

"It's not a problem. It's on the way: I'm up in the city."

"It must be two in the morning."

"Three," F. said.

"I guess I'm so tired I'm not even tired anymore."

"That's adrenaline. You're going to crash soon."

"At least tomorrow is my day off."

And then it hit her: *my day off*. What did that even mean anymore? What was there to give tours of? What would happen to her?

The techs had sampled and swabbed for hours in Beach Ball's tank and then the rest of the place. At one point, a ranger had asked Illyriana a bunch of questions that were from a T.V. show murder mystery. When had she last seen Beach Ball? Was she the last one to see him? Was she sure she had locked all the doors? Who else had access to the building?

She rarely drove Highway One at night. Illyriana had learned to drive as an adult, and she didn't feel like she completely took to it. Americans often seemed to her to have driving built into them, having been around cars constantly since birth. That was how Kosalapova drove: as if the late model electric she was piloting was an extension of her nervous system and musculature. Under the headlamps the reflective centerline glowed. Tongues of fog were trailing over the road from the dunes and cliffs.

"So—what's your theory? What do you think happened to them?"

"I think they just fell apart."

"What do you mean?"

“In a way they aren’t multicellular organisms—not like we are. They are colonies. I think they just disintegrated. They turned back into unicellular organisms. Like a slime mold.”

“A slime mold? Beach Ball would be really hurt to be compared to a slime mold, I think.”

“Maybe. But I think the comparison fits. The slime mold is a weird one—for most of its life, it consists of separate unicellular organisms. Then for some of its life, it’s a colony—it looks kind of like a slug, but then it grows fruiting bodies, and gives off spores that become new unicellular slime molds. I think they’ll find that the aliens are still around: they are just unicellular organisms now. They moved to a new phase, that’s all.”

“That’s all? Just a new phase? It sounds so simple when you say it.”

“I don’t mean to be dismissive. I just think—it’s probably not a tragedy. Not for them, anyway. They are just moving on.”

Not a tragedy. Standing there with the techs swabbing and sampling, looking at that empty tank, Illyriana had felt as if her whole life was coming apart. This job—it wasn’t much. It didn’t pay much. But it had been enough: A routine. A kind of family, even: all her coworkers with their little traditions, their inside jokes and constant, good-natured complaining about the visitors. And it seemed as if Beach Ball had been at the center of it all, in some way, binding all of them together. WWBBD?

Looking at the empty space where he had been, she’d seen the end of this whole fragile little world she had been trying to build. If she lost her job . . . No. Think of something else.

“So you said you were a scientist, before?”

“I was a biologist. Used to work for the state. Doing the typical things—counting otters, taking water samples, tagging coastal birds.”

“But now you’re enforcement.”

“I saw one too many animals killed by fishing boat propellers, a poacher’s bullet or net. I decided what I really wanted to do was help put a stop to that. Counting them and measuring pollutants wasn’t going to do it.”

She never turned to Illyriana at all. She kept her eyes on the road. The glow of the dashboard chiseled her profile out of the night. Her cropped gray hair seemed lit up, every strand, like illuminating filaments. It must be prematurely gray, Illyriana thought—she couldn’t be older than forty, forty-five.

“That’s admirable.”

“Not really. I was also just bored. Patrol work is more exciting. Turns out I wasn’t cut out for the lab. So, I made a change.” Now finally she turned to Illyriana. “I’ve made a lot of changes, in my life. You know?”

“Me too. But mostly just coming here, to the United States.”

“That’s pretty big. It must be hard.”

“It is. You feel like a stranger all the time.” She never talked like this to people.

“I’ve felt like that my whole life,” Kosalapova said. “Like a stranger. But I grew up here.”

“At least you grew up speaking the language.”

“Sort of depends what you mean by the language. There’s more to it than just words, you know? I never was good with the other codes. Left here?”

“Yeah. And then the third right. So—what does the F. stand for? On your badge?”

“That’s another thing I’m considering changing.”

“Oh, really?” Then she understood. “*Oh.* I see.”

F. Kosalapova glanced at her. “Yeah. A lot going on with me. I think we’re here.”

Before she had immigrated to California, Illyriana could not have imagined how gloomy the coast could be. When she thought of *the coast*—a generic image of what a

coast should be like—she thought of the Dalmatian coast, the Adriatic with its warm light, its water mild and blue and safe, lapping sandy beaches.

The Northern California coast was not like that. So many days here were clasped in fog, with the sun never visible. The sea was a freezing thing crashing against cliffs and boiling between stones. It coughed up giant snags of wood along its beaches as if it had invaded the land and torn whole forests from their roots, rolling them in its chop until they were smooth, gray corpses.

She used to walk on the beach every morning, but too often she would find dead things—the torn limbs of crabs, chunks of jellyfish. Once, an elephant seal with a bite taken out of it almost a meter across. She didn't need that stuff in her head all day.

The redwood-shingled fourplex she rented a studio apartment in looked like an overturned ship, a wreck mired in the bed of ice plant around it. Its hull of shingles was black with age, barnacled with lichen. Inside, too, it would be like a shipwreck: damp and cold. There was no light in the windows.

Here, in the warmth of the car, she felt flooded with something then—a sense of—what? Some people had a warmth, like a lamp inside them. She felt that here, now. Then she felt the hand on the side of her face, mouth softly on hers. If she carried this light into her home. . . . She imagined it there, brighter, composed of them together, warm under the redwood scales of the house. Glow.

“Come in,” she was saying. Was this her, speaking? This brave? “Come in with me. Come in.”

* * *

“Just come over here and look at it. I've been up all night. I need a second pair of eyes.”

The lab smelled of cheap coffee, that distinct earthiness of Robusta beans. That variety of beans always reminded Le of home. Not in a good way. He wished people would buy Arabica when it was their turn to pony up for coffee.

But at this point he couldn't taste it anymore. He wasn't doing anything but pouring it black into his system and hoping it would keep him upright.

Thanh walked over. She was looking fresh enough—she hadn't been here when the samples came pouring in. What time was it now? 9:00. She'd only been at the lab for around an hour.

Le had been up all night, looking through the samples. Looking for cells that weren't there, for traces that weren't there. But then . . .

She leaned over the terminal.

“Neat. A cell. Organelles. There's the nucleus. Golgi bodies, mitochondria. Is this science class?”

“You blind?”

“Maybe. I don't really do cells, you know? I do DNA sequences.”

“Here. I'll bring it up on the big screen.”

Le flipped a switch and the wall terminal flickered on.

“Bigger cell. Bigger organelles,” Thanh said. “*Life is gross up close*.”

It was the bioanalysis lab's fake slogan. One of the techs had made it up.

Le didn't laugh. He walked over and stabbed a finger at the thing. “Here.”

“Wait. What the *fuck* is that?”

“You tell me.”

“Looks like some kind of organelle I haven't seen before. That is so weird looking. Where is this sample from?”

Le set his cup of coffee down on the counter.

“I was looking through samples from the visitors' center tank at Año Nuevo. You know—looking for cellular traces of the aliens. There was no trace of them at all. But there was a lot of other stuff in the tank—lots of phytoplankton and zooplankton in

the seawater they pumped in, just incidental stuff from the ocean. But when I looked closer, I kept finding *this* in their cells. It's what you said—like an organelle. Something I've never seen before."

Thanh stared at the coiled, violet structure on the screen. "Neither have I. It's—that thing is *new*."

"Yeah."

"What zooplankton is this cell from?"

"It's not."

"What?"

"It's not plankton. This is my blood. We have to quarantine."

* * *

Jillian lay in bed, listening to the sound of Beaulac clanking around in the kitchen. Sunday already. Yesterday had not been that bad a day: as their days together went, you might even call it good.

There was a smell of eggs. Of toast, and the good coffee that he insisted she buy. Where had he gotten this taste for expensive things? They were the kind of people who had always been just a bit too poor to live in their neighborhood, who had never quite had . . .

Standing at the counter spreading butter on an English muffin.

The image came to her with such clarity that she actually sat up. She had . . . seen Beaulac in the kitchen. Just then. Okay, no. Obviously not.

Laying the plates out on the table. She won't expect this. The two cups of coffee. Is she still asleep? Aliyah is running. She's just paused, out of breath. Her hands on her thighs. No, she's awake. I'll go get her before her eggs turn cold. Aliyah has started off again . . .

Jillian put her face in her hands for a moment, pressed her eyelids. She often felt this way in the morning: tangled up and out of sorts, still dreaming. Especially lately.

Standing at the door about to knock.

"Mom? You up? I made breakfast."

"Coming, Bo. Just give me a minute."

"Hurry up or your eggs will get cold."

* * *

"Frank."

"Too nineteen fifties, somehow."

"Too . . . frank."

"Yes."

"Francis."

"Like Black Francis, from the Pixies?"

"Wait. How *old* are you?"

"Oh, come on. My dad loved them. Francis is . . . okay. Francis is a possibility. Is it a nice day there?"

Illyriana was sitting on the back porch of her building. No fence around it. Not really a porch, even: just sort of a cement pad the ice plant was probing, considering taking over. There were a few pots, but the plants they had been intended to contain were long dead. People here came and went—people planted things and then moved away and abandoned them to die, probably never thought of them again. But one of the pots was full of wildflowers, a beautiful weed that had somehow found its way there and thrived.

You couldn't see the beach from here, but you could see a strip of sea, and there was an old picnic bench someone had salvaged, and dragged to the porch—a good spot for breakfast on a nice day, if you were careful about splinters. The mug Illyriana was drinking from was one she had found at the back of a cabinet: heavy,

hand-thrown on a potter's wheel, glazed a blue-gray that the mist here often was.

Yes, it was a nice day here.

"Ms. Carabregu?"

Someone is knocking at the door. Out the window, the day in San Francisco is a good one: a cold, clear blue above the buildings. Who can that be?

"Ms. Carabregu?"

Illyriana turned.

The ranger was standing about ten meters or so from her. There was a police officer with him—a local officer by his uniform, and with them another one—state trooper, maybe. And behind the three of them, four figures in Level 3 HAZMAT suits.

* * *

The eggs were good. Certainly, Bo hadn't learned to make them from her: she couldn't make an egg over easy if her life depended on it. The coffee was excellent too, the toast just right.

"Sometimes you cook so well, I feel like you can't be my son. And I don't know where it comes from, you know? This good taste you have. This sense of how you want things to be. Not from me. Certainly not from . . . well, I guess it's just you."

Out the window, a neighbor was mowing their lawn. With the window open, and the buzz of the lawn mower and the smell of the grass, it seemed like summer. But it wasn't summer at all—just an unseasonably warm January. Jillian could not get used to it no matter how long she lived here—the way seasons in California seemed to shift, abruptly, into other seasons—winter suddenly becoming summer, and then slipping back again into itself. Or up in San Francisco the way a June day could feel like December, and October was like August.

"I've been so angry," Bo said. "For years, now."

Jillian just waited for him to continue. *Please. Please let us get through this day without conflict.*

"And I'm sorry."

"Bo, you . . ."

He put a hand up. But not rudely. Not trying to cut her off. Just—asking to finish. "I'm sorry. Because anger is just a waste of time. We don't have much time together, and I've been wasting it. I don't want to waste it anymore. I'm not angry anymore."

"I know that I've . . ."

"No, you haven't done anything. Just lived your life. I used to think . . . I used to think the only reason you had me is so you would have someone who would be grateful to you all the time. But now I understand: You had me because you were lonely, and you wanted to make yourself a friend. It sounds like a selfish reason, but it's not. It's a really good reason."

She was crying, covering her face with her hand.

"You should eat your eggs, Mom. Before they get cold. I'm sorry: I didn't mean to make you cry."

"No. It's a good cry. I just . . ."

"You just hope this is gong to last. That I'm not going to be angry again. I think it will last."

"How do you know?"

"I had a dream last night. I dreamt I was you. And you were dreaming of me. Of us. We were in Oakland, and I was a baby. We were in a church, listening to organ music."

"We were so poor it was all we could afford."

"Were you dreaming about that?"

"I never remember my dreams. But I think of those days all the time."

"I don't remember those days. But you do. You remember parts of me I can't. And I

see you in a way you can't see yourself. I remember things you don't remember. And if we are good to each other, that can be what family is—a way to help each other remember who we are. So we can be better people.”

He reached across the table and took her hand.

She couldn't recall the last time he had held her hand.

* * *

“We fucked up.”

“No kidding. Zero protocols. Obviously, everyone should have been at HAZMAT level 3 at least.”

“According to what protocol? They don't even interact with us. Totally alien chirality: Right handed amino acids attaching to left handed sugars . . . we've been watching these things for thirty years. They aren't a *contagion*. They can't even digest the things we do. For all intents and purposes, they don't even exist in the same biosphere we do.”

“Yeah, but *Anaerovirgula multivorans* can chemically alter mirror nutrients to digest them.”

“They were just *fourbees*, Doctor.”

“Yeah, I know. Big Boring Blobs on the Beach. Four Bs. Very clever. With reverse chirality. With no DNA. With pyrrolysine in their RNA structures. But even there, there's an Earth analogue.”

“Okay, we know of a few archaea and bacteria that use pyrrolysine. But that's not the point. There are so many other differences . . .”

“I've been telling you all for decades to be more careful. But nobody listens.”

It was true—Doctor Chidubem *had* been warning people for years about the aliens. He had been warning everyone there might be more to them. Another stage, for example. But you can only say things like: “There is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it's going to be a butterfly”—which was just some stupid recycled Buckminster Fuller quote anyway—for so long before people stop listening. And it was one thing to tell people to be more careful, and another thing to *be* careful—to do it for thirty years, when there was no indication of danger.

Le could hear cars passing. “Where are you?”

“I am headed to San Francisco. We contact-traced a case to an apartment building there. What about Thanh?”

Le looked over at Thanh. She was sitting in a plastic chair in the corner, dully swiping at her terminal. She hadn't looked up from it for hours.

“It's in her cells as well.”

Silence for a moment from the line. Just the sound of cars passing.

“Did you get the images of it that I sent you?” Le said, just to say something.

“Yes. They are beautiful.”

* * *

“You're Bo, right?”

He had been so far away. Listening. This early in the morning, when it was quiet, you could hear them dreaming in the houses. The sound of it was dim, thin as the shadow of a flower on a lawn, but if you concentrated . . .

“Yeah.” He didn't know this guy. Not a kid: maybe twenty. Dark beard coming in, carefully trimmed. Baseball cap, flat-brimmed. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

“Maybe not. But you know my sister, don't you?”

“Do I?” Then he understood. “Oh. Aliyah. You're Aliyah's brother.”

He saw the other three. And the baseball bat.

“I love her,” he said. “You should know that. And I know—I know for a fact—that she loves me.”

He didn't even put his hands up to defend himself.

* * *

"How are you feeling?"

"I was thinking Farley."

"Okay. You're going to need to explain that."

"Well, there's Farley Granger—the actor in *Strangers on a Train*—who I think you kind of look like. And then there's Farley Mowat, the author . . ."

"You really think I look like Farley Granger?"

But on the other end of the call, Illyriana was sobbing.

"It's going to be okay."

"Is it? They have my house in a giant tent. It's the final scenes of E.T. around here . . ."

"Yeah, here, too. They took my view away. Looking out my window is like trying to look through the bottom of a Tupperware container."

"Are we going to die? Are we infected with something?"

"I don't feel like I'm going to die," F. said. "Do you? Did they take a blood sample from you?"

"They did."

"Me, too."

"Do you think it was some kind of . . . spore, or something? You said the slime molds release spores . . ."

"I really don't know. I think we should just wait, probably. It's not worth speculating."

"I was just starting to feel . . . I don't even know how to explain it. This morning, for the first time . . . I was just starting to feel like I fit into something. Despite everything that happened with the aliens disappearing. It was finally . . ."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," F. said. "Me, too. I feel that way, too. But I need to tell you something."

"What?"

"There's absolutely no way on Earth I'm going to walk around with the name Farley Kosalapov. That's totally insane."

Illyriana laughed. "I wasn't thinking about how the first and last names sound together."

"Anyway, I think I need to go. There's some dude dressed like a spaceman here who wants to talk to me."

"Call me again."

"I will. Until you're sick of me."

* * *

"When can I see him?"

The doctor sat down in one of the plastic chairs next to Jillian.

"First of all, Ms. . . . is it Gagnon?"

"No, that's Beaulac's last name. Mine is Neuberg."

"Well, Ms. Neuberg . . . he's not doing well. I'm not going to lie. But that's today. With head injuries, things can change rapidly. They can get better, or worse, very quickly. You need to be prepared, though. . . ."

"I don't really think I can be prepared for what you are implying. Nobody can. When can I see him?"

"Soon. He's out of surgery, and now what he needs is rest. But soon."

The doctor looked away for a moment, and Jillian noticed for the first time how tired she was. The circles under her eyes, the chipped nail polish that had grown away from the cuticle. Pulling double shifts, triple shifts probably. Her nametag said "E. Lopez" but she had forgotten to introduce herself. In the movies they always introduced themselves . . . "I'm Dr. so-and-so."

You can't make any of them feel better. Talking to them just makes it worse.

“Sorry, what?” Jillian said.

There was a girl standing in the middle of the hallway. Dark haired. Bo’s age or so.

“Are you Bo’s mom?”

“Yes . . .”

Before she could do anything, the girl had closed the distance between them and put her arms around her. “I’m Aliyah.”

* * *

Le couldn’t stop looking at the organelle—its coiled violet spiral, like a shell or horn. He had it up on the wall terminal, rotating it now from a new modeling image he had made.

“It isn’t making proteins. And the cellular activity around it is going on as normal. It hardly seems to be doing much of anything. Not that I can see at this level. I wonder what its molecular weight is?”

Thanh looked up from her swiping. Her eyes were puffy and red, but at least she was interacting, Le thought. He was very worried about her: nothing had elicited a response from her for hours now.

“I’m going to call it ‘The Unicorn,’” he said. “Because of its shape—like a unicorn’s horn. And that color . . .”

“I hate you,” Thanh said. “If I am going to die, I could at least get the chance to name the thing that is killing me. Or you could at least name the thing I am going to die of something *not stupid*.”

“I don’t think any of us are going to die,” Le said.

“Oh yeah? Is that inductive or deductive reasoning you’re using?”

“It’s neither. It’s abductive reasoning.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a hunch. A feeling.”

“Well . . . unicorns suck.”

* * *

“I was there in the beginning. When they appeared on the beach. I don’t mean, of course, that I *saw* them appear. But I was there the very next day. There were dozens of us . . . biologists, epidemiologists, astrobiologists from NASA pulled out of their beds in the middle of the night, plus a whole gang of government and law enforcement agents of one kind or another. I remember it like it was yesterday. The cliffs were so full of reporters it was a wonder they didn’t collapse into the sea.”

Doctor Chidubem sat at F. Kosalapova’s kitchen table in a SCAPE suit, a new NASA model that could almost be called sleek. He looked as comfortable in it as if he were wearing a T-shirt and jeans. “Of course, there were incidents: that was the day someone fired a rifle at one of them, and a man tried to ram the beach in a small fishing boat filled with explosives. Strange times. The ironic thing, of course, was that I had almost appeared in California right along with them: I had immigrated two days before.”

“Epidemiology, I take it.”

“Yes. And from the early days, I was convinced they were wrong.”

“Who?”

“Most everyone. They were seeing what they wanted to see: aliens. But I was certain, then, as I am certain now, that the aliens came from here. From Earth. I wrote paper after paper on it. The idea that something like them had traveled here from outer space seemed ridiculous to me.”

“But their biology . . .”

“That’s just it. They are alien, of course: but not from space at all. They are from a second emergence of life on Earth. My theory is that they evolved somewhere in the sea—an area so unknown to us that it might as well *be* outer space. We don’t need

other explanations—meteors seeding spores from other worlds and all that. Very quaint. They had likely been here all along, having emerged out of the same chemical stew we came from—but at a different time, and in a different form. Right-handed amino acids, sure. No DNA, sure, but their RNA also shows too many similarities in its function to our own . . . God, I would like a coffee.”

F. sipped from her mug guiltily. “I’d certainly offer you one, but . . .”

“Yes, the inconveniences of quarantine. If only coffee were able to penetrate all membranes. Someone should look into that. Anyway . . . everyone kept insisting they were not dangerous. But I was never convinced. There was every sign that there was overlap between our biospheres. That in fact there are ways in which . . .”

“Wait—I read one of your papers! It must have been twenty years ago. God, it seems like another lifetime. It was in *Nature*. You . . . what did you call them?”

“*Prodigals.*”

“That’s it! Because . . . what was it?”

“Because there was always a possibility that some day they would come home. Rejoin our family, enter our biosphere. But nobody listened to me. So I stopped shouting. I opened a nationwide, and then a global, system of laboratories, turning to the great American pastime . . . for the lucky ones, anyway . . . getting rich. If they would not listen, I told myself, I would not worry. Why die a poor crusader? That was not what I had immigrated to this place for. And perhaps I understood something, as well, about human nature.”

“What’s that?”

“No matter how great the danger, people can only remain cautious for so long. Complacency is like entropy: it is the natural end state of every human endeavor. Routine—and boredom—lead to a lack of care.”

Doctor Chidubem’s terminal vibrated.

“I’ll need to take this.”

“Of course. Do you want me to go in the other room . . . give you some privacy?”

“No. Stay. If the results are what I predict they will be, soon enough everyone will know anyway.”

* * *

Bo was hooked up to what seemed like a hundred machines. In the dim light, with the blinking multicolored indicators, the tubes and wires, he looked like a battery being used to power all of this technology . . . as if instead of keeping him alive, the machines were draining him.

Jillian sat down next to his bed. The IV taped to his arm was surrounded by a spreading bruise—a yellow halo on the paleness of his forearm. She looked at it so as not to look at his head. Doctor Lopez had told her he might be able to hear her, or might at least be aware of her presence.

“All of this reminds me of just after you were born,” Jillian said. “You know the story because I used to tell it to you all the time. It was one of those stories you got sick of hearing. About how you had viral pneumonia at four months old, and they had you in one of those plastic boxes in the hospital, hooked up to all these monitoring machines . . . just like now. But you were so restless, even as a baby. You kept pulling the monitors off. Finally, they had to wheel a TV into the room, to keep you occupied. And you stared and stared at it—at those little people moving around in there—and grew calm and stopped pulling the monitors off. And when I tell you that story, I always tell you I knew you would get better, and that I would take you home. But that isn’t true. I thought you were going to die. And that it would be my fault. That’s the truth. I was sure I wouldn’t take you home from the hospital. And outside the hospital, it was August. That lovely time in Quebec when it always feels, in the afternoons, as if a storm is gathering, drawing this light breeze in to the center of itself. And I would

sit on the bench and think: ‘How can a child die at a time like this?’ Because the last thing the world seemed to be was indifferent.”

Early in the morning, you can hear them dreaming in the houses.

“Did you say something, Bo?”

But nothing in the room had stirred, except for the machines. And the intubated, brutalized head was nothing that was capable of speech.

Thin as the shadow of a flower on a lawn.

* * *

“Los Angeles?”

“Positive.”

“Phoenix?”

“Positive.”

“The Gulf Coast Facility?”

“Positive.”

“Halifax?”

“Positive.”

“Hong Kong?”

“Positive.”

Doctor Chidubem tore the second-layer sealing tape from his SCAPE hood and unzipped the hood itself.

“I’ll take that coffee now, if you don’t mind,” he said. “No need to play the quarantine game any further.”

“How can it already be everywhere?”

“Not perhaps ‘it’ but ‘they.’—And I have a feeling this is something that may have been infiltrating the biome for some time. We just didn’t know. If it wasn’t affecting us, if there was no illness . . .”

“We would have no reason to look for it.”

“But now it has pushed out at a much higher rate . . . entered into a new phase. They just . . . dispersed.”

“Yes. I expect we will find the new organelle in the blood of arctic caribou, if we look in a week. . . . This is excellent coffee, by the way. And of course, you knew I would take it black. Do you know what the caterpillar does to become a butterfly? What goes on inside that cocoon?”

“I admit I don’t, really. Entomology wasn’t my specialty.”

“It digests itself. It releases enzymes and dissolves most of its tissues, in order to become something else. A miracle happens in there: it dissolves itself, but portions of its body remain, tiny groups of cells called imaginal discs. They are seeded with the information needed to create new structures—structures that did not exist before and were not even suggested by the caterpillar’s form. This insect does this impossible thing as a matter of routine. And that is an animal that is everywhere, one that we find quite boring. Just imagine, then, something truly interesting coming along. A new cellular structure—a new organelle. They join the mitochondria, that oxygen-respiring purple nomad who once wandered the harsh world looking for its next meal and then found a home in the warm, wet cytoplasm of our cells and took up permanent residence in us. Most of our organelles were once wanderers. The fact is, we like to think of ourselves as individual organisms, but we have our own colonial aspects: we colonize, and in turn we are colonized. None of us is one creature. Not only do we need to cooperate with other creatures to live—we are ourselves cooperatives: There is a bit of the Portuguese man-of-war in all of us.”

“So—now what happens?”

“Won’t it be amazing to find out?”

* * *

Aliyah sat in the orange plastic chair in the hospital hallway, staring at the drop-ceiling panels

I'm going to be all right.

. . . as if I could hear you. And I remember every second of you, that evening. I'm not sorry. Not sorry. Even if you won't be all right. I'm not. There should be things in the world worth paying any price for . . .

But I'm here. Here. And I will be all right.

Jillian stood in the doorway of Bo's hospital room.

You can hear them dreaming in the houses. You really can. If you sit quiet. Even the ones you don't know. If you sit quiet. But it isn't like hearing. It's like a pattern in the blood.

"Aliyah?"

The face that turned toward her looked lost, frightened. Older. Had they really? She should be angry—this whole person, this whole relationship, had been kept from her.

But now there won't be anything kept from anyone. Even the earthworms in the ground will know . . .

"Aliyah, how did you find out Bo was in the hospital?"

Aliyah shook her head. "I don't . . ."

"You don't know."

"They must have called me."

"His girlfriend? Why would they do that?"

Aliyah paused, thinking.

"No. They didn't call me, did they?"

"No, I don't think they did," Jillian said. "And they didn't call me, either. But I came."

* * *

"Ferris."

"Yes. That's it. That's the one I was thinking of."

"I thought so. And I like it. We'll go with that one."

"So, how do you celebrate a new name?"

"I don't know, but I'm driving down there so we can find out."

I know you are, Illyriana thought. And she felt it. It was as if she were driving herself: as if the late model electric Ferris was piloting was an extension of Illyriana's own nervous system and musculature.

She felt it. That feeling of connection to something outside herself. That feeling of being at home in the world.