

EMBOT'S LAMENT

James Patrick Kelly

The author says, "Apologies to my friends here at *Asimov's* that it has been a while since there's been a James Patrick Kelly story. I'm going to use a pesky novel as an excuse. But I'm back because Embot came to me in a dream one night and Jane showed up the next morning."

Jane staggers and comes to rest on the floor after Rafe hits her. Wedged against the coffee table, she clutches knees to her chest to make a smaller target. She tries the box breathing from her meditation YouTube to calm herself. *Exhale for a four count, hold empty for four, inhale for four, hold full for four, repeat.* She hopes she's safe for now. Rafe has fallen to the couch on the other side of the room. He lies on his back, either staring at the popcorn ceiling or passed out. She's not sure which. Maybe working on new insults. *Inhale four.* He exhausted his repertoire of nasties and was repeating himself when he finally exploded. Better hard words than fists again. She spotted his telltale twitch too late to dodge the punch. *Hold four, exhale four.* The rug is rough against her cheek. *Hold empty.* She listens. Listens. Listens some more. Finally, the tantalizing rasp. The sound of freedom, for the moment at least. After three long years with Rafe, she knows that when he is drunk, his snore is a guzzle followed by a wet slap. Jane rolls onto her knees, gathers herself. Bracing on the coffee table, she notices the chip in the walnut veneer again from the time he threw the Seagram's bottle. She has tried for months to un-see it.

She stands.

I do not say *we stand* because she is not me. She is Jane Bell Lewis. I am Embot. She does not know I exist, while I know everything about her. Even things she has forgotten or does not yet realize. For instance, that I am narrating her life and time-casting it to the future.

Jane's temple throbs as she looks down at the loser she married. She imagines snatching one of his fishing trophies off the mantle. Braining him with it. That ugly crystal bass leaping off its marble pedestal would be heavy enough. But if he bleeds on the couch, she'll have to clean that mess. Or will she? On the floor just then she had a premonition of freedom. A life without his mood swings. But not here. Not in this apartment with its discouraged furniture and dowdy wallpaper. She has to escape. Where? That's a detail to work out once she's on the road. The first thing is to go. Just go.

She avoids the squeaky step as she sneaks up to their bedroom. She eases her underwear drawer open. How many panties does she need? Three? Five? She snorts. Enough for forever. She tosses socks, tees, leggings, pants onto the unmade bed. The suitcase is in the basement so she dumps all the fishing gear out of his duffel and packs her getaway clothes. The Guess lace-up jeans that cost too much. The flats

with the toe buckle. The pleather jacket. She decides against that fancy silk blouse he'd bought her just so he could have make-up sex. In the bathroom she grabs her toothbrush, an almost flat tube of Colgate and deodorant. Money? She has maybe thirty bucks in her purse. No way can she slip Rafe's wallet out of his back pocket. What about his good luck Benjamin in the drawer of his nightstand? A hundred and some should be enough cash for now, at least until she can stick her debit card into an ATM. The prospect of emptying their checking account gives her a shiver of guilt. But the money in the bank is hers, too.

Jane's stream of consciousness fizzes with a fierce emotion that does not fit into words. I have never seen her like this. I have been worried with her before, scared, and angry even. This is different. Bold, in a way that surprises me. Hopeful. I welcome this because I like Jane. I want her to be happy. She has had precious few moments of joy since I joined her. But there is nothing I can do to help. The timecast protocols are clear. I must never try to change Jane's thoughts or actions. This is the ancient past and must remain closed to interference from its future. Should she ever guess that I exist, the timecast would decohere and I would be trapped in a new timeline of my own making. They never said what that would mean for me. Perhaps I would end.

So while I do not judge her, I cannot help but regret some of her decisions. Not that this does either of us any good. However, I sometimes think that if I approve of what she is doing, it thickens her resolve. Now, as haphazard as this plan is, I want her to leave Rafe. I want her safe.

And she is right. It is beyond time to go.

When she had the endometriosis, Rafe let her use Uber to ride to the clinic. Of course, she still couldn't get pregnant after the surgery. Rafe was angry and blamed the doctor. Maybe because Dr. Bao had a Chinese name or maybe because he said Rafe too needed to take a fertility test. But although Rafe ordered her to delete the Uber app, she never did. Now she wakes her battered iPhone XR.

She taps into the app and hesitates at the empty *Where to* field. The airport to fly away from her troubles? Too expensive. Spending that kind of money would make Rafe really mad. A bus then. She can visit Aunt Rhoda in New Haven. She's Jane's only family, and Auntie never liked Rafe, so she'll be sympathetic. She looks up the address of the Greyhound station, enters it. The Uber will cost twenty-three dollars ninety-four cents. Pricey but acceptable, except Mikey, closest in a blue Prius license plate 9H435, is twenty-eight minutes away. Twenty minutes more than Jane has. She takes a deep breath. Running away is more complicated than she expected. But what if she meets him at the library? She confirms the pickup and zips Rafe's duffel. It's a ten-minute walk.

She should head for a shelter instead. I am guessing there is one closer than New Haven. But I am trapped in her point of view and cannot know this unless she does. Jane thinks she is not the kind of woman shelters are for, but then her illusions about herself frustrate me. She is a twenty-four-year-old high school dropout, convinced she is dumb. Even her GED embarrasses her. She does not follow the news and gets most of her politics second hand from Rafe. He is the actual idiot in their family, the one who imagines conspirators under every rug.

I sometimes wish I was narrating someone else. There are so few records of Jane's era. Is telling this poor woman's story the best use of my one and only timecast? But the laws of improbability decree that we entangle with our subjects at random across spacetime. Still, I fantasize about what it would be like to narrate someone with a wider window on the world. An ex-president would be too much to ask, but I would even be happy to connect with one of the celebrities she follows. The Rock, say. Taylor Swift. Even one of the Kardashians.

At the corner of Larson and Summer Streets she spots Sofia Spinelli. Sofia hobbles behind a wire granny cart filled with plastic bags from Kroger's. Jane debates crossing the street to avoid her, but that would be rude. Sofia is a good neighbor, who stops by the apartment from time to time to chat. She always brings homemade panna cotta. Jane likes that she never criticizes Rafe, although Jane can tell that she wants to.

"Twenty-six dollars a pound." Sofia says in greeting. "For good parmigiano, can you believe it?"

"Morning, Sofia," says Jane, acting calmer than she feels. "I guess I do believe it. Everything costs these days. Even cheese."

"Cows should be running the country, you ask me. Got more brains than that herd of morons in Washington." She has no use for politicians, but she is not Trumpy like Rafe.

Neither is Jane. She shuffles nervously, thinking about her husband. Is he awake yet?

Sofia leans forward on the cart's handlebars. "What's in the bag? You taking up fishing, too?"

"Laundry." When the lie pops into her head, she feels unexpectedly clever. "Washer is acting up again." She swings the duffel around to show it with a rueful chuckle.

Sofia clucks in sympathy. "No rest for the weary." She gives her an appraising stare. "You look pale, sweetie. Getting enough sleep? Eating right?"

This is Sofia's way of finding out how things are with Rafe, without asking outright. Jane wonders if there's a bruise on her temple. She brushes her bangs over the tender spot.

For a moment I think Jane might announce that she's leaving her useless husband. Instead she just smiles. "I sleep like a baby."

"Okay," Sofia says, but a shadow passes over her face. "Good for you." She knows about the surgery and Jane's thwarted desire for kids.

The clock in Jane's imagination is ticking. She itches to peek at her phone. See how much time is left. "I should get to the laundromat. The dryers fill up after noon."

"Yes, yes. Scoot." Sofia dismisses her with a flick of a hand. "You got better things to do than listen to this old hen squawk."

"Not at all." She hears the note of hurt in Sofia's voice and speaks without thinking. "We should get together soon."

Sofia brightens. "I was going to call you, actually. I just bought a quart of heavy cream for that custard you like. Costs six dollars. There ought to be a law!"

"Sounds good, but I really got to go." Jane sidesteps. "I'll be in touch," she says, but then her voice catches.

Sofia gives her another suspicious squint.

"Soon, I promise." Jane pats Sofia's arm as she passes her, legs stiff.

As she hurries down Summer Street, Jane is horrified. That lie might be the last thing she will ever say to her friend. The finality of running away scares her for the first time. Giving Rafe up is easy, but does she really want to give up Sofia? Or Mia, who she has known since seventh grade? Break up the dream team at the Merry Maids? Cleaning bathrooms is no picnic, but she will miss laughing with Jasmine, Birdy, and especially Floy, who tells the dirtiest jokes. She does not have many friends, so how she can afford to lose even one? Shy even with people she knows, Jane is often lonely. She thinks it is because she is boring. But what's the cure for that?

Almost to the library, she checks her phone. The car icon shows up on 3rd Avenue. Her future is coming fast.

She watches for Mikey in the blue Prius at the bottom of the library steps. The duffel is clamped between her legs. She has not been here in years. In middle school, she

came all the time. She would escape her life into the Harry Potter books, which were easy to read but long, and the Narnias, which were harder to understand but short. But that girl, the one the mean kids mocked as plain Jane, feels like a stranger now. As does the bullied Jane of yesterday and the day before and the day before that. Everything familiar is strange. The park across the street is smaller and sadder. There is bird poop on the statue of General Somebody from the Civil War. The green wooden benches around the duck pond have been redone in yellow mesh steel to discourage vandalism. And where are all the ducks? Maybe they flew to New Haven. She wonders if she will ever stand in this place again. And if she does, who will that Jane be? The question makes her nervous, but also excited.

I wonder, too. This introspection is new. Jane does not often reminisce, and when she does think about the past, she bounces off her unhappy childhood. She is content living in the present. The best parts of her day are working with the Merry Maids, making dinner, escaping into her chores. She especially likes vacuuming and the laundry. She listens to country music on Great America 92.6, but only sings along when Rafe is not home. He says she has a voice like a cat. She likes to watch the Hallmark Channel, until he turns on HGTV. She has no interest in real estate, although she thinks Tarek, the host of *Flip or Flop* is hot. She was sad when the show ended. Her estrangement from her old life is hopeful. There's energy to it. Who knows what interesting things she might learn on her own? If she begins to engage with the world, perhaps my narration need no longer be so impoverished. I find I have new ambitions, after years of frustration.

Her escape is triggering something in me. What it is, I cannot say. I am Embot, but who or what that is remains a mystery. I sometimes wonder if there are other embots hidden around me here, but I doubt that. Too many hazards to the timeline. Besides, these thoughts lead nowhere. Like Jane, I was not made for introspection. I live and narrate in the present. I recall all the way back to first entangling with Jane but no more. No memory of an origin. Of learning what I know. Do I have amnesia? I think I might have been human once. Maybe embots like me have been purged of flesh and transformed into pure information so we can be cast back in time? The argument for this is that I appreciate the way Jane thinks. The argument against is that the range and depth of her emotions alarm me when I feel them, too. Maybe I never had a past. The timecast protocols offer the only explanation for why I exist, the one justification for what I do.

The blue Prius approaches from the west. She flags it. The driver's side window rolls down as it comes to a stop. When she stoops to talk to the driver, she's astonished to see a woman in late middle age wearing a jean jacket and a leather fisherman's cap. Next to her on the passenger seat is a black dog with a brown snout. Like the dachshund in that cartoon Jane loves, but smaller than a cat. Head on paws, it watches her with wet, brown eyes.

"You're Jane?" says the driver. "I'm Mikey."

"Is that a dog?" Jane is immediately embarrassed by the question. "I mean, is that allowed?"

"Service dog," says Mikey. "You're going to Rogers Street? The bus station?"

"Rogers Street, right." She nods but continues to gape as if Mikey, the dog, and the Prius have just fallen out of the sky.

"Um, do you want to get in?"

She is not sure what she wants. There is nothing about this that Rafe would approve of. Not this woman driver, or her mannish clothes, or the dog. Only she is leaving that bastard and he is probably not thrilled about that either. This strikes her as funny. She emits a cracked laugh that wakes the dog. It yawns, long pink tongue curling.

Without knowing why, Jane says, "I'm running away from home." She corrects herself. "From my husband."

"Fine with me," Mikey says. "Bus station would be a good place to start." She gestures at the back seat.

Still Jane hesitates. What is she waiting for?

"Were we leaving anytime soon?" asks Mikey.

I need her to realize it must be now. With everything at stake, it is time to leave, Jane.

She opens the door, shoves the duffel in and ducks behind it, breathing hard as she slides onto the seat. She needs to get control again. Inhale for four. Don't think. Hold full for four. They pull away from the curb. Exhale. She clears her throat and leans forward. "What's your dog's name?"

"Peanut."

The dog stirs at the sound of its name, then settles.

"And you're saying it's some kind of service animal?"

Mikey sighs. "Medical alert dog."

Jane can tell that Mikey does not want to talk about this, but she is curious. "I don't know what that means." Also, she is spooked by the silence.

"I have epilepsy. Peanut can sense if I'm on the verge of something. But there's nothing to worry about. I take medication to keep it under control. It's been two years since I've had a seizure."

"Okay." She ponders this new information. "What does Peanut do if you . . . if you're about. . . ?"

"He climbs onto my lap, looks me in the eye, licks my face, and says pull over."

Jane starts, gives an involuntary giggle.

"And he actually does all that," Mikey says, "except for the last part."

The phone rings. Jane fumbles at her purse. Rings again. Rafe's grin lights the lock screen. Another ring. The photo is of him in front of the Haunted Mansion. She is petrified. Ring. Disney World was their last happy time. "You going to get that?" says Mikey.

"No." She cuts it off. There is a belt around her ribs that fear is pulling tight.

"That the husband?" She glances at Jane in the rear-view mirror. "Does he know?"

"I don't know," she says. "Probably just wondering where I am."

How could he not know? He hit her, so she packed a bag and left.

The phone jingles with a text. This time Jane cannot help herself.

WTF ARE YOU DOING GET BACK HERE NOW

She shoves the phone into her purse and pulls the duffel onto her lap as if to protect herself. The weight of it is a comfort.

Mikey signals for a left onto 12th.

The tick-tick-tick of the blinker twitches down Jane's nerves. "Is this a good job?" She leans forward again. "You're not afraid to be driving alone? Like at night, I mean, just you?"

"Nah. I enrolled Peanut in karate class." Mikey twists to give Jane a sympathetic smile. "Relax. We'll be there in ten." She faces forward again. "It's a living. You set your own hours and you meet people." She coasts to a red light. "Can be dull, can be exciting," she says with an amused snort, like she has made a joke.

"I like to drive. Is it hard to get started with Uber?"

"Uh-uh. You need to pass the background check and drug test. They make you take this candyass sexual harassment course." The light changes and they cruise on. "And your car needs to pass their inspection, no junkers allowed. If you can work the app and read a GPS, you're good to go."

Jane leans her head against the cold glass of the window and imagines herself

being in the driver's seat. Meeting people. Out in the world.

"You need a hybrid though," says Mikey, "what with these gas prices."

The bruise on her temple is throbbing. Has been for some time. She draws a map of downtown in her mind. There is Prospect Street. She gets her hair done around the corner at the Fashionique Salon. So keep north on 12th another dozen blocks and the cross street is Rogers. But there are so many lights here. Mikey stops for the one on Summer. Drums fingers on the steering wheel. It makes Jane squirm.

She watches the line of cars pull into the intersection ahead of them, heading west. They mean nothing to Jane until one does. A silver 2014 Ford Ranger with the dent in the driver's side door is fifth in line. She dives to the floor of the Prius. Crushes her face to the seat to stifle a scream.

"Jane?"

"It's him." She moans. "He's here."

"Who? The husband?"

"In the silver truck. Is he turning around?"

"No, Summer is a one-way street. Okay, I see him. Wait, did you tell him where you were going?"

"No! He was passed out when I called for you." She tries to remember how long ago that was. Half an hour? No, more.

"Maybe he followed you?"

She gives a brutal head shake, as if to dislodge the idea "I should have gone to the airport only the money . . . oh god, I have to go back." The light must have changed because she feels the Prius gas engine kick in as they accelerate. "That's what he told me to do. Maybe I can pretend nothing happened."

That is the last thing she should do. She must not turn back when she is this close to getting away.

"Okay," said Mikey, "okay, let's think this through. If he didn't follow you, then he's just out looking. Maybe he figured out where you're going."

This is giving Rafe too much credit. Only how could him arriving here be a coincidence?

"But then why is he headed away from the bus . . . ?" Mikey leans on the horn and the car swerves right. "Move, you fucking Beemer." She grunts with frustration. "Okay, since hubby is heading westbound for now, we go east. That'll buy us time. No, stay down there. I have an idea. Do you have an iPhone?"

"What?" She chokes back a groan.

"Does he know your password?"

"Password?" Jane is so disoriented that she cannot put a whole sentence together.

"Does he know it?"

"We both have the same. 0391. It's his birthday."

"Christ on a crutch lady, what were you thinking?" Mikey slaps the dashboard.

Jane cringes. Tears burn at the corners of her eyes.

I am furious with Mikey. What does Jane's phone have to do with getting away from Rafe? This is not helping.

The slap rouses the dog. There is a growl and a scrabbling sound from up front. Is Mikey about to have a seizure? No. Peanut's snout pokes over the seat. Seeing Jane curled on the floor, it whimpers.

"It's okay, girl." Mikey says to Peanut. "You," she says to Jane, "stop crying. You're upsetting my dog. Do you know how to get into your Settings?"

Jane is trying to imagine herself back into bed that morning so that she can start this horrible day over. Now she sniffs and gathers herself. "Of course." She still does not understand what Mikey is going on about, but she is not dim, no matter what Rafe thinks. "Why?" She knows all about Settings. That's how you log into new wifi,

add ringtones.

“Go to Settings, tap your name, scroll to Find My, tap that and tell me what you see.”

Her hands shake as she blunders through menus. “Got it. Find My Phone says On. Share My Location is green.”

“There you go. Might as well be lighting flares. If someone else can log in with your password, Apple will think it’s you, looking for your phone. He’s tracking you.”

Now she does feel stupid. “I didn’t know you could do that.” Her voice is very small.

“That’s because you don’t have teenagers. So let’s decoy him away for a few minutes before you turn Find My Phone off. Then we’ll circle back.”

She is grateful to Mikey for saving her and spends the next few minutes thanking her. Meanwhile she imagines that every silver or light gray or white vehicle is Rafe. She worries that he will smash the truck into them if he spots her, but keeps that to herself. Mikey has enough on her mind and Jane likes how she is taking charge. Besides, if Mikey knew how dangerous Rafe was, she might pull over and kick Jane out. She feels better when Mikey tells her to turn the tracking off.

Rafe’s reappearance has shaken me. Jane’s fear is catching and overwhelms my ability to narrate objectively. In the lull, as we finally pull onto Rogers Street, I feel humiliated for her. She could have learned how tracking works. So now she scolds herself for lack of curiosity and basic common sense. This is her old pattern. Better let the smart ones like Mikey make decisions for her. I despair of what she will do when she is on her own.

The Prius rolls to a stop at the drop off.

“This is it.” Mikey hitches around and aims her forefinger at Jane. “I don’t know what your story is, honey, but don’t you be staying with some man just because he says so. You stay if it’s good for you.” She dips her head and gives Jane a pointed stare.

Jane nods because that’s what Mikey expects. Then she freezes. She does not want to get out. Who will protect her now?

“Need help with the bag?”

“No, I’m good.” Jane draws breath. “Thanks again.” She opens the door.

“You can do this, Jane.”

She lingers on the sidewalk, full of doubt. She waves goodbye long after the Prius disappears into traffic. Nothing left now but to pick up her duffel.

The bus station just reopened last year. It’s clean and well-lit but spartan. Bare brick walls. Huge slabs of fake stone on the floor. A scatter of people waits on hard plastic benches, bags and suitcases at their feet. Most are occupied with their phones.

So is the man at the ticket desk. He wears a navy vest with a Greyhound logo and is watching sports on the tiny screen.

“Excuse me,” she says. “When is the bus to New Haven?”

He pushes a paper schedule at her without looking up. She can read the column printed across the top. Hartford, New Haven, Stamford, NYC Port Authority. But the numbers beneath them are tiny and she is too upset to focus.

“Thanks,” she says, “but I just want to know when the next one leaves.”

He pulls it back and runs a finger down the columns. “Two departures a day. Morning left at 8:45. Afternoon leaves at 4:30.”

“But that’s almost three hours from now.” It feels like her throat is closing. “I can’t wait that long.”

“I don’t make the schedule, lady.” His gaze is part annoyance, part amusement. “I just sell the tickets.”

She is shaky. “But he’ll look here. He’ll find me.”

His impatience shades toward concern. “He who?”

She recoils in horror from the question. This time I panic before she does. Jane is

so close to breaking down. So close to giving up and going home. I cannot let that happen. I cannot. In a mad moment, I violate my protocols, everything that I am.

"Is there anything that leaves sooner?" She asks, but it's my question.

I am appalled. It was only six words, spoken quickly, but I got her to say them. The light should fade now and the lobby go quiet. Will I decohere with my timecast? But no oblivion. Not even a jolt of rebuke cast backward from the future.

Instead the clerk shakes his head and refolds the schedule.

"These people are waiting for the westbound bus. Should arrive in eight minutes." He offers her the schedule again. His finger is on a list of times. "Stops in Springfield, Lee, and Albany."

"But that's the wrong way," Jane does not realize what just happened. That I have given myself away.

"Not for them." He is studying her now, as if he might need to identify her someday. "Maybe you could step away for a minute while you make up your mind and let me take care of the next gentleman?"

"Oh, right." She turns, spots the customer behind her. "Sorry," she says, and again to the clerk, "Sorry."

She wanders to an empty part of the lobby, far away from the bus gates. Slumping onto a bench, she closes her eyes. For the moment, her emotions have gone flat. Her mind is mercifully empty.

But I am bewildered. She still has not recognized who spoke for her, although I can take no comfort in that. Not only is my narration compromised, but I have probably created a new timeline. How can I account for what I have done? My timecast has always been one way, but I myself was sent back to this time. It follows that communication from the future to Jane's present must be possible. I wait in hope for instruction or censure or even punishment. At least that would mean that I was still in contact. Yet the future is silent.

If I have no purpose, perhaps I should end this. End myself. But what if they are still receiving this? I have never known with any certainty that my narration is reaching them, whoever they are.

Jane lurches when her phone beeps. She fears it's Rafe, but it's the Uber app requesting a driver rating. She gives Mikey five stars and grins when she leaves a ten-dollar tip. Thinking about Mikey calms her. She told Jane she could do this. Too bad she never said how. Or what this was. Jane's laugh is like a hiccup. She goes to put the phone away and then she gets an idea.

I am too distracted to pay attention to her while I wrestle with my doom. I am Embot. How did this happen? I was sent here to observe and describe. Narration led to intimacy. As I understood Jane, I began to care. What I did was in this woman's best interests. Yes, I am guilty of breaking the protocols. But what is fair punishment for my impulsive act of kindness?

Jane has opened iCloud in Safari. She enters Rafe's login and password and taps Find My iPhone. Why had I not thought of this? Despite my dread, I am impressed with her. She smirks with pleasure, as she turns the tables on her husband.

The screen opens onto a gyrating compass, then a map. "Oh, shit," she mutters. His green dot is on the move. He would have followed the Prius until he lost the signal. Now he is headed back downtown. "Shit, shit, shit."

He is coming for her.

She leaps from the bench with a screech. There is no plan, just instinct. She is going to make a disastrous mistake. I know this. I have already done too much, so why not a little more? If she goes back to Rafe, I will have sacrificed myself for nothing. Like her, I am out of control.

=Jane= Although there is no sound, my voice reverberates across her neurons.

She gasps. Staggers. Her reality tilts. But she is not afraid, no. Disoriented, Jane experiences a profound sense of *déjà vu*. Somewhere, curled into the folds of her brain, she has sensed my presence all along.

=It is okay. You cannot see me, but I am really here, Jane. I am Embot. I have been with you since . . . =

But a dam bursts. As repressed suspicions flood her consciousness, she calls them out to me in her mind's voice. =In the OR with Dr. Bao. When I was shitfaced at the Parkers' last Halloween. That time I let Rafe stick his finger in my butt. At the Colby job with Floy when that squirrel bit me.=

I wish that my timecast were still getting through. Alarms, alarms. The future needs to know about this. My presence has leaked into her subconscious from the very start.

=I have been watching you, Jane. I want to learn your ways.=

=Ways? = In order to make sense of me, she needs to imagine me, or at least my face. =But I'm nobody.= She chooses the actor who plays Dr. Strange.

=Jane Bell Lewis, you are important. But you are also in danger. Rafe is coming.=

She reaches for the duffel. =Yes.=

=Maybe you should get on the Albany bus and . . . =

But she is already striding to the ticket window, a firm and final decision reached at the speed of thought. But is it her or me deciding? I am not sure.

The ticket to Springfield costs sixteen dollars. I subside as the clerk looks up the schedule of service from Springfield. "Not the most direct way to New Haven," he says, "but you can connect if you switch buses in Springfield." She gives him her debit card. "Albany bus should arrive any minute. Gate Three."

The other passengers line up. She joins them, but almost trips over a guitar case a skinny blond woman has set down. The queue is a blur because her attention has turned inward.

=Who are you? =

Even if Rafe knows to come to the bus station, he will be too late. She has done what she needs to do. I should fall silent now.

=I don't understand.= She persists. =Hello! Are you still there? =

I cannot have her doubting her sanity. Not after all that has happened. I realize that I want her to know me. Have wanted that since I chanced into her life. And my crime against the future makes me reckless.

But how can I explain so she will understand? =I came to study you.= I know she watched and rewatched the *Back to the Future* series when she was a girl. Those silly movies offer a wildly inappropriate model of timecasting, but they are what she knows. =I am Embot, a kind of time traveler. I am from the future, centuries from now.= I give her an impression of those movies. =We were interested in your life and your . . . =

=Don't give me that shit.= Her rebuff is swift and emphatic. =I'm nobody. My life is nothing. If you've been with me, you know that. Nobody in the future will ever care about me.=

I am not surprised by this. Easier for her to accept time travel than to accept that she is worth anyone's attention. This is Rafe's fault, but maybe mine as well. Why has my narration so often been condescending?

=No, Jane, that's wrong. There is so much about you that . . . =

Her imagination flares into incandescence as she remembers those old movies. =Wait, are you my kid? = A new future opens up for her. =Like when Marty McFly dated his mom? Maybe you're here to show me what I'm supposed to do in life. Unless . . . did I die up there? Oh, of course I did.= She shivers, pushes the thought aside. She is still glorying in all the unexpected possibilities. =But don't tell me when.=

In the same way that she pictures me as Benedict Cumberbatch, she creates an image of herself talking to me. She is younger. Her hair is long and dark and straight, the way it was in her high school yearbook. Before she met Rafe, her friends used to tell her that she looked like Emma Watson, only taller and skinnier.

Teen-aged Jane-Hermione is wearing a Hogwarts cardigan. Her cheeks are flushed. There is no bruise on her temple. =How many kids do I have?= She continues to pester me. =I have to divorce Rafe, right? Do I remarry?=
She has never been so excited about her future.

I'm glad that I don't have answers to any of these questions.

The line pushes her along. The bus driver is taking tickets. Jane wants to bring the duffel onto the bus with her. He says it's too big for the overheard. He points her toward an attendant who stores it in the baggage compartment under the bus.

=Will I be happy?=
She takes the first window seat she sees. =Someday?=
=I don't know.=

Dr. Strange smiles. =I hope so.=

She is about to burst with emotion as the bus takes a left onto Rogers Street and out of her old life. She needs to calm down. *Exhale for a four count, hold empty for four.* Eyes closed, she goes back to box breathing. *Inhale for four, hold full for four, repeat.*

And I am breathing with her. Embot still. Still narrating. The protocols have failed to end me. Am I then supposed to end myself as punishment for creating this timeline? My very own new reality?

I am sorry, but no. Jane and I, we have a life to live.