

# InterNova

Vol. 1 • 2022

International Science Fiction

InterNOVA online  
Volume 01 · 2022

This e-book is free for personal use only. It may be obtained via direct download from [www.pmachinery.de/internova/online/in01.zip](http://www.pmachinery.de/internova/online/in01.zip). It is not permitted to share this e-book via social media, peer to peer networks and the like. Unauthorized distribution might be persecuted as a copyright violation. The copyright of all contributions remains with the respective writers.

© of this issue: August 2022  
p.machinery Michael Haitel

Editor: Michael K. Iwoleit  
Proofreading: Adriana Kantcheva  
Cover picture: Anaterate (Pixabay)  
Layout & cover design: global:epropaganda  
Production: global:epropaganda



Publisher: p.machinery Michael Haitel  
Norderweg 31, DE-25887 Winnert  
[www.pmachinery.de](http://www.pmachinery.de)  
[www.internova-sf.de](http://www.internova-sf.de)

ISBN ePub: 978 3 95765 804 3  
ISBN PDF: 978 3 95765 803 6

## Editorial

---

MICHAEL K. IWOLEIT

When in summer 2002 Helmuth W. Mommers, Ronald M. Hahn and me founded the science fiction magazine *Nova* which was primarily conceived as a forum for contemporary science fiction stories in German, it was part of our concept to include in each issue one translated story by a foreign guest writer. Although famous writers such as Brian W. Aldiss and Greg Egan supported our endeavor with contributions and we published a number of British and Northern American writers over the years, our focus was on countries and regions whose local science fiction production was, like the German, generally neglected by the Anglo-American centered science fiction markets, regardless of their quality. While looking for interesting stories, we established so many new contacts that soon the idea came up to publish an international edition of our magazine that would feature stories from all over the world in English or English translation. The first and unfortunately only issue of *InterNova*, as *Nova*'s sister magazine was dubbed, was published in 2005, but the time wasn't ripe for a magazine like that, especially due to distribution problems. Still, *InterNova* made its contribution to a movements towards a global science fiction that has continuously grown stronger and more comprehensive since then. Especially our successful fellow Lavie Tidhar from Israel and the Apex Book Company in the USA played a major role in it. Around 2010 I continued *InterNova* as a web magazine for a while. A planed relaunch with new

design and regular publishing schedule didn't come about as health problems kept me unable to work for several years. The idea of an international science fiction magazine, however, was never given up.

After moving *Nova* to its new publisher p.machinery it turned out soon that owner Michael Haitel and me not only collaborate marvelously but also have in common that both like to take risks and start something new. It didn't take me much, thus, to convince Michael to give *InterNova* another chance. The preparations for the restart took some time. Writers from all over the world submitted almost hundred short stories and novellas as well as numerous articles and interviews. The first result of our efforts is presented to you here now. It is planed that *InterNova* will run with four to six online issues and one printed issue each year, the latter published by p.machinery and available internationally through all common distribution channels. The online issues will alternate between mixed issues with writers from various countries and themed issues about the science fiction of particular countries and regions. But even the general issues will have a theme motto and present stories with a lose thematic connection. In the present issue writers tackle, in very different ways, topics that are of relevance in the current world situation. We hope that our readers will enjoy reading these remarkable tales.

I have to thank all writers who contributed stories to the new *InterNova* and to all the fans and editors who helped me to make contacts. A special thanks goes to Adriana Kantcheva who was the first to join in as a volunteer editorial helper.

Michael K. Iwoleit  
July 2022



# Remembrance

---

BRANDON CRILLY

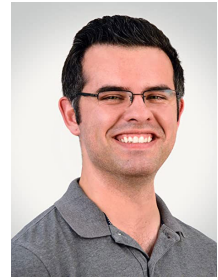
Anna turned from the cutting board when she heard the door open behind her and saw her father finally emerge from the basement.

He rubbed his bleary eyes as he shuffled into the kitchen, the servos in his right leg whirring and squeaking. He was still wearing his cotton pajamas and fleecy blue robe even though it was nearing one o'clock in the afternoon. Without a word, he sat down at the kitchen table and idly scratched at the stubble on his jaw.

It took all of her will for Anna not to say something. She chewed the top of her lip until it started to sting but stopped before she drew blood like she had last time. With a sigh, she went back to chopping the celery for their lunch.

She heard the front door slide open and sighed, knowing that only one person was supposed to be visiting them that day. The sound of heels clicking reached the kitchen a few moments ahead of Dorothy, her father's physiotherapist — or "air-headed technician" as far as Anna was concerned. Cheery, red-headed Dorothy was supposed to be a specialist, assigned by the company that donated the artificial leg to Anna's dad, but somehow she hadn't gotten the whirl or the squeak out of it yet.

"Afternoon, Mr. Sheldon!" Dorothy greeted as she walked past the counter where Anna was standing. "Everything going well today?"



*Brandon Crilly, an Ottawa teacher by day, has more than 30 published short stories to date, by markets like Daily Science Fiction, Fusion Fragment, Abyss & Apex, PULP Literature, and Flame Tree Publishing. He also reviews fiction for BlackGate.com and serves as a Programming Lead for Can\*Con in Ottawa. With Evan May, he's the co-host of the podcast Broadcasts from the Wasteland, described as "caves-*

*dropping on a bunch of writers at the hotel bar." His website is at brandoncrilly.wordpress.com and his Twitter feed: @B\_Crilly.*

"Already played a few rounds of cards with the squad," Anna's father said. "Just finished a few minutes ago."

Anna could picture his eyes lighting up as he spoke. She finished chopping the celery with more gusto than necessary and dropped it into the food processor with enough force to make it rattle.

Neither of them seemed to notice the outburst. Dorothy was in front of the fridge, calling up the calendar on the embedded touch screen. For some reason she could never remember how long her session with Anna's father was supposed to be even though the length rarely changed. Anna needed to get some more vegetables from the fridge, so she waited with arms crossed for Dorothy to finish. Her father had gone back to scratching his stubble.

Dorothy finished checking her schedule. Then, as per usual, she noticed the screen's background image had been changed to a rolling springtime meadow, and with a casual flick of one finger changed it to a close-up shot of five figures in army uniforms. Her daily ritual complete, she left to get her equipment, which was stored in a cupboard elsewhere.

Anna glared at Dorothy's retreating back and then crossed to the fridge. As calmly as she could, she retrieved a few more vegetables for the ground medley she was making. When she shut the door, she spent a moment staring at the new image on the screen — or rather, the old one. She and Dorothy fought a weekly battle over that image, two women in their early thirties feuding like little girls. Anna refused to give up. She would not look at the photo of those five soldiers every time she came into the kitchen. It didn't matter that it was one of her father's favorite pictures, or even that he was in it, smiling and laughing with his old comrades from Afghanistan. Anna refused to have that image showing in their home.

Dorothy returned with her equipment, a small scanner and an adjustor, as Anna was adding the last ingredients to the processor. The physiotherapist crouched down in front of

Anna's father and asked him to start moving his artificial leg while she ran the scanner over it.

"So, how is the squad today, Mr. Sheldon?" she asked cheerfully.

"Oh, they're fine, just fine," Anna's father said. His voice gained more inflection as he spoke as though each word was an energy boost. "I actually managed to beat Rick today. You should have seen his face! He said he's never going to play cards with me again, but I know he'll be up for it again tomorrow. I think we're going down to the river after lunch."

"Well, that sounds lovely!" Dorothy said, practically cooing. "Be sure to say 'hi' to them for me, as always."

"You know I will..."

Anna tried to tune them out. While every word brightened her father, it only tightened the knot in her stomach. She preferred to be elsewhere when Dorothy was around, but she had to make sure her father got his lunch. The gnawing hunger he must have been feeling was the only reason he left the basement, after all.

For the hundredth time, she wished her mother were there. Her mother had been able to deal with everything far better than Anna could. She could have handled Dorothy. Anna just stood there, making lunch and trying to ignore the conversation behind her.

After a few minutes, Dorothy clicked her tongue in satisfaction, signaling that her father's session was over. At the same time, the processor poured the ground vegetables onto three plates, which Anna deftly carried over to the table. Anna always made enough for Dorothy to eat when she was around, but only because her father had once insisted that it was polite.

Dorothy didn't even acknowledge Anna as the plates were set down; she seldom did. Instead, she turned to Anna's father and said, "Now, you be sure to have a nice, long walk with the squad when you go to the river. I want you to keep that leg

from seizing, but more importantly, you deserve to have fun with your friends!"

The last plate of food hit the table with a clang. Dorothy jumped, and turned to look at Anna for the first time that day.

"Can I talk to you?" Anna said, gesturing to the hallway nearby. She hoped her tone made it clear she wasn't really asking.

Dorothy just nodded and left the kitchen. Anna smiled at her father, who looked as though he had stopped paying attention again. As soon as she had her back to him, she let the smile fall.

In the hallway, she said to Dorothy, "I need you to stop."

Dorothy sighed, her cheeriness abruptly vanishing. "We've had this discussion before, Anna."

"Except I keep asking politely. Now, you're just going to stop. As of today."

"I maintain it's not only beneficial, but healthy for your father —"

"What in God's name is healthy about what he's doing?" Anna demanded. She had planned on keeping her voice low, to not disturb her father, but she didn't care anymore. She was going to deal with this; she was the one taking care of him now that her mother was gone. "Is it healthy for him to spend the entire day in the basement, hooked up to that damn computer? Is it beneficial for him not to interact with anyone but what that computer feeds him?"

"There's nothing wrong with him seeing his friends —"

"*They're not real!*" Anna shouted. Her hands were shaking now, and she was surprised she wasn't crying. "Nothing about his life is real anymore because of what you people gave him! I never should've let you bring that machine into our home!"

"I understand how you're feeling," Dorothy said. She raised her hands and put on a soothing tone, similar to how she spoke to Anna's father only not as cheery. "But you must realize that this is the best way for your father to cope. PTSD is a



hard thing to live with, and our company's remembrance program —"

"Don't," Anna said. "Don't give me those corporate lines again. How can you call yourself his therapist? You're supposed to make him *better*."

"Anna —"

"Get out."

Dorothy tried to speak again, but Anna just pointed at the door and said, "Just get out. And if you come back, and you talk to my father about the squad again, I'll be speaking to your superiors."

That seemed to shut her up. Dorothy stared at Anna for a moment longer, then turned and headed for the front door without another word, scanner and adjustor clenched tightly in her arms.

When she heard the front door slide closed again, Anna let out a long, shuddering breath. She quickly wiped away the tears that had leaked down her face. She knew she shouldn't have been so harsh, but Dorothy just didn't understand. Neither did that company, or even the military. They could all talk to her about making her father better, but, in the end, they were only making him worse.

After taking a minute to calm down, she returned to the kitchen. Her father wasn't there. His lunch was sitting untouched on the table. He never left without finishing his meal, so Anna instantly knew something was wrong, and regretted shouting. Luckily, she knew exactly where her father had gone.

She could hear his shuffling footsteps and squeaking leg as she walked down the narrow, rickety staircase into the basement. The room was surprisingly small and completely unfinished; her father had been overseas for most of his service, and, since then, he hadn't had the energy or inclination to improve it. There were a few boxes of odds and ends stacked in one corner, with the water heater in another, next to the fuse box. In the center of the room, there was a cushy, blue chair

that almost matched the color of her father's robe. It sat in front of the long, metal table the corporate technicians had brought to support their invention: the sleek, black computer that Anna hated, with its virtual reality system, its thin fluid injectors, and the innocent-looking neural jack.

Her father was checking the settings on the computer, as he did with every piece of technology before using it. Seeing that aspect of his personality unchanged made Anna feel a little better, until she saw him pick up one of the fluid injectors. After the injectors were hooked to his arm, the neural jack would follow.

"Dad," she said, and he stopped and turned to her, his expression calm and mild. She didn't know how to begin; she had kept quiet for so long that the words weren't coming. "I'm sorry I shouted up there. I kind of lost it on Dorothy."

"You don't have to apologize," her father said. He smiled, and, though it looked sad to Anna, it was still the most genuine expression she had seen on him in a long time. It wasn't a fading effect from his time connected to that computer, or his usual benign expression. "I understand why you're upset."

"Do you?" Anna asked, taking a step toward him.

"Yeah," he said, and looked down at the neural jack. She wondered if it gave him comfort. "I realize a lot more than you think, honey. I know how much you wish I didn't use this thing. And how you think I don't know that what it shows me ... isn't real."

Her father looked up at her again, and she saw his eyes were wet. "I know they're not real. I know that when I'm hooked up, I'm not overseas with the squad. That when I talk to Rick, and Joan, and Andre, and the rest, I'm not actually with them. It doesn't change anything."

"How can it not?" Anna asked, after finding her voice again. "If you know it's not real, why do you stay down here all day, pretending you're playing cards or walking by a river?"

"You don't know what it's like." His voice started to shake.

"Dad," Anna pleaded, "I need to understand."

He sighed. "We ... we trained together. We were like a family. They ..." He struggled to find the words. "We were trained how to work together, to be like brothers and sisters ... but not how to deal with ... afterwards."

This was becoming the longest conversation she'd had with her father in a while. Listening to him trying to voice a sense of loss and longing that must have reached to his core, she felt her own tears start falling again. She crossed her arms to steady herself, knowing she had to continue. Her father seemed coherent, but she had no idea if she could ever have this conversation with him again.

"Staying down here won't help you come to grips with that, Dad. It won't get any easier."

"How can you know?" His eyes widened, and he looked at her with more intensity as though he had woken up. "This remembrance program ... when I see the squad, they don't judge me, or accuse me of leaving them behind, like they do in my dreams. They try to comfort me. When I'm with them ... I can forget what really happened."

"But ... it's not real. *They're* not real..." Anna said.

"They don't realize that. I know they're just simulations, using data to pretend to be my friends, but if I didn't know, I wouldn't doubt who they are. Now that I have them back..."

Her father shook his head, looking up at the ceiling. "You know, we decided not to say anything like goodbye. As if ... as if it was a bad omen. I ... I just need more time with them..."

He wiped his eyes as his voice faded, and Anna suspected she wouldn't get anything else from him. She could see his expression turning distant, one of his favorite defense mechanisms. He was still holding the neural jack, though tighter than before.

For a while, Anna just stared at him, trying to understand how someone could become so damaged. Her father never told her any stories about the war, not even anecdotes about the

squad. She knew they were important to him, but she wondered how they could be so important that he had to spend every day seeing them, for years, because he couldn't come to grips with surviving where they died. It was a product of PTSD, of course, but that didn't change her father's feelings.

*Is there anything that would make me so ... obsessed?* she wondered.

Again, she wished her mother were there to help her. Her mother would have sat her down, told her what to do and that everything would be all right. It wasn't just the support Anna missed, though. It was singing while they cooked meals, watching holofilms in the living room – decades of experiences that were only memories now. She knew she would give anything to spend just a little more time with her mother.

Anna's breath caught.

Her mother had been taken away just as suddenly, though by a brain hemorrhage instead of a war. Anna hadn't been able to say goodbye, but she thought that, over the years, she had come to grips with losing her. But she knew if she were given the chance, she wouldn't pass on spending more time with her mother. As strongly as she felt about her father's behavior, watching him disappear into the basement so he could ignore the world and his only daughter to laugh it up with his war buddies ... she had to wonder if she would behave any differently.

She took another steadying breath and focused on her father again. He was sitting in the chair, the neural jack dangling in one hand, his energy and focus spent. Anna smiled gently as she crouched down in front of him and grasped his other hand.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. I didn't understand. But it makes a little more sense to me now." She smiled softly and added, "I was actually just thinking that if I had a remembrance program for Mom, I'd probably be the same as you."

He nodded but didn't say anything, and she knew his focus was vanishing. The conviction couldn't last.

"I'll be upstairs if you need me, okay?" She waited for another nod before she stood up.

Anna was halfway up the rickety stairs when her father spoke again.

"She's in there, too," he said in an offhand way, and gestured at the computer.

Anna stopped in her tracks. She turned to stare at her father with wide eyes. "What?"

"I had them include a simulation of your mother." His eyes still looked distant, but his expression was sad, and his voice was low. "I've never used it."

"Why not?"

After a long moment of silence, he looked at Anna and answered softly, "If I did, I would never leave."

Without another word, he started attaching the fluid injectors to his arms. Anna watched as he deftly carried out his daily ritual, finishing by applying the neural jack to his temple. Her father leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and she knew he had left her, filled with questions he could never answer.

# The Jellyfish

---

ADRIANA ALARCO DE ZADRA



*Adriana Alarco de Zadra was born in Lima, Perú, in 1937. During her life she has travelled a lot for studies and for her husband's work. She has published six books for adults, works on geography and literature, eleven booklets for children and one science fiction ebook. She won prizes for children dramas, worked as a teacher, secretary and translator and presided the Ricardo Palma*

I'm dissolving in terror. The water continues to rise with incredible force. My cells are getting thinner and more transparent.

I must find a place to take refuge. The blows come, and I don't know how long I'll be able to resist. I feel so bad that if anybody told me I have died, I wouldn't be surprised.

Humans have found a way to survive. They have special suits, spherical caves with oxygen and light that filters through the cracks, through the water. The air ball is full of people, who are attacked when they try to enter the enclosure. I try to stay away. From my aquatic space, I observe how they fight among each other. They are fierce, arrogant, and with disproportionate bodies. Not even slightly like me, one of the most intelligent beings. They call me Jellyfish! As if I were floating jelly, which is absolutely not true. I am transparent, elastic; I move in the water with agility; I choose the form that best suits me to move, and, when I have an appetite, I join another being similar to me and absorb it.

Human beings who have inhabited the ball for a long time have studied us and refer to my species as cannibals. Nothing could be further from the truth. We give life to our fellow similars within ourselves. Thus, we think with their same thoughts; we grow with their same genes; we enjoy their same happiness. What more do they want!

Humans do not comprehend.

I have seen that they wear special suits, which they can use, both, inside and outside the water.

Water is covering the planet, and there is less and less land. This is why, they are desperately looking for places to survive: on ships that float, that fly, or that descend to the submarine depths. This is how they have found the underwater secret refuge, the sphere of the depths.

But they don't take off their suits completely even in those oxygenated caves. They move slowly and clumsily. They are not delicate and harmonious like us. They circumvent the easiest obstacles with the greatest difficulty.

I see that their suits are experimental because they don't understand their use very well. I float in the surrounding waters and observe them. I approach the transparent walls that cover the enclosure and see how some of them strip their torso and stop under such a strong light that it makes me flee from the underwater sphere with its heat, which I hate because it disfigures me. They probably want to get disinfected from bacteria and "water bugs" as they call us.

In the midst of the blow of the waters that at times drives me away from the human group that flocks to the depths, I see how new people cannot enter the sphere. There are too many of them inside. They push each other, they get angry. Terror is contagious.

They are more protected than we are from the sea currents. The intelligent suit that covers them inflates and helps them to float on the water, to swim and move, and, perhaps, also to fly through the air. When I look at their boots, I see that they are supplemented with hooks to collect substances from the ground. They probably analyze them. Their gloves also investigate the components of the algae and corals that rub against them. The knives they carry on different parts of their bodies are impressive. It is wise to stay away from these humans. They

*Foundation in Lima for ten years. Now as a widow she lives in Italy near her daughters and grandchildren, paints with oil colors and writes stories.*



can be aggressive, violent, destructive. I don't think they use their weapons only for their defense because they cut anything with them if it bothers them or is in their path.

I'm not saying that they will become like us, harmonic and simple. I don't have that hope, and I don't believe they are superior enough beings to do that, but, maybe, they could imitate our customs as soon as their habitable territory becomes smaller. The submarine sphere has limits, and they cannot exist under the waters without their suits that cover them, protect them, help them to think with their greater capacity. Who could have invented them? Possibly, some aquatic being. Some "jellyfish" from the depths.

I see that, already, some humans decide to leave the refuge and explore the new coral territory that unfolds before their eyes. I watch them from afar, but I don't escape. I have come nearby and can have the pleasure of leaving at will. They can't do that. The earth is almost non-existent. The ocean takes over their dry territories little by little. They must be attentive to the careful consumption of each resource they possess because their survival depends on it. How do they want to achieve their goals when so fragile and clumsy?

Now, I see them moving towards the surface of the waters. When they swim near me, I discover that, in the shoulders, the intelligent suit carries needles, which inject vitamins and energizing liquids if the vibrations of the human body signal that this is necessary because of weakness or an external attacks. That keeps them active.

Through the waters, I realize that they flush and fly over the surface like certain seabirds. Are they looking for another sphere of the depths? Or do they want to escape their inescapable destiny?

Chaos and devastation begin in the submarine ball. I said it before. They are the imitators. The inhabitants who remain in the sphere can no longer move for lack of space. They push each other and hit each other. They break each other's suits

with sharp knives. The red liquid in them squirts out and they bite each other with fury and hate. They also want to survive with the absorbed virtues of others of the same species.

That is how they will think the same thoughts; they will grow up with the same genes; they will enjoy the same happiness. The fierce capacity of beings who fight for their lives leads them all along the same path. Some disappear to feed others. There is nothing new under the waters. Let us leave the novelties for the elderly who wish to rejuvenate.

## Babies Come from Earth

---

LOUIS EVANS



*Louis Evans has made many decisions. Someday he hopes to find out what they meant. His fiction has appeared in Nature: Futures, Analog SF&F, Interzone and many more. He's online at [evans-louis.com](http://evans-louis.com) and on twitter @louisevanswrite*

The sky is the color of an old blue egg bleached in the sun. We walk along the beach the same way the clouds are going.

He is squeezing my hand with the rhythm of a heartbeat. I wonder if he knows he's doing it. It's a light sort of question, a net cast over the deeper ones below. I realize I'm squeezing back, continuously. No rhythm. Flatline.

"I'm sorry," he says, and there's a catch in his voice.

I don't know if he's speaking to me or to the thing inside me that they have implanted. That thing inside me, growing, only half alive.

I don't know who he's apologizing to, but I answer for both of us.

"I'm not," I say, and there's no hesitation in my reply. We made a decision. We knew what it meant.

Already it is dark enough for our smallest moon, green and cracked, to take form in the sky.

#

*This is how you do it. You take your surrogate and, in the third trimester, you change the meds. You have been drugging her already, drugging her and testing her, from well before week zero.*

*In the third trimester, you change the meds. Before, it was just three or four or five pills. Ordinary things. A surrogate will swallow what she's told.*

*But in the third trimester, there is the drink, which is a slang term for cryoprotectants, which is a pretty way of saying antifreeze, damn near magic if you look at the crystallography, the way ice does not begin to form, the way chilled blood goes on and on in waves. She begins to swallow it by the cupful.*

#

The nursery is small and neat. He carved the crib by hand. I have always loved his hands, the way they turn and turn a knife around the grain in wood, the way they plant flowers and pick weeds. But I love them most, and secretly, for the way they are perfectly still in repose.

If it were on command, they'd have made him a surgeon, but his fingertips buzz like dragonflies when he reaches for something important, and so he is a farmer instead.

I remember the buzz in his fingertips the first time he held my hand, the way the honeysuckle smelled as we fell, laughing, to the grass. I think about the honeysuckle, which is native, not a transplant; I think about how Earth gave us her cast-off names. I think about the Earth's gifts.

The honeysuckle may not be the same as on Earth, but there is the same meaning to its smell, and I kissed him under a thick quilt of summer. I have been ready for a child with this man for a long time.

There is a pattern on the wall of the nursery cast by the shadows of the drapes, curling and uncurling gently. I catch my fingers in the drapes and pull; the shadows stretch themselves taut, and they stay, anchored for as long as I can hold them. The sunlight comes in somehow anyway. That's good. A baby shouldn't be in the dark.

#

*This is when the vomiting starts. And there are the meds for that, too, but she vomits anyway. You are used to reassuring them with careful half-truths. "It's not that bad," as though it were anything other than exactly as bad as it is. You will keep saying it those times that something goes wrong, when she cannot keep the cups down at all, when they switch from oral administration to amniocentesis, as sometimes they must strap her down and wheel her away to cut it out of her, your lying face reflected in her sweat-stained brow, screams just beginning to unhinge her jaw — but this is fairly rare.*

*Once she can keep the cups down, the dose begins to grow. She passes it, most of it, producing gloriously unfreezable runny stool, stool you could use to lube tank tracks on Europa, and so she must keep drinking it, getting it into her system, into the amniotic sac, through the placenta.*

#

I was eight when my brother came to us. My parents swept and tidied and made things baby-safe again, stoppering outlets and moving vitamin caps to the high shelves.

I remember how carefully we dressed, the formal way that my father held open the car door for my mother. The shuttle sitting on the long thin strip of asphalt, fat and sleek like a bird full of young, a fish full of spores.

I remember how the grass had been burned away around the runway, the men and women in clean blue scrubs laboring about it, grass smoke curling between their legs. How the light from its metal womb was green like the sea.

#

*What you do is ten days before the due date, you take her into the delivery room. Premies die in space, but ten days before is viable.*

*It is cold in there, cold enough that you take to slipping hand-warmers inside your double-thick latex gloves, which is against the rules, but fuck it, and by the time you arrive, she is shivering, her fingers and toes bluing alarmingly and the blood under your knife is colder than blood should be.*

#

My brother dreamed himself to death.

Earth is a very long way away, and the sleep is deep and dark. We bring them down into the world on a long, thin path of flame, and most of them wake. But some do not; they remain somewhere in between the stars, dreaming forever of the smooth arcs that link world to world, the way it feels to be frozen and falling together, the passage of time beyond time.

#

*Now is when you need to move quickly.*

#

We made a decision. We knew what it meant.

#

*Here is the shape of the amniotic sac, the way the caul wraps itself around the infant. Here are your hands, spreading apart the muscle and the membranes, pressing and pulling. Do not push; the sac must remain intact.*

*This is you inside her. She is open, now, like an empty box, like a forgotten gift. The cryopod is alongside the operating table, the tanks of oxygenated cryprotected saline beneath, chiller running already, chattering like your teeth. You lift the infant still in its membrane into the pod. The orderlies murmur*

*and the pod's mouth begins to fill with freezing spit. One last incision, long and wide like a smile, and it's done, the spit is rising, the mouth is shut, the pod fills to the last inch of clear plastic. Already it is cold enough for frostbite, nipping at your fingertips; the baby's face is lilac, still.*

#

It happened in my fourth month. My husband was not with me.

I was walking in the hospital's garden past the wall where the honeysuckle climbs, and there was a knot between my hips. Out of nowhere. I sat down on the path suddenly woozily — the drugs had given my fingertips and skull the texture of felt — and blood pooled between my legs.

The nurses rushed me to the OR and stripped me in a dream of hands. I do not know when they gave up on trying to save it. Their voices were the same throughout, the susurrations of wind through tall grass.

#

*All that is left are the leavings. The orderlies wheel the cold cart away, slipping it off somewhere, into the river that leads to the Thread and to space. You sew up your surrogate and pat her hand, tell her she did well and that you're proud of her, moving your tongue like a scalpel, carving out familiar patterns. Tomorrow you will look in on her, and begin to count the days until she can do once more. But you are done for tonight.*

#

It never lives. This is what she told us, my husband and I, sitting in the hospital office.



"I wish it were otherwise. It never lives. But you live. And the next ship has your child on it — has your new baby on it *already*, just waiting for you to make the brave choice, the generous choice, to give some months of your strength and hope to science, to medicine. To the hope of natural births on this planet. Already we are better at it — the average pregnancy lasts a whole three to six months, now!

"That's how it is," she said. "I hope you make the good choice."

Sitting in the office in the hospital, in our two chairs, hand in hand, we did not discuss it. We knew what we wanted, and we made a decision.

#

*Some nights, you go out to see the Thread and watch the bubbles rise. Not on the nights after you operate; on those nights you take an unwise dose of kavalactones, the only thing left that gives you dreamless sleep. And you sleep.*

#

Babies come from Earth. I learned this in my childhood, from parents and picturebooks. I do not know how I imagined Earth in those days. I have memories of rows of harvest infants, like lettuce heads. Crowded but comfortable.

Just before my brother came, my mother explained to me about the List. We had to wait our turn, she said. They did not tell me where we were on the List. They did not tell me that those high on the List are given survivors, and the low receive only the dead.

I was sixteen, a month before my sister came, and I found my father crying, and he explained to me how babies are made and bought; how long it had taken to learn that you could not reproduce under our sun.

He told me: "If you volunteer to conceive a child — a fetus, a thing — if you let them test treatments on you, even though you know the thing in your belly won't survive, they move you up on the List. It's the only way to get ahead."

He said my mother had volunteered, had spent the month in the Maternity Ward. A Maternity Ward from which no child had ever emerged alive. That thanks to her sacrifice, I would get a live sister, where I had gotten a dead brother.

That evening, I walked out under heavens like a bowl of pure water. You can see the Earth's star on a clear night from my childhood home, but I did not look up. I was feeling the grass and soil beneath my toes, and I was wondering, the way a girl wonders, just what I would give to be a mother. Now I know.

We are a young couple. The List is long, and there is only one way to get ahead. We made a decision.

We knew what it meant.

#

*At night, the Thread is lit a soft, crisp white, nothing gaudy, and it goes on and up forever. Sometimes, you must wait a full fifteen minutes to see the next bubble rise.*

*This is how you do it. When you see the bubbles, you must let the idea of their cargo, the frozen infant faces, slide softly across the surface of your mind. You must not think of girls and boys taking first steps under distant suns, and you must not think of men and women growing tall in a strange land, wondering what it sounds like when their lips form the words "mother," "father." You must not think of how far away the stars are, trying to fit the scale of space inside your skull, you must not think of your own mother, the way she smiles at you, the way her nose is your nose and your hands are your father's hands, you must not wish for a change in the order of things —*

LOUIS   EVANS   BABIES   COME   FROM   EARTH

*This is how you do your job.*

#

I am standing in the field now, wearing my good dress, waiting for the stork. Unbidden, my hand rides up over my collarbone. His hand joins me, envelops mine. Soon there will be a twinkle above us, and here I am, looking into a clear blue sky.

I am standing in the field with my husband, waiting for our child to fall from above, waiting —

# The Withering

---

BRUCE GOLDEN



*Bruce Golden's short stories have been published more than 150 times across a score of countries and 30 anthologies. Asimov's Science Fiction described his novel Evergreen, "If you can imagine Ursula Le Guin channeling H. Rider Haggard, you'll have the barest conception of this stirring book, which centers around a mysterious artifact and the people in its thrall." His latest book, Monster Town, is a satirical send-up of old hard-boiled*

I lie here as I have lain for so long, like a crumpled fetus, waiting for an end that will not come. I beg for it ... I pray for it. But even as I wait for a cessation to my terrible existence, I know it is only a seductive fantasy. I imagine release, escape, blissful freedom — for imagination is all I have left. How perversely ironic that the cause of my damnation is now my sole salvation.

The air reeks of disinfectant as it does habitually, and the only sounds I hear are distant murmurings. There's a chill in the air, so I clutch futilely at the lone, coarse sheet that covers me and open my eyes to the same austere wall, the same mocking shadows that greet me in perpetuity.

This time, though, I see a slight variation. Something is there; Something I can barely discern in the feeble light. A tiny, quivering, wiggle of activity. I strain to focus and see a caterpillar laboriously weaving its cocoon. Somehow, it has made the herculean trek to where the wall and ceiling intersect and has attached itself in the crevice there.

As I lie here, I wonder what resplendent form will emerge from that cocoon. But even this vision is eventually muted by the despair that possesses my soul. I struggle not to reason because there is no reason. Guilt or innocence, fact or fiction — they are concepts that no longer matter. All that matter are the gray ruins of my memories — memories that play out across the desolate fields of my mind. I cling to them the way a madman clings to sanity. In truth, I'm but a single, aberrant

thought from slipping into the murky, swirling abyss of madness myself. So, I try to remember.

I remember the carefree excursions I took to the ocean as a child — the warm sand, the cool water, the waves lapping at my ankles. I remember the university, in the days before reformation. The camaraderie of my fellow students. The give and take of creative discourse. Soaring over the sea cliffs on a crude hang glider built by a classmate. The girl with the bright red hair for whom I secretly longed. I remember many things, but, always, there is one tenacious, tumultuous recollection that intrudes.

It's always the same. The same thunderous sound of cracking wood as my door bursts open. The same flurry of booted feet violating the sanctum of my thoughts. The same rough hands that assault and bind me.

I remember the looks of hatred and repugnance, the shouted threats of violence from unfamiliar voices. The relentless malice focused upon me was like a living thing. Time and space became a rancorous blur as I stood in the center of an imposing room, still bound, surrounded by more strangers. I was on display, the accused in a courtroom where only the degree of my guilt seemed subject to debate.

Much of what occurred that day is lost in a haze of obscurity, but I clearly remember the prosecutor's embittered summation.

"The facts are incontrovertible, honorable Justice," I recall him stating with restrained assurance. "A routine intruscan of the accused's personal files disclosed numerous writings, both prosaic and poetical in nature, which can only be described as obscene and disturbingly antisocial. Public decorum prevents me from detailing the improprieties here, though the complete volume of these degradations can be found in the articles of evidence.

"In addition to the *possession* of these heinous works of pornography, the accused fully admits to authoring them. I say he stands guilty of counts both actual and abstract. I request

*detective stories featuring movie monsters of the black & white era. His homepage is at <http://goldentales.tripod.com>*

that no leniency be shown by the court, and that he be sentenced under the severest penalties allowed for such crimes."

I distinctly remember the prosecutor, indifferent but confident, returning to his seat as the presiding justice contemplated the charges.

Turning a stern glance towards me, the justice methodically asked, "Does the accused have any statement to make before judgment is passed?"

I remember standing there, befuddled by the ritual of it all, unable to accept the realization that it was my fate they were discussing. When it seemed I wouldn't reply, the justice opened his mouth to issue the verdict, and I quickly stammered the only thing I could think of.

"I ... I admit I wrote things that may be considered inappropriate by some, but they were simply meanderings of a personal nature, never meant for public dissemination. In no sense was I propagating the enforcement of my ideals upon society. They ... they were simple fantasies, scribbles of an unfettered imagination, nothing more."

"Surely," boomed the justice, "throughout the course of this trial, if not previously, you have been made aware that, under our governing jurisprudence, thought is deed."

When I failed to respond, he went on. "If you have nothing further to say in your defense, I rule, by law, your guilt has been determined within reasonable doubt. I hereby sentence you to the withering."

I remember the clamor of hushed voices swelling like a balloon about to burst as the words were repeated throughout the courtroom.

*"The withering."*

The sound reverberated inside my skull, but terror and denial colored my reality. The withering. It was something spoken of only in whispers. No one I had ever known knew the truth of it. There were only rumors, grisly tales with no substance, yet the power to invoke dismay and horror.

Much of what happened next is a void of innocuous bureaucracy, but I remember the room where it took place. I was still bound, this time by sturdy leather straps that embraced my wrists and ankles. Except for the straps, I was naked. Lost in the surreality of the moment, I felt no humiliation at my nakedness but was overwhelmed by a pervading sense of vulnerability. I remember a chill in the room. There was a draft blowing from somewhere nearby. A single bright light was positioned so that it blinded me with its glare.

Three others were in the room. One I designated the "doctor," and two men who assisted her. They went about their business with systematic efficiency, seeming to ignore my obvious presence.

Then, without really acknowledging me with her eyes, the doctor began explaining the procedure. Paralyzed with fearful anticipation, I failed to absorb much of what she said. I remember only bits and pieces. Something about "hormonal injections" ... "osteo and rheumatoid mutations" ... "effects which bypass the brain."

The technical details of her explanation became a mere backdrop when I spied the row of hypodermics. Its length extended beyond absurdity, and, when she reached for the first one, I braced for the pain to come. However, after a few minor stings, I felt only a pinching sensation as needles were inserted with care into my thighs, my forearms, my neck ... and on and on until each violation of my body no longer mattered. I must have passed out at some point because, when I awoke, I was in another place.

I have no idea how long I was asleep, but, as I weaned myself from unconsciousness, I felt a stiffness that convinced me I had been lying there for some time. I tried to move but couldn't. I saw no restraints holding me down, so I tried again. I was successful, briefly, if you consider inducing a stabbing pain somewhere in my back a success. The pain convinced me to forego any further attempts at movement. So I shook off the



vestiges of slumber and tried to recall with more clarity what had happened.

Oh that it could only have been a horrible dream. But my reality had become a nightmare, one I hadn't yet grasped in its fullness. I know now nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to learn.

After I lay motionless for some time, a white-coated attendant approached me and bent over to engage in some sort of interaction with my bed.

"Where am I?" I asked, my voice cracking with dryness. "What's wrong with me? Why can't I move?"

The attendant made no sign he heard me. Instead, he pushed my bed into a corridor that stretched on without end. The wheels churned below me as we passed cubicle after grim cubicle. In the dim light, I saw other beds, beds occupied by inert bodies. The shadows and the constant jog of movement prevented me from seeing more until we came to a halt. The attendant departed, leaving me as naked and helpless as the day I was brought into this harsh world.

The alcove where I had been left was much brighter, and it took time for my eyes to adjust. Unable to turn my head without great pain, I could look in only one direction. Facing me was a metallic wall or door of some sort. The metal's sheen was highly reflective, and in its mirrored surface I saw myself.

Rather, I saw what I had become.

I have no idea how long I screamed before my cacophonous lament attracted a swarm of attendants who quickly sedated me. But I'm sure I wasn't the first, or the last, to wail in terror inside those somber halls.

I try not to remember what I saw in that hideous reflection. But I can't forget that my fingers are now gnarled deformities, my arms shrunk and folded against my chest as if my tendons had shriveled. I know the slightest attempt to move my legs will cause indescribable agony that will writhe up through my hips and assault my spinal cord. I can try to forget that my

once wavy hair has been shaved to a coarse stubble, but the feeling my lips are dry and cracked is ever-present, and, too often, my skin is aflame with a devilish itch I cannot scratch.

Warehoused like a spare part that no longer serves any purpose, my days passing into years, I suck sullen gruel through toothless gums and wait for the impersonal touch of an attendant to wipe my body clean. It is a morose whim of fate, indeed, that even such routine maintenance is a welcome diversion to an otherwise monotonous subsistence.

Trapped in a useless husk, perched on the precipice of lunacy, I turn inward for deliverance. From a place deep within, I rise and soar high above other lands, gliding lazily into other times. They don't know about my journeys. They think I'm a prisoner of this room. They don't know I become other people — bold people, curious people, people who commemorate their adventures in rhyme. I don't tell them about the rhymes or the improper thoughts that creep into my head. I still dare to imagine the unimaginable, but no one knows. They won't find me in here. In here, I don't allow myself to dwell on past transgressions. I seek no pity nor submit to reproach. And, no matter how seductive its siren call, in here I resist the longing for sweet death.

Instead, like the caterpillar, I wait to emerge from my cocoon, spread my glorious wings, and fly.

# The Assassination

---

GUY HASSON



*Guy Hasson is an Israeli author and filmmaker. Six of his books have been published, including Secret Thoughts. He is currently working on the Lost in Dreams universe, which follows a girl who is lost in dreams from birth to death. The first book in the series, The Forgotten Girl, comes out September 2022. The podcast (English) follows her life in the Dream between the events of the books is coming out with daily*

He wears the story of his life on his face. That first second, looking at him in person, is a rehashing of everything I know about him: the hardships, the killings, the fight for freedom, the struggle against the British Mandate, the wars with the Arabs, and the cruel battles against traitors within. I can see four decades on his face: the 1930s all the way to the end of the 60s. Decisions and fates had been carved in the stone of his skin, more than fifty years ago. So much of a person's face is not captured on a TV screen.

His eyes move past my face, scan the large mirror behind me, then come to rest on the conference table between us.

"My name is David Sanderson," I offer my hand. "A pleasure to meet you, sir."

"I'm sure," he mutters, and rather than to shake my hand moves to sit down. A ninety-year-old body moves slowly and it still takes me a couple of seconds to notice that although he did not deign to give my organization the respect of a handshake, he had seated himself in front of the mirror.

I sit opposite him, making sure not to hide any part of him.

"You're recording this, I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

He shrugs and moves his head as if he's lived through this dozens of times before. "How many times do I have to be right," his mouth curls up in a slight smile, "to be right?"

"This is the last time, sir."

Something in the way I said this makes him look at me. He scans me up and down.

"How old are you?" he says. "Twenty-six? Twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-six, sir."

He looks down and laughs. "I have granddaughters older than you."

"I know. They're two very beautiful women."

"Their children are even more beautiful."

"That's right, sir."

He nods. He's got five great-grandchildren, two grandchildren, and two children – a boy and a girl, all from marriage to Dinah Shamgar, his devoted wife. She was the one who helped him dress before he came here, no doubt.

I saw pictures of her when the two of them had met, two twenty-three-year-olds in the middle of a war for freedom. Oh, she was something. They met by accident. British Intelligence decided that Aryeh Shamgar had been the man responsible for the assassination of Colonel Tanner at the King David Hotel. Shamgar needed an apartment in which to hide, and the Underground ordered him to lie low at Dinah Gat's apartment. She was a bike messenger for the Lehi, the smallest and most militant of the resistance groups, passing notes from one officer to another and, of course, ready to lay down her life for our independence. Aryeh lived on the floor of her bathroom for six months, keeping quiet lest the neighbors hear. When she was out, he would store his feces and piss in glass jars in fear that someone might hear or smell the toilet. When it was dark, he would occasionally wander the streets of Jaffa wearing a false beard, dressed as an Orthodox Jew.

After the Nazis were beaten in '45, after the British left 'Palestine' in '48, and after the Independence War was won in '49, they were married. They have been married now for sixty years.

"Would you like some tea, sir? Coffee? We have mineral water here for you."

*episodes and is already towards the end of its second season. It is called The Squashbuckler Diaries Podcast. In his other podcast Geekdom Empowers Guy interviews geek fans and creators who are often not highlighted.*

"Just get it over with. I won't be here more than ten minutes."

"Yes, sir. For the record, this is October 16th, 2010. My name is David Sanderson." As I talk, I see his eyes glaze over in impatience. "I am sitting here with Aryeh Shamgar in Tel Aviv. The time is ..."

"You're a leftie, aren't you?" he cuts me off.

"Sir? I don't know what that has ..."

"You're a leftie," he states.

"My job here has nothing to do with ..."

"Your job here is to find out the 'truth' about how we drove the British occupation forces out of our country, how evil we were and how good they and the Arabs were."

"My job is to find out the truth about what happened, Sir."

"And you happen to be a leftie."

"That has nothing to do with ..."

"Why afraid to admit to the truth? Show some guts, show some balls. This is what our meeting is all about, isn't it? Guts. Guts and truth. Come on, tell me the truth."

I look into his eyes. He's sharper than the hi-tech geniuses I work with. He put me on the defensive on something I shouldn't be defensive about. The facts are on my side.

"Yes, sir," I say, not moving my gaze from his. "I'm a liberal."

"And lefties like you have been coming after me since the Seventies. Every two years I'm invited to see another set of 'facts' or 'papers' that show that the assassination of Colonel Tanner was unjustified and cold-blooded. Every time they come in all cocky. And every time they are proven completely and utterly wrong."

"Yes, sir. That's right, sir."

"And every last one of them is a leftie. Imagine that. When they try to undermine my heroic act, they are actually trying to undermine the footing and legitimacy of the fight for this nation."

"Yes, sir. And although I am a 'leftie', I would like nothing better than to realize that everything I learned about you in school was right. You are my hero, sir."

He thinks of answering, but after a second he closes his mouth and locks his arms around his chest.

He *is* my hero and has been my hero since childhood. He has been a hero for more than sixty years. A hero of the nation, given countless honors and citations, all because of this one assassination, the one that turned the tide of the British Mandate, the one that got the British government to decide they should relinquish their control over 'Palestine' and leave it for the Arabs and the Jews. On the waves of his public adulation, he was a Minister of Defense for ten years. When he left that office, he received countless offers from lucrative business companies. The successes he had had with the five he chose to run made sure he and his family would be set for generations.

This is the man whose life I have to crumble. This is the man whose heart may be too weak to withstand it. And I have to break his heart as a 'courtesy', as requested by my bosses, before the news is released and the press does it to him.

"And like I said, sir," I continue, my voice even, "this is the last time."

His eyes watch me sharply, then, rather than be confrontational, he leans back calmly. "Dispense with the formalities, then."

"Ummm ... all right, sir. This," I put my hand on a folder and spin it around so that he can read it, "contains information about our institute, Past Intelligence." He no more than glances at it. He doesn't have his reading glasses with him. "We are not a liberal organization. In fact, most of our work is done for military intelligence and the Mossad." He raises an eyebrow with surprise and respect. "Though we are an independent foundation. This particular project, pertaining to you, is not military in any way and therefore whatever facts we discover

are not classified as Top Secret. The manner in which we uncover these facts, however, *is* so classified."

I move the folder to his side of the table. "What we do is, we use a new technology, developed at the Weizmann Institute, and available only in Israel so far." He squints at me, trying to see where I am leading him. "The technology deals with ... Well, receiving information through time, from ... the past. Basically, what it means is we can 'hear' things that happened during a small window of time, between sixty-five and seventy years ago, and record them on ..." I almost say a fancy word, and then I remember that I am talking to someone from a different era, "on tape."

"You can *hear* things from the past?"

"Yes, sir. Basically, we have a spy satellite ... into the past. But always sixty-five to seventy years ago."

"And you... record those things?"

"Yes, sir. And everything's real. We are sanctioned, as I said, by the government and the military and the ..."

"Sixty-five to seventy?" he cuts me short again, leaning forward. "Sixty-eight years ago I assassinated Colonel Tanner."

"Yes, sir. And we have that recording. In fact, we have the recording of each and every conversation in British military circles that led to the conclusion that it was you who had been behind it and to the decision that you must be hunted down ..."

"That can't be true," he says, but his eyes glisten with the memory of the past, a memory he has been living again and again every day, I'm sure, since it had happened. That long-lost past is his present still. He lives it daily. He breathes it. He speaks of it and people speak to him about it. He is invited to other countries to speak of it. He makes the headlines when liberals like me try to discredit him. "You can't hear the past!" In this instant I see in his eyes that the past I've listened to is his present.

"It *is* possible, sir, and we have put all the DVD's, uh ... the tapes ..."



"I know what a DVD is and I know how to work it!"

"Yes, sir. We put all the DVDs of all the recordings in this folder for you. You can listen to them at home. They also include all the discussions in the top echelons of the Lehi that led to your hiding away, and even the first time you met Dinah at her apartment. We hadn't known that that would be what we would hear and we thought you would like it, so we put it in for you. We didn't listen to anything else between you two that came later."

He puts his finger on the folder. "All that is here?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And this technology is real? This is not a joke?"

"No joke, Sir. Latest technology. Only we have it. And I trust you to keep it a secret."

He nodded, for an instant a dutiful soldier again, serving the interests of his nation, "Of course."

"Now ... we also happened to record – and that is what we were actually looking for – everything that led up to the most famous assassination of a British soldier that the Lehi has ever carried out. We have the recording of the orders you were given."

His eyes widen. "You do?"

"Yes, sir."

There is war in his eyes now. Something new appears there. It's as if he is fighting some urge. Then, in less than a second, it disappears and age-old anger reappears. "If your recording does not match my version, word for word, then your entire institution is a sham!"

"No, sir. Our recording corroborates your version, word for word. It corroborates the version you've retold in dozens of documentaries and inquiries here and abroad about the orders you were given and how you carried them out. All that is now corroborated by irrefutable facts."

His anger abates slightly. "Good." Then a sparkle appears in his eyes, "Can I see it? Is it on the DVDs?" That sparkle: It's

young. It's like he's 23 years old again, talking to me with the energy of youth.

"Yes, sir. Of course we put it on the DVDs."

He takes a breath and that breath feels cleaner and fuller than all his previous breaths. "Excellent."

"In fact, I'd like to play it for you right now, if you don't mind."

"No, no, not at all."

I nod and take the remote into my hand. There is a big HD screen to my right and his left. The HD is redundant, since there is nothing to look at. We only capture sounds, so we only play sound.

I press PLAY and the recording I have heard so many times before begins to play.

It begins with the sounds of the street. They aren't muffled by a closed window. This was the second floor in a stone building in Allenby Street, the temporary hiding place of Nathan Burnstein, one of the three Lehi leaders. The Tel Aviv weather was unseasonably hot and this was in January of 1942. As Ben Gurion had said, we were fighting the Nazis alongside the British as if there was no British occupation of our land and we were fighting the British occupation as if there was no world war with the Germans.

You can hear the market outside: chickens, a donkey and the occasional car engine sound – a sound that does not exist anymore today.

His entire body perks up. "That sounds exactly like ..." He looks at me. "You do have that technology?"

I nod and point to my ear, urging him to listen.

"Shamgar, come here," a man's voice urges.

Shamgar's mouth drops and he slams his aged fist on the conference table. He immediately recognized the voice of Nathan Burnstein, his commander, the man who at that time led the military arm of the Lehi and would later lead a great political movement that would change the nation's history.

His voice doesn't sound like it was recorded sixty-eight years ago, because it wasn't. What we hear is the cleanest sound one can achieve with today's technology, because it was recorded by us only two months ago as if we had a microphone in the room.

"Yes, sir, I'm here." This is Shamgar's voice. He sounds like a different person, his voice higher, his words faster, his rhythm different.

Shamgar doesn't react to this as powerfully as he did to his commander's voice. His body is frozen with intensity.

"Sit down, soldier."

"Yes, sir."

There is some scuffling of a wooden chair dragged on the floor tiles. Another car passes in the background.

"That's exactly what the street sounded like," Shamgar whispers, a tear in his eye. "I'd forgotten how much I remember."

I nod. The recording continues. "I have dire news and a great task, for which I need my best soldier."

"Yes, sir!"

"There is news from our intelligence about the latest plans of the Mandate Government."

"Yes, sir."

"Colonel Tanner has sent his recommendations to Churchill."

"That's exactly his voice," Shamgar's voice is a whisper. I press PAUSE. "How did you do that?"

"It's the technology, I told you. I ..."

"Turn it back on." He raps his fingers on the wooden desk. "Continue!"

I press PLAY and Burnstein continues to speak, "Our intelligence has intercepted a copy of it. The colonel believes a harder hand is required with the Jews. He requests full authority so that, following any violent action on our part, he will have complete freedom to arrest any Jew, guilty or not, and let them rot in jail. Guilty ones will be sent to prison in British

East Africa. And the ones he deems most guilty will be executed."

Shamgar points at the screen. "Yes! That's right!" – I press PAUSE immediately – "That's what he said! That's exactly what he said! I remember! That was it!"

I nod and wait.

He looks at me. "Did you stop it? Go on! Go on!"

I press PLAY.

"But that goes against every principle the British claim to believe in." Shamgar's young voice booms. He was agitated and appalled.

"Yes, I would have said that!" the older Shamgar in front of me is riveted.

"Churchill would never approve!" The young Shamgar half shouts, sounding like a teenager whose voice was still breaking.

"Yes," Nathan Burnstein says. "These were my sentiments. But we have evidence, irrefutable evidence, that Churchill has sent word that Tanner's initiative is to be followed."

"What!" shouts the young Aryeh Shamgar.

The old Aryeh Shamgar nods. "That's right."

"Calm down, soldier."

"Yes, sir."

There was a sound of a wooden chair moving on a stone surface. Shamgar had apparently jumped out of his chair and was now getting back into it.

"Churchill is busy with the Germans and has no patience for us anymore. Are you following me?"

"Yes, sir!"

I look at Shamgar's eyes. It is as if he is having an epiphany.

"Churchill's message is so sensitive and he was so afraid that it may find its way to us, that it has been entrusted to one man alone, a confidant. But in spite of Churchill's attempts we had intercepted that message and received it before it got to Colonel Tanner. The confidant will deliver the message personally to Tanner. In fact, it will be delivered later today." There is

a slight pause. I always assumed Burnstein was letting Shamgar absorb the news. "We can stop this. It is up to you, Shamgar, to stop this. Colonel Tanner must die tonight. By your hands. Alone. Immediately after he receives the message. We will be sending a message of our own to Churchill that the Jews can be even more trouble than they have been so far and that this new policy is unacceptable.

"I need a brave, fearless soldier. I need someone who can walk into the King David Hotel, into a ballroom full of British personnel, cool enough to appear as one of the help, cool enough not to be intimidated by anyone he sees there. I need someone brave enough to walk up to Colonel Tanner when he goes to the loo, put a bullet through his head, then walk out calmly through a room full of enemies. Are you that man, Shamgar?"

"Yes, sir!"

Every time I listen to this part of the recording, I keep thinking that the main difference between Shamgar's voice today and his voice then is that nowadays you can hear the past, you can hear the battles, the decisions, and the decades with which he had to live with those decisions. But back then, you couldn't hear any of that in his voice. His past was a child's past, a teenager's past, devoid of scars.

Burnstein continues. "Am I making the right choice by letting you take on this mission on which our independence hangs?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good man. Go home, then. Prepare yourself. In an hour, a man will drop by with the plans. Open them when you're alone. Read them, memorize them, then burn them."

"Yes, sir!"

"An hour later another man will drop off your escape plans. Open them when you're alone. Read them, memorize them, know them by heart, then burn them. This mission will be just you ... alone."

"Yes, sir!"

"Dismissed, soldier."

"Yes, sir!"

I press PAUSE.

"Basically," I say. "That ends this part of the recording. There are some noises, and you leave the room."

Shamgar is looking at me. He can hardly breathe.

"That's it!" he says, his voice filled with air. "That's the proof right there! You have the incontrovertible truth right there! That's just the way it happened!"

"Yes, sir."

He's looking around, trying to get a hold over his excitement, maybe even looking for more witnesses. "Every time I've claimed this was the reason we killed Tanner, the lefties and the British would say that that couldn't have been the case, that the British would never behave like that, that there was no such order. But there was and they did! They did! That's the proof of everything I've been saying for decades!"

"Yes, sir." I want to add an 'however', but he continues...

"Oh ... Oh ... That is unbelievable. I can't believe it ... I was there again ... I was there inside the room ... This technology ... I'm never going to have to prove the justice of my deeds again. I can go to my grave without a scandal hanging over me."

"Sir, I just ..."

"You said I can have recordings of all of this?"

"Yes, sir. This and all the other stages of the assassination and the escape. Of your and your wife's meeting. Of ..."

"Amazing!" He is ecstatic. Suddenly his entire life seems vindicated.

It hurts me that much more to bring him down from such a high to total abjection. "Sir, there is one more recording I need you to listen to."

"Yes, yes!" He is too excited. He is too happy. His guard is down.

"The following is a recording of events that took place thirty hours earlier, in Nathan Burnstein's hideout. In this recording ..." I am losing nerve. I phrase it as delicately as I can, letting the recording bear the brunt of the blame. "In this recording we can hear how Burnstein made the decision to assassinate Colonel Tanner."

"All right," Shamgar is energized. "Play it!"

"Yes, sir." I switch to the next track on the DVD and it begins to play.

The street noises are different. They're quieter. There is no hustle. A muezzin is heard in the background – a call for the morning prayer from sixty-eight years ago. There is scuffling of a chair.

"Sit." This is Burnstein's voice. His tone is friendly, not at all the commanding tone used with Shamgar.

Another wooden chair moves on stone. The muezzin's voice grows softer. A man is beginning to set up shop right underneath the window and calls out orders to his helper.

"What have you found out?" Burnstein asks.

"I followed the subject since yesterday afternoon until she went to sleep." This is another voice. Young – everyone was young in the Lehi – and serious and idealistic-sounding.

Shamgar straightens at the sound of that voice. "I know him! Who's that...?"

I don't press PAUSE. The recording continues, "What did you find out?"

"The subject's day was quite routine, spending it ..."

"Tsootsik!" Shamgar shouts. I press PAUSE. "Zalman Berg! We called him 'Tsootsik'!"

That's right. Zalman Berg, a.k.a. 'Tsootsik' (which means 'pip-squeak') had been charged a year earlier with creating the Lehi's intelligence service from scratch, a task performed magnificently well, and was soon to become one of the Lehi's legendary leaders. Berg and Shamgar would be friends, though

not close ones, for most of the 1950s, until Berg developed cancer and died in 1962.

"Go on," Shamgar orders me. "This is unbelievable. Go on, go on!"

I rewind a bit, and press PLAY.

"The subject day was quite routine, spending at her home ..." Berg was saying.

"Don't call her 'the subject'," Burnstein interrupts. "She's got a name and this isn't about the resistance."

"Elisheva," the young Berg amends his statement, "was at her home all day and all the previous night."

"'Elisheva'?" Shamgar whispers to himself. It sounds familiar to him, but he hasn't put the pieces together yet.

"At six she began to dress for a night out," Berg continues to report.

"Yes?" Burnstein said.

"What are they talking about?" Shamgar whispers to me.

"Listen!" I say.

"At seven she met with Colonel Tanner at Haled's fish restaurant on the Jaffa pier."

"She met with him?" Burnstein's voice was tight.

"They stayed there for an hour," Berg continues the report. "They seemed ... amicable. Smiling a lot. Intimate in nature."

"Yes?" It is as if Burnstein was gritting his teeth.

"They left together, and took a long walk on the beach to his home."

"Colonel Tanner's home?"

"Right."

Shamgar squints and looks at me. "There were two Elishevas?"

I shake my head and raise a finger, indicating there was only one.

"She stayed the night at his place ... At their place."

Shamgar touches his cheek. "Why were they following the woman and not Tanner?"



"Listen," I say.

"At eight twenty-seven p.m. I took a risk and looked through the window. They were in the middle of a ... sexual act. Then I ..."

"All right, all right," the young Burnstein interrupts him. "Thank you. We got the data we wanted."

"We certainly did."

There is silence for a long time, then a chair is pushed back on the floor quickly. Burnstein got up suddenly, no longer able to sit down. "She told me she was never coming back to him. She told me it was over. She said she felt revulsion when he was near her. I felt she was ..."

Shamgar looks at me, horrified. "Are you saying they had an affair?"

"I'm not saying anything. What we're hearing is what happened."

Shamgar listens. "Why am I not hearing anything?"

"They're quiet," I said. "Listen."

All we can hear is more and more vendors setting up shop in the street. The muezzin had finished his call for prayer. The silence lasts for more than a minute, in which I can see Shamgar's impatience growing.

Then, finally, we hear Burnstein's voice. "Tsootsik, Tsootsik ... I can't let this happen. I can't lose her. I can't lose her to him. I can't let her do that. I can't have him ... This is unacceptable ..." There is another short silence. "I'm going to kill him! I won't let him be with my woman!"

"No," Shamgar, in front of me, says.

"You know I've always thought we should kill high-profile British officers," Berg says. "And who's more high-profile than Colonel Tanner? You're too fearful of killing the British."

"No no no," Shamgar shakes his head.

"Yes ... yes ...," Burnstein says. "We should kill them. You're right. This will send a message to the Brits!"

"It will."

"That we're powerful."

"Yes."

"No!" Shamgar shouts. His eyes are screaming.

The recording continues, "That we're not to be messed with."

"Yes."

"All right. All right. Let me think. I need a devoted soldier, one who's willing to die for the cause. A brave soldier."

"No! False! No! False!" Shamgar is shaking his head almost uncontrollably.

"I've got just the man for you. Aryeh Shamgar."

"He's young, isn't he?"

"Not as young as the others. He's been around. He has nerves of steel. And he's been begging me for some real action. And ... he's expendable."

"Lies! Lies! Lies! Lies!" Shamgar slams his open hands on the table, and then buries his face in them.

"Yes ... yes ..." Burnstein is excited. "All right. I'll start making plans. I want Colonel Tanner's complete itinerary for the next few days. I need to know where and when would be the best place to strike."

"I'll have it for you in two hours."

"Excellent."

"We are not going to rest until that man is dead."

"No, we're not."

"No, we're not. Now go. You have a job to do."

There are noises of people walking on stone, and then a door closing. Shamgar is looking at me. I look down. The recording isn't over.

Without warning, we hear Burnstein scream, "Whore! Whore! Whore! Whore!"

Shamgar's mouth opens in horror. "No! No! No!" And then Shamgar shouts at the screen: "What are you doing?!"

"Whore! Whore! Whore!" the screen shouts back, joined by the clear sound of furniture being thrown against the walls and then kicked around. "Whore! Whore! Whore!"

I press PAUSE. "This goes on for a while. Then there's a long silence. And then he begins to plan the assassination."

Shamgar's mouth is puckered tight and he is shaking his head. He looks to the right. He looks to the left. His fingers begin to drum on the table. "It's a lie. It's a lie. It must be a lie. There is no way ... You fabricated their voices somehow. You ..."

"I assure you ..."

He raises his hand to silence me. "I want to hear it again," he says.

His cheeks are red and puffy. I keep my calm. "All right."

I press a few buttons, and the recording is played all over again.

As he listens to it again, his eyes seem to sear through whatever they are focused on. I follow their gaze, but they are not focused on anything in the room. They are focused on the past. They are searing through to the past, just as our technology does.

"Again. I want to hear it again," he says once the recording has played through.

He listens again. And he listens again. And he listens again.

The more he listens, the more awake he seems. The more he listens, the shorter his breath becomes. The more he listens, the redder his cheeks become. A vein in his neck I haven't noticed before is making its presence known: His pulse is rising. I try to time it, in my head. Around 130 a minute. Not good. Not for a ninety-year-old man.

After three times, in the middle of the fourth playback, he raises his hand and says: "That's enough."

Immediately, I fumble with the remote, find the button and press PAUSE.

He looks at me. His body is shaking. His fingers are shaking.

He looks away from me and at the table. He looks at his trembling hands. He reaches into his pocket. For a second I think he's reaching for a gun. But of course he isn't. He takes out his clamshell cell phone, opens it, is about to push a but-

ton – probably to call his wife –, but he hesitates. Then he throws the cell phone at the wall. "Traitors! Fucking traitors!" he yells.

He looks down, gathering his breath.

Then he looks up, straight at me. His eyes are clear, not trembling, sharp – even sharper than when he had come in. Without moving his eyes, I can see that he is no longer looking at me but at the mirror behind me. "You've had your fun. You took your pound of flesh and now you have your victory. Do you really need to keep filming this?"

I look behind me, at the mirror, and get a chill. It's true. Why do we need to film an old man losing his life cause? What historical purpose does that serve?

"Cut the feed," I say. "Stop the camera."

I hear voices on the other side.

"Stop the camera," I say.

A tiny red light, still seen through the one-way mirror, vanishes.

I turn to face him. "The camera is off."

"I'm sorry, sir," I tell him. "There was no reason to record this in the first place. I'll make sure it never gets used."

Shamgar looks at me with the eyes of a man who is lost. "It doesn't matter. You have won the battle. Take your victory lap and enjoy the applause ..." He looks down and there is a tear in his eye when he says, more to himself than to me: "While it lasts."

He puts his hands on the table and it seems clear that he is about to pull himself up.

"Wait," I put my hand next to his, but do not touch him. "Stay. You don't have to go immediately." He looks at me. "Please. I meant what I said earlier and back then I had known what I was going to show you. You are my hero. You are still my hero. Take a couple of minutes to calm down. Drink some water. Have some coffee or tea. Breathe. Just ... Stay here a couple of minutes more."

For a long time, he just thinks. Then he says: "I'll have some tea."

Even before the tea arrives – Wissotzky, no sugar, just the way I know he drinks it – Shamgar closes his eyes and sinks into his own world.

Within a minute, he begins to bang his open hand against the conference table in small baby slams. "The traitors ..." – *slam* – "The traitors ..." – *slam* – "The traitors ..." – *slam* – "Such traitorous ..." Dis fingers curl. "Such destructive ... That something so filthy should be the cause for ... The excuse!" He raises his voice on this last one. "Everyone who followed them ... Everyone who believed in them ... For sex?! Sex! ... Such ... traitors ..."

Then he sinks into silence again, his eyes closed.

He drinks his tea in silence, his eyes far away from here. Suddenly anger flares up again. "He was my friend! My friend! For thirty years after we won our independence! For thirty years, until he died! Lied to me, embraced me, told me how brave I was. Looked me in the eyes. And never ... never ... said ... anything ..."

He takes another sip of his tea. "The traitorous bastard. Traitorous bastard!"

He raises his cup but his hands shake and some tea spills onto the table.

"I'm sorry." He looks aside, abashed.

"I can't believe it!" Five minutes later, he claps his hands together and gives me the look he had given me when we had met an hour ago. "I can't believe it! Not true! Fabricated! Great fabrication, but inconceivable."

"I assure you, the tech ..."

"I don't need your words," he silences me. "Play it again. Then, after that, I want to hear something else. Play something else, something that can't be faked. I want to hear the time I met Dinah."

I nod. "All right."  
I reach for the remote.

The track begins to play.  
"Louder," he says.  
His old ears probably heard only half of what I heard.  
I turn up the volume.  
A few more words are said by Burnstein, and Shamgar screams again: "Louder!"  
And a few seconds later: "Louder!"  
"Louder!"  
"Louder!"  
Then, almost at max volume, he is content. And he listens to the conversation again, to its very end.

I was prepared to play for him all the segments we had prepared, but it is his meeting with Dinah that breaks him. He listens to it, head bent over, following every sound. Then, once it is over, he raises his hand and says, "Enough."  
I look at the remote and press STOP.  
When I look back up at him, he is holding his chest and leaning back. "Ow. Ow."  
I leap up and run to the other side of the table.  
"Is everything alright?"  
"Yes."  
I grab his hand to feel his pulse. He shoves it away.  
"Stay away from me!"  
"Shall I call for an ambulance?"  
He shakes his head. Maybe he isn't able to speak. I reach for my cell phone.  
He slaps it out of my hand.  
"Enough," he says, still holding his chest. "Sit down."  
I look at him. He looks straight into my eyes.  
"Sit down. It's just pain. It will go away."

I freeze in place. I want to do what he said, but I am unable to move.

He looks away, and takes a deep breath. With apparent effort, he lowers the hand that held his chest. I still don't move. He doesn't look at me.

His hand reaches down to his pocket, then up again. "I miss cigarettes," he says. His hand is at his pocket a second time, searching for something that hadn't been there in ten years. "I could use one right now."

Trembling, he brings his hand up. He leans forward, elbows on the desk. "This is a good time to start again." Without looking at me, he says, "Sit down."

Warily, I sit down.

His fingers are on his forehead. He is licking his lips. Fifteen minutes have passed and he is still hungry for cigarettes.

He hasn't looked at me in a few minutes. That's all right. I'm here for him, not the other way around.

"We died for them ...," he suddenly whispers, maybe forgetting that I am there. "We bled for them. I killed for them ..."

He stares into space. Then he sighs. "No. We died for the nation. We bled for the nation. We killed for the nation. I killed for the nation. I killed ... the wrong man for the nation."

A small, hollow laugh escapes him. "Ridiculous."

"You!" he aims an accusing finger at me. "You're probably happy. This fits so neatly into your political theories. We were all liars, weren't we? The entire nation is based on lies ... That's what you think!"

"No, I ..."

"Our entire nation is not based on lies. It's based on ideals and a need. There were a few bad apples ... Some rotten, rotten apples. But they can't ruin it for the rest of us. The dream is just. The dream is true. And you can go to hell if you think that you can make a leftie out of me."

I shake my head. "No, no, I don't!"

"Rotten apples and that's it!" He growls through his teeth.

Music begins to play.

He looks immediately sideways, I realize it's his cell phone and then I remember it is on the floor where he had thrown it.

He tries to bend down to reach it.

"I'll get it for you," I leap up.

I grab the phone and give it to him, not looking at the caller.

He answers without looking at who was calling him. "Yes, Dinah ..."

I'm sitting back down and a sigh escapes me when I hear the name. This will not be over for him when he leaves this place.

"Yes, I'm all right. It's just taking too long ... I promise, nothing bad ... It might take a few hours. Go to sleep, I'll take a cab."

"I'll pay for a cab," I say.

He shushes me with a finger. "I'm going to stay for a while, that's all. ... Go to sleep. ... Great... Thanks... Yes, yes, I'm all right. ... Tell you all about it later. ... Good ... Good night."

He closes the cell phone, causing it to disconnect and puts it on the desk.

His hand rests over it.

"Dinah ...," he says softly and looks at me with soulful, twenty-three-year-old eyes. "I never would have met her if I wasn't on the run, if I hadn't assassinated ..."

He looks down. His fingers touch the cell phone softly and I imagine how he had touched his wife when they were young and had just met.

"I met his daughter, you know," he says after a ten-minute silence. He had been drinking one cup of tea after another for the last three hours.



I look up, the question in my eyes.

"His wife wouldn't meet with me. But I met his daughter."

"Whose daughter?"

"Colonel Tanner's," he says. His eyes are elsewhere again. He's reliving a meeting that had taken place decades ago. "He had a family, you know. A daughter. A wife. Who, apparently, he was cheating on. But a family, he had a family. I killed a man with a family for the Cause, not for a ..." He trails off.

"I met his daughter, you know," he says again after a while. "Back in, uh, '64. She was just getting married, in her early twenties. I, uh ... She wanted to meet with me. I immediately agreed. There were concerns she would try to kill me. I said: No, don't worry about it." He stops for a while. This is where he would have taken a great gulp of smoke.

"How was she?" I say.

"You know ... Young ... She understood ... She wanted to hear it from me ... She wanted to hear the why ... She wanted to know how he was ... how he was during those last minutes ... She wanted a missing piece of her father."

He trails off again, then continues. "I told her he was a great and honorable man. That is why he was a choice target. I told her he died with dignity. I told her I was sorry for her private tragedy and that it wasn't personal."

When he trails off again and does not continue I ask: "How did she take it?"

He shrugs. "All right. No anger there. She hardly even knew him. She just wanted to know."

"Did she say anything important?"

He shrugs. "No. His wife, her mother, never agreed to meet with me. That was all right. It's understandable."

"Yeah."

"But, the thing is..."

"Yeah?"

"He had a family. A daughter who is now a grandmother. And a wife who remarried. He had a family. I destroyed his

family ... for my commander's shag in the bed. That's why his family was destroyed."

I nod. I don't know what is the right thing to say now.

"Yeah," he says. "For a shag in the bed."

"I spent decades on this. Decades.

"These last three decades this is practically the only thing I did. Meetings like this. Invited to lectures and seminars. Answering hecklers and ill-wishers ... The documentary film they did on me ... following me around for a year ... needs to be revised. Nothing is true. No reason for it anymore." He looks down, ashamed. "I was wrong ... I was mistaken ... My cause was unjust ... No, my cause was just, my deeds were unjust ..."

"You couldn't know. As far as you were concerned you had a just cause to assassinate him and protect your people."

"A man is dead. A family is dead. Bystanders were hurt. What does that matter?"

"The tide of war turned because of that event. The British Mandate began to lose its spirit."

"Yeah ... That's good. It's good that it happened." He falls silent, no doubt thinking about that point. Then, after a while, he says, "The results were accidental, weren't they? It wasn't because ..." He shrugs again and puts his fingers to his lips as if he is smoking. "Just a lucky accident."

His lips curl. "People think I'm brave."

I look up. He had been silent for something like twenty minutes.

"You are brave."

"Pfah. I'm not brave. I just like to think I'm brave. No, no, I am brave." He waves dismissively at his own thoughts. "I'm rambling."

After five minutes of silence he starts again. "Other people think I'm brave."

I don't respond this time. He already knows I'm one of those people.

"Other people ..." He holds his forefinger tight against the desk and moves the rest of his hand this way and that, like a child. "Other people ... they thought I was brave ... I got honors ... honors on top of honors ... There was a ceremony just last year ... Golda had made me a minister. Do you think she would have done that if not for the ...?"

He looks down, like a chastened child. "I'm sorry."

When he doesn't say anything for a few more minutes I ask him: "What are you sorry for?"

He looks at me with doe eyes. "I should call her."

"Dinah?"

"His daughter. Tell her I'm sorry."

I think about that. "Maybe you shouldn't do that. It was so long ago. It's history. We're just fixing history here, not people."

"I'm living it still, every day. She's living it still, every day."

He purses his lips and tears begin to form in his eyes. "No, I'm not brave. I just like to think I am."

He sighs and seems to deflate in front of me .

"I was a good minister, damn it!" He slams his fist on the table, suddenly enraged again. Slamming his fist on something is a mannerism he had been famous for doing during cabinet meetings. "I was a good minister!"

"Yes, sir. I ..."

"I did good. I helped build the nation! I fought for military acquisitions that saved us in wars, created connections that served our nation ..." When he trailed off more light seemed to leave his eyes. "What does it matter?"

And in his chair, he seems to deflate even more.

"No one will remember anything of me. They won't remember the good I did. They won't remember I was an accomplished

member of the Knesset. They won't remember I was a successful CEO of four companies."

"Five," I correct him.

He squints for a second, then nods. "Yes, five. I brought success to whatever I touched. Burnstein took that away from me. At that moment in time, when I was twenty-three, he handed me my future. But he also took away my future." His eyes begin to look here and there, as if searching for something. "He took that away from me."

He shuts his eyes and puts five fingers on his forehead. "I would never have met Dinah if it weren't for this."

He opens his eyes, and he seems like a shy sixteen-year-old suddenly. "I wonder if she would have liked me if not for ... She stood by me all this time ... She believed in what I did ... She believed in me ... Our entire lives ... Together ... Together ..."

He wipes a tear from his left eye, then looks at me as if he had been caught stealing. I look away.

"Don't think that makes me a LEFTIE." He isn't being aggressive now. It's four-thirty in the morning. Most of the strength has left him. He is now completely deflated, and his voice is raw. And yet he sits there, unable to leave, running through thoughts in his mind, thoughts and scenarios I couldn't begin to guess.

"Hey!" he says, snapping me out of my own thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"You didn't make me a leftie, you know. Don't think this takes any of the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, historical basis on which we built this nation, on which I built myself." I shake my head, about to tell him I didn't think that, when he looks down, and in an even weaker voice says, "What does it matter? It doesn't matter."

"I remember one of my first missions ..."

It's been eight hours since he had learned the truth. Neither of us has left the room. As he speaks, his eyes are floating, seeing a past that hasn't been there for more than seventy years. "We were lying down on top one of the hills outside Jaffa's open-air market ..." He speaks softly, dreamingly. "We thought we were snipers ... Our mission was to shoot Arabs and cause as much mayhem as possible ... I was the lookout. I wanted so much to be the sniper ... I wanted to kill Arabs ... I remember thinking that: I wanted to kill Arabs ... But no Arab adults came when we were there, only children ... Then someone ran over, told us the mission was aborted, that we had to leave ... I wanted to kill so badly ... We were children, playing children's games."

He looks at his right arm, deep in thought.

I'm afraid to move my hands or to even shift weight in my chair. He seems so fragile to me, so broken. Any movement on my part might cause him to snap out of it and leave. And then he would go through the rest of it on his own, at home.

I can't stop looking at him.

Suddenly, he mumbles: "Children's games ... Children's games ... I haven't been a child in ...", and his eyes are suddenly infinitely fatigued, "...in so long."

"My father always said ... When you grow up ... You have to work. Work is food. Work is respect. A man who does not work has no dignity ... I kept true to that all my life ... The minute the war was over, I got a job ... Even during the Mandate, I was working for the freedom of the nation ... The Knesset... Building a new nation, a good nation, working for the government ..."

Suddenly he squints. "Why did I think of that? Why this talk about everything my father had told me? Why ..." And then realization appeared in his eyes. And with it, almost immediately, there is light. A spark of light, for the first time in hours. "Ah! I was going to be a gardener! When I was just a kid, that's what

I wanted to do. Yes!" He smiles sadly. "My mother learned about this, so she waited for my father to get home. She spoke with him, and then he came to talk to me. I needed a real job, he said. Being a gardener, that's not a real job." And as he speaks, the spark in his eyes grows slightly brighter. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I always had a green thumb when I was a kid. I had a small garden plot behind my family's home ... I used to go in and look at it and take care of it every day ... I figured out how much shade each flower needed ... I figured out when to water the plants and when it was best to keep them thirsty a bit ... I took out books upon books from the library, telling me about the different kinds of plants. And when my Dad came to me and explained that I needed to be serious ... I dropped everything about gardening ... I never took another book from a library. Can you imagine that? Not one book."

He looks at me and there seems to be a gleam in his eye.

For a second, I start to believe he was beginning to feel better. But it couldn't be. His world had collapsed.

He had been quiet for fifteen minutes, looking at his fingers as they moved on the table. It looks to me like he is playing a very slow piano or as if his fingers are playing some sort of game. His gaze follows his fingers with mild fascination, as if surprised by their action.

He breaks the silence, "I wanted a plant nursery ... wall to wall with roses ... daffodils ... lilies ..." His fingers are still playing on the table and his mildly fascinated gaze follows them. "Persian alliums ... the cyclamen, before they became a protected species, were fantastic ... I love them to this day ..."

He leans back and I could swear that for a minute he was resting.

"I haven't touched flowers in decades ..." He hadn't spoken about anything that had to do with the assassination in forty minutes. "I haven't looked at them ... No, that's not true. I've

looked. From afar, when I happened to come across ... I never bothered thinking about it, but I remember my eyes getting stuck on the sight of a beautiful garden and every time that happened Dinah would ask me what's the matter, why was I day-dreaming ..."

He smiles. And there is a longing in his smile. Is that longing not sadness about all that he had lost today? For a split second I think it might be. But no. I'm wrong about this.

He looks at me and his eyes are as sharp as they were when he came in. But they are also different. They are still sharp, but neither aggressive nor defensive. "So what if gardening isn't a vocation?" His eyes look at me, sharp but not searing. "I mean, so what? Who cares?"

I shake my head. I don't know what we're talking about anymore.

He leans back and he seems taller and not as sickly-thin as when he came in. "I loved my childhood, Mr. Sanderson. I loved my childhood."

I don't understand what he's trying to say, but I have to say something. So I smile back at him and answer his words. "Me too."

"Did you?" he says, smiling. But my own smile cracks.

He slams both hands on the table, not aggressively, but to help him get up. "Well," he said. "Time to go home."

I stand up when he stands up. "Are you sure?" It's ten past six a.m.

He turns to face me with the briskness of a young man. "I'm sure. Thank you for all your work, Mr. Sanderson. And your honesty. And your understanding during this night."

He offers his hand, for the first time. I shake it heartily. "It was an honor to meet you, sir."

He shrugs it off. "If you say so." He doesn't care about that anymore.

I look at him as he leaves the room. If I didn't know better, I would say by his gait, from behind, that the man was forty

years old. He's tall, his back is straight and he is no longer dragging his feet. He walks with energy and lightness of foot.

Right before he disappears, as he goes out the door, he looks back at me and nods. And I notice that all his wrinkles have disappeared.



# Download

HELMUTH W. MOMMERS

Translated by Richard Kunzmann

He had prepared everything. It would be time soon. An odd fever had seized him, the way it always does when he is on the point of taking this trip. It did not matter how short the journey was. Out of this world, into another. Away from here. His finger quivered visibly over the ENTER key. A slight touch would be enough to begin the download.

One last time he made sure everything was in place: accumulator fully charged, system operational, data-cube inserted, file called up. He was online. He did not even have to turn his head to follow the wires running into the player – he could sense them on his scalp.

The gadget humming on his hip was barely audible, but still, he held his breath and concentrated on listening, with his eyes pinched shut. There was nothing to hear, nothing to see that was suspicious, no one to observe him going about his affairs, no danger of being discovered.

The prep-indicator blinked invitingly: >READY FOR DOWNLOAD<.

His finger settled on the key.

A noise startled him. A tinny sound, followed by scratching and scraping. It roused him. He pressed his forehead and nose against the sooty window and wiped at it with a threadbare



*Helmut W. Mommers, born in Vienna in 1943, was as illustrator, writer, translator, editor and literary agent one of the first allrounders of the German speaking science fiction community. For family reasons he moved to Switzerland in 1966, had a successful career as a business man and lived for many years on Mallorca. After a break of 35 years he returned*

*into the science fiction scene with a vengeance, founded the German science fiction magazine Nova (the sister magazine of InterNova) in collaboration with Ronald M. Hahn and Michael K. Iwoleit in 2002, edited the anthology series Visionen and published dozens of new short stories some of which were translated into ten languages. His latest achievement is the founding of the Villa Fantastica in Vienna, a specialized library for science fiction and fantastic literature. His homepage is at [www.helmuthmommers.de](http://www.helmuthmommers.de). More information about his library can be found at [www.villafantastica.com](http://www.villafantastica.com)*

sleeve when he could not make out anything. His breathing came spasmodically and scratched painfully in his throat as he went on rubbing at the glass. Eventually a dull streak appeared through which he could spy the outside world without having to leave the safety of his shack. After this he would have to blacken out the glass again, so as not to leave any tell-tale signs of his presence. He was meticulous when it came to that. He wanted to live awhile, yet.

Outside everything was as it had always been: mountains of scrap wherever the eye turned. An ideal hide-out. Not a place for a survivor. Only for rats and other vermin.

Perhaps it had been a rat. Perhaps it had knocked over something in its search for food – it may even be, if he was in luck, that the creature had fallen into a trap and become food itself. The thought caused his mouth to water. Barbequed rat, a feast for him. Yet it was more likely that he was getting his hopes up for no reason. The bloody critters were getting sharper by the day. Lately the bait had been disappearing without his traps being set off. Where they mutating?

He would have to go see. Before it got dark. But then he heard something else: a tapping sound. Bated silence, then that noise again. It was as though someone was working his way into unknown territory. In his direction!

That was no rat. It was something bigger, something heavier. Man or beast – whatever the difference might be.

Very slowly he ducked away from the peephole he had made and grabbed the shotgun leaning against the "wall" near the "door", which was nothing more than a faded tarpaulin that covered the entrance to a shack buried deep inside scrap. His so-called door was in turn concealed behind a dented sheet of tin propped up against the outside of the camouflaged shanty.

Carefully he went down on his knees, put the weapon down next to him and stretched out on the floor. Again he strained to listen. Weak sounds of metal scraping over metal, a creak-

ing, a grating, followed by a meaningful silence and more noise.

As quietly as he could he crawled out underneath the tarpaulin and squeezed himself into the gap behind the tin sheet. Inch by inch he moved his head forward. Looked.

The scenery was as usual: gutted car wrecks towering a few floors high and next to them air-conditioners, fridges, washing machines, televisions and computers, all jumbled together, as though they had been tossed all over the yard by a giant craps-shooter's hand. Further to the right were entangled mountains of building materials: pipes, beams, reinforcement steel and aluminum profile frames, as though it had rained Mikado Sticks. Some of them extended towards the sky like reproving fingers, lit a ghostly red by the setting sun – or the eldritch reflection of the nearby burning city.

All that was missing was the wind that struck up its lament every morning, its melody of death. As pure as the end of days.

In its place something howled in the distance – dog ... wolf? More of its kind answered ... or joined in. Was it the same pack that had roamed through the smoldering ruins a few days ago? There where survivors still believed themselves to be safe. Where the smoke of a fire could not betray them because it hung so pervasively in the air. Where cellars and camp stores still held supplies, around which a merciless war had flared up – a free for all, a symbol of the apocalypse.

In the flickering glow he thought he could make out movement. His gaze fixed on a point in the middle of the scrap pile. There it was again: a shadow moving forward. And that treacherous noise, the squeaking of metal over metal. The anticipatory quiet that followed. It was not an animal either. An animal would sniff the air, fix on its prey as it stalked closer and only pause when its quarry moved. He had stayed hidden, however, still behind the protective tin sheet. Or was it an animal? Had it already come to animals behaving like humans – or the other way around?

Had something scented him?

The shadow moved again and he with it. With the shotgun clamped under one arm he took a few hunched steps out into the open, cover to cover. When he froze he could feel his heart pounding. He barely managed to stifle a coughing fit with one hand. He was breathing hard. No doubt he was ill, most likely terminally. He was convinced he did not have long to live.

And yet he would fight to hold onto every minute he had! The hope of a better world in which he would find comfort kept him alive.

A sharp pain shot up his calf. Instinctively he whirled around and fell to his side as he lost his balance. He saw the rat which had bitten into him, and the rat saw him. They stared at each other with open hostility, man and animal, red-rimmed eyes both, each waiting for a reaction. He had raised the gun's butt to strike, but did not go through with it; too great was his fear that he would reveal his position with the noisy blow. The rat seemed to realize this and bit again.

He barely managed to suppress a cry of pain. He laid the gun down and tried to grab the rat by hand. Eat or be eaten! He could not manage to catch it, however. On the fourth attempt it managed to escape with a mouthful of his flesh.

Now he pressed a hand to the wound so that no more blood would drip to the ground – blood which would draw the creatures en masse. With his free hand he tore loose a strip of cloth and wrapped it around the wound. He would have to turn around immediately and wash it out, threatening shadow or not.

One hand on the floor, the other supported on the gun, he scrambled up into a squat. The earth crunched faintly under his heels when he turned around and his eyes landed on a foreign shape. Slowly, his eyes travelled upwards to a grotesque face staring at him out of bloody eyes. Its maw hung open; froth bubbled at the corners of its lips; two rows of yellow teeth with gaps between them like embrasures. It was from

these jaws that a throaty growl and thick miasma of decay sprung simultaneously.

>DOWNLOADING< ... signalled the indicator.

"Oh please, not before breakfast!" his mother tore him back into reality. To emphasize her point, she pressed the STOP key and pushed the player aside.

The boy wanted to protest, but for that it was too late. With little effort his mother had pulled the cables from his skull.

"And get this stuff cleaned up, why don't you?" She pointed at the boxes, manuals and wrapping paper, which lay strewn over the table. "You can take in your horror stories later. Now its time for your meal!" She handed him a plate with a slice of birthday cake. "What was it this time? *The Chainsaw Killer* or *Armageddon*?"

His little sister giggled until he stabbed her with a warning glance.

"*The Last Days of Mankind*," he grumbled, more to himself than the others and thought: *Cool film, I should show the guys...*

"I'm afraid our last days may soon be on us," his father said, "the way we're going on." He pointed at the holo-wall, where a reporter was chattering away in front of thousands of demonstrators. "We're heading straight for our own doom." He turned up the volume; now the whole family was engrossed in the scene.

"...that in case of aggressions they would not hesitate to make use of every means at their disposal. When asked if this includes the use of chemical and biological weapons, the government spokesman replied that he could not categorically exclude their use. This was a "holy war" and therefore the cause sanctified their means..."

"I missed the beginning," said mother. "What's ..."

"Shhht!" Father waved impatiently. "Later ... I recorded everything."

In the corners of the room camcorders blinked.

"One shouldn't always see the worst," mother mused, "otherwise you might as well shoot yourself right now."

"But we should take in any case it seriously. I suggest we stock up on supplies."

Mother only nodded.

None of this bothered the boy; he already lived in horrifying worlds. The girl made large eyes. She was still too young to fully understand what was happening.

On his way out of the kitchen his mother handed him the obligatory lunch snack. The boy let it disappear into his school bag in such a way that his mother could not see the player hidden inside.

Hardly out of the house and view he leaned back against a wall and slid down it, pinched a pocket mirror between his knees and began to plug in.

A moment later the display blinked:

>DOWNLOAD FINISHED<

When the download hit him at full force it happened at the most inopportune moment. He fell over as if he had been floored by a powerful blow, helpless to protect himself from the wretch facing him.

Although he was still staring at the creature's mask, his gaze was turned inward. He saw himself as a fourteen year old, experienced for the nth time how he, so well-protected in the circle of his family, had sought refuge in his gruesome worlds – perverse, taking into account what he would face one day.

Of all the films it had to be *The Last Days of Mankind*, he thought bitterly. As though he could not wait for them to come.

Something dribbled on his face when that mask came closer. Saliva. Hunger breathed at him. A stench of decay enveloped him.

Was this it? No way back into the past, only forwards – into a future he no longer had?

When the claws with their broken and dirt-smeared nails clutched at his throat and pressed, his body began to thrash uncontrollably at the dearth of air. Then there was a sudden bang and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he believed himself buried, so how dark and moist it was, so musty it smelled. But no, he lay under the creature which had attacked him. After he had maneuvered it off himself with difficulty, it fell to the side and rolled onto its back. That was when he saw the torso which had been torn open, the blood. Then he spotted the shotgun which had still been in his hand and from which a shot must have come without his conscious assistance.

He got up and stood swaying over the body a moment. What to do with it? He could not dispose of it. Perhaps it was best to leave it to the scavengers ... drag it further away so that the rats and dogs and cats and whatever else was out hunting – humans even – did not stray into the immediate vicinity of his hide-out.

If possible, he should not leave any traces of blood. He would have to change, wash his clothes. Then go on. What else?

Thirty steps away he dropped the corpse. The night would not pass without its being gnawed down to the bones and even these would be scattered all over by morning. He decided to undress it. It was more difficult than he thought. The body was sown with pussy pimples and suppurating sores into which the creature's rags had eaten. He did his best, though it took a good deal of willpower.

He could burn the rags, but again there was the danger that a fire would attract unwanted guests. And it would be a pity

about the gasoline. They had to go, of that he was certain; he could not just leave them lying around in the area, as blood-drenched as they were. So where to with them? His gaze fell on the heap of discarded tires, fridges and washing machines – that was the answer. He took off his shoes, which would have left a bloody trail, and made his way forward barefoot.

Back in his shelter, he could hear the first loud harbingers of the starving hordes. Soon there would be open battles over the carcass.

He pulled the tin sheet across the entrance, hooked it shut. Safe is safe, he thought. Then he switched on the light bulb, and quickly covered the clean slit he had rubbed into the window. The light would not hold for long. He would have to recharge the batteries.

First he had to wash. He undressed himself, carefully putting each item aside on a plastic plane. Then he dipped his hands into a dish full of soapy water. He removed all traces of blood then washed his face. When he looked up to dry it he saw himself in the mirror, lit one-sidedly by the pale light from the bulb.

The face that stared back at him did not differ that much from that of the creature he had just killed. The only exception was that it was not covered in grime. Like the creature he bared his teeth and saw they were the same yellow stumps. When he sniffed the air, the same revolting stench hit him.

No, he did not have long to live. He was rotting from the inside out and disintegrating from the outside in. It was just a question of time.

Time.

It was valuable.

The light bulb began to flicker.

As naked as he was, he clambered into the saddle of a dilapidated bicycle and began peddling the squeaking peddles with ever increasing speed. The dynamo began to hum like a swarm of angry hornets and the light bulb started to glow



with new life. His breathing was ragged; he puffed like an old steam train. His jerking body threw a ghostly shadow against the walls.

*A ghost rider, he thought, flying out of hell!*

The din of the horde fighting outside over the carcass could now be heard clearly. It would drown out any noise that came from his lair.

The needle on the battery's indicator trembled on maximum. "I'm coming!" he squawked like a crow. "Wait for me!"

He slid off the bicycle, dug around in an old shoe-box, taking out one cube after the other and reading their inscriptions. "18th Birthday" said one, "Graduation" the other, "Wedding". He hesitated a moment, then decided.

"I'm coming, Eve!" he coughed as he plugged the cables into his skull with shaking hands. "Give me a minute!"

His fingers flew over the player's keyboard, then he stared at the display with tearful eyes.

When the >READY FOR DOWNLOAD< icon lit up, he did not hesitate a second to flee this world.

# The Colony

---

FRANK ROGER

1



*Frank Roger was born in 1957 in Ghent, Belgium. His first story appeared in 1975. By now he has a few hundred short stories to his credit, published in more than 40 languages. Apart from fiction, he also produces collages and visual art in a surrealist and satirical tradition.*

Champagne is flowing freely at the headquarters of the European Space Agency as great news are announced about the agency's biggest project ever.

A spokesman for the agency declares in a live interview on TV: "Ulysses has made a safe landing on the lunar surface and is already transmitting data. The first unmanned European mission to the moon is a success. It is now clear to everyone that Europe is fully taking part in the exploration of space. Americans, Russians, Chinese and Indians now have a serious contender in the game to reckon with. It goes without saying that this is merely the beginning of a grand space adventure for our Agency. Now some people may be tempted to start dreaming of our first manned mission, but let us focus on the present and start work with the treasure trove of information Ulysses is transmitting."

Not a word is said about the technical problems the mission was facing in the beginning: error messages, news about technical mishaps, predictions of a mission bound to fail. "All's well that ends well," a major newspaper has it, even if the mission has barely started rather than ended.

## 2

*Ulysses* has landed where it was supposed to, all its technical systems are functioning properly and it is transmitting data to earth: so much for the good news.

There is some uncertainty, however, concerning the problems that arose right after the launch. Now that we are told the lunar module's first images cannot or may not be shown to an impatient audience, the grapevine has been stirred into action. The Agency's spokesman denies there are any serious problems and promises that images will be shown "as soon as some issues have been dealt with". He cannot elaborate on the nature of these issues.

The media abound with speculation as to what may be going on.

## 3

Images supposedly taken by *Ulysses* were leaked on the internet by a staff member of the European Space Agency. The images are of poor quality and seem to show signs of activity. It is impossible to determine whether the footage is genuine, edited or simply fake. A few hours later, social media are teeming with comments, and later that day the ESA makes an official announcement.

"The video images transmitted by *Ulysses* show irregularities that are related to the technical problems the mission was facing after the launch. We are now examining the nature of these problems and will take appropriate measures."

The rumors, spread by anonymous sources, that stowaways have sneaked aboard *Ulysses* are adamantly discarded by the spokesman: "These rumors are sensationalist nonsense. Security measures at Corou spaceport are very strict. Moreover, there is no room for stowaways aboard the lunar module or the booster. In the unlikely event of a human being or an animal going along for the ride, it would inexorably end in death: the

acceleration, the lack of oxygen and temperatures well below zero will not leave any living creature a chance."

#### 4

Expectations are high as the ESA announces a press conference after more images were leaked, unmistakably featuring moving human figures. The spokesman breaking the news is clearly ill at ease:

"We can now confirm that prior to the launch of *Ulysses* unauthorized persons managed to gain access to the restricted area as well as to the lunar module itself. Although all scientists and experts explicitly exclude the possibility of surviving the journey from the earth to the moon without proper facilities, these persons apparently beat the odds. Nothing is known about their identity, their motives or their methods. When our investigation sheds light on this mystery, we will provide further information. Finally I am happy to report that this problem does not seem to interfere with *Ulysses'* regular activities. The lunar module keeps transmitting data and has started its soil research program."

Earlier attempts by desperate refugees who miraculously survived a flight, hidden in an aircraft's landing gear, are recalled in the media. Everyone realizes, however, that there's a world of difference between air travel and a journey through the void.

#### 5

The BBC broadcasts an interview with a Somali man, who prefers to remain anonymous and who claims to be the brother of one of the stowaways who traveled to the moon with *Ulysses*.

"My brother and his wife prepared their trip thoroughly," he says. "They did not arrive at their destination alive by coincidence. They trained in cold storage rooms and underwater, building up resistance to temperatures below zero and the void."

They manufactured thermal suits made out of discarded insulating material, and multi-layered plastic bags with an oxygen supply. They also smuggled food and water aboard, as well as some other useful stuff. I'm happy to see that my brother left the entire scientific world awe-stricken with his determination, persistence and resilience."

Experts and ESA staff members refuse to believe the man's bold claims, but cannot give an alternative explanation for the stowaways' accomplishment. "Our investigation is making progress and will eventually allow us to unlock this mystery," the spokesman concludes.

## 6

The ESA finally releases video footage clearly showing two human figures clumsily moving about on the lunar surface, wearing spacesuits that were crudely stitched together but which appear to hold up well. It is not clear what they are doing, as they are mainly active beyond the camera's visual range.

Some commentators doubt the images are genuine, but ESA confirms their authenticity. "It's a miracle this couple arrived alive on the moon," says the spokesman, "but we have to realize that their chances at survival are about zero. Very soon they will run out of oxygen, food and water, and there's no way to get new supplies up there. Then there are the extreme differences in temperature and the low gravity. We fear this success story will soon come to an end."

The trials and tribulations of the Somali moon dwellers are all over the international media. No one is paying attention to *Ulysses'* real mission anymore.

## 7

Somali communities of various countries have created a benefit fund for New Mogadishu, as they call their "first extrater-

restrial colony", a bridgehead of hope for a people left to its own devices. "Refugees from areas plagued by war, chaos and famine aren't welcome anywhere anymore, and all host countries claim to have reached or exceeded their immigration quota. The only option left is to push the boundaries and explore new horizons, to go where one is still welcome, where one cannot be sent back, where one can build a future undisturbed, even if theoretically impossible. Time will tell."

## 8

More sensational news about the lunar expedition is released upon an unsuspecting world: It is now revealed that the Somali woman who made the journey is heavily pregnant. This clearly shows on recent images released by the ESA, and the fact is also confirmed by the alleged brother of the male stow-away (and reputed father of the child). He even adds that this is all part of a grand plan, soon to unfold before the eyes of "those who stayed behind" (i.e. the people on earth).

It is now easier to see what the couple are doing on the lunar surface, after the man pushed one of the cameras in another angle. Next to the lunar module a modest construction is arising, made out of material either smuggled aboard or taken from the module itself. A green mass can be seen under a transparent piece of plastic or glass.

There are plenty of rumors buzzing about in the media. Are those two people building a small moon base? And what could that green mass be? Some claim it's algae or other plants that produce oxygen and can also be eaten. Is this the first step towards a hydroponic garden that will support the basic needs of the "colonists"? Is there a future beckoning then for these two people, where no life was considered possible?

## 9

The news of the birth of a child on the moon – the first human child ever not born on earth in the history of mankind – leaves the world stunned and elicits a lot of reactions.

There are some who criticize the parents because it's irresponsible to have a child in an environment that's hostile to life, and where a boy – in the unlikely event of his making it through his first days – is doomed to grow up without friends of his own age, completely cut off from his world and with an unending fight for survival as his only perspective.

Scientists who say it will be interesting to see what influence the low gravity will have on the child's development get all sorts of reproaches hurled at them – for instance for being out of sync with the real world.

According to the father's brother (the child's uncle), by now self-appointed "ambassador of New Mogadishu on Earth", this birth gives a new impetus to the story: "A first step has been taken towards a flourishing, viable colony, a beacon of hope for all refugees in the world".

On spaceports in the United States and elsewhere security measures and surveillance are upgraded. There are well-founded fears that the Somali success story will set an example and incite other refugees to try and sneak aboard spacecraft.

Refugee communities are cheering and celebrating: the impossible has now become feasible, dreams may come true, a new and unexpected horizon is beckoning. The picture of the father proudly holding up his newborn child (wearing a cute space suit that was obviously made beforehand) in front of *Ulysses'* camera is without a doubt the most shared image ever.

# Abel

---

ANA CRISTINA ROSSI

*For Patricia Marraco*



*Anacristina Rossi was born in Costa Rica and studied in France and The Netherlands. Her first novel Maria la Noche (1985) was published by Lumen in Spain and was translated into French by Editorial Actes Sud. Her second novel La Loca de Gandoca (1992) is considered the first ecofeminist novel of Central America, has sold more than a million copies, and is*

Lalia scratched the place between her eyebrows. For months there had been a stinging feeling, sometimes just a tickle. What could it be?

But why worry about that, after everything else ...

She could hardly believe it, so fast it had happened. And yet they always known it would be like that. Had she been left alone just in order to tell the story? But tell it to whom?

The Research Center where I found myself – alone – was on the skirts of a volcano in a country to the south of Central America.

From the observatory I could see the two seas a great many kilometers away. There did not appear to be any life other than an orange-colored moss. No more plants, no animals old or new, no humans. Not one living tree was left. The sky had turned something between red and orange. At night the stars looked reddish. And it kept raining. Not continuously, as before, but on and off. The water collected in the Center's tanks. All I had to do was clean them with a brush because they formed algae. Yes, some things stayed the same, like the formation of algae. And my breathing. My eating, drinking. Though not like before. I ate little, I ate flowers, the only species to have survived, like me. Back in the village we called these flowers "chinese", because they were from the Asiatic



genus *vinca*. They tasted good but the most nutritious, the most important thing, were the seeds packed inside green pods that burst when ripe. I had to take care to pick them before they burst open, dispersing the tiny globes that made me feel extraordinarily good.

I was totally alone and felt at peace. That was strange.

What's more, I need less and less water, I thought while scratching myself again (something odd was sprouting there between my eyebrows). There were weeks in which just a few drops were enough or I would simply go outside and let my skin absorb the humidity. I felt it penetrate my pores. My skin had changed. I did not want to accept the fact but yes, my skin was strangely smooth and almost rubbery, like the skin of certain frogs. Besides, there were no frogs anymore, no anything.

But I loved getting wet, getting under the rain. The air had turned warm and then hot since the catastrophe. I stripped off, surrendered to the downpour and stuck out my tongue. It was the water absorbed along the tongue and the skin that most kept me going.

But in fact, the strangest thing of all was my breathing. I had to inhale far less. The intakes of breath were longer, deeper, but at really great intervals. This act, breathing, had been the defining process, the change that made me a survivor. I didn't have slightest idea why or how this had come to be. I had seen others die gasping like fish out of the water.

The change in the air had been sudden, but that we had expected too. It happened over a couple of nights. Two nights, because it was when we were going to sleep that we felt it. Not me, but just after going to bed I heard my parents and sister coughing. And little by little the uncontrollable cough of the other researchers and staff. Afterwards they were afflicted by a sort of asthma, heaving for air they could not reach. Only me, of all of us, could breathe normally. But nobody noticed, so wrapped up were they in their own distress.

*required reading in high school in Costa Rica. It has also been read in universities abroad. Her third novel Limón Blues received the Latina American prize for Narrative from Casa de Las Américas, Cuba, and it is recommended reading in high school in Costa Rica. Limón Reggae, her fourth novel, was translated into Italian by Aracne Editrice, Rome. Her fifth novel La Romana Indómita tells the story of Julia, the daughter of Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. Her sixth novel Tocar a Diana is autobiographical, narrated from the couch of a psychoanalyst and tells the story of how her maternal grandfather abused his children, his grandchildren, his nephews and nieces in total impunity. Rossi has received the National Novel Award many times in Costa Rica and Chile distinguished her with the Presidential Medal of the Birth of Pablo Neruda, for the social scope of her work. She has also written many*

*short stories. Some have been translated into English and French and published in anthologies abroad.*

About an hour later the troubles had calmed down and the next morning everyone seemed better. But nobody had any illusions. They got in touch with other centers and sounded the alarm to the world. It was their duty to do so. The world had to know what was happening: oxygen levels were sinking dangerously low.

We called the people still in the village, got together and then said goodbye, each thinking "Well, this is it." Because once started, there was no way of stopping it.

Twenty years back, probably yes.

Twenty years. What did twenty years signify?

The solar panels were still functioning and would keep going for a while. They were excellent and I knew how to look after them. I used their energy to read at night. I re-read my library, my parents' books and those of the Center that I could understand. But, what did 20 years mean? How many years had I been alone in the station?

I went out into the old garden looking for the trunk where I used to make incisions, recording the passing years by their shortest day. Because there were no seasons anymore.

Even as a child I lived by the rhythm of the Pacific coastal zone of Central America: rainy season, dry season.

I well-remembered the year in which the seasons disappeared. It was when the village was still intact, with its schools, colleges, and its twenty thousand inhabitants. I was in fifth grade. It was the year of the last campaign. I had seen my mother frequently go down to the capital with other researchers. From there they would take planes, hopping from country to country, staying a month in each of the Empire's capital cities.

My mother: not very tall, dark skinned, long black hair, straight and soft, turned up nose, almost too much so, showing her nostrils, which made her look nice and friendly.

That year of the intense campaign the dry season failed to arrive, the harvests rotted, there was little to eat. When I was born the bees had already died. All of them, wild or domesti-

cated. They said it was the agrochemicals or excess of civilization's electromagnetic waves that killed them off, but nobody knew for sure. Loads of other pollenizers died too: bats, hummingbirds, bluebottles, small cockroaches.

The only sure pollenizer was the wind. And the human hand. In the village people told ancient stories of massive harvests of papaya, peaches, strawberries, oranges, apples and melons, of exquisite pumpkins and courgettes. I had trouble believing them.

"With the death of the bees and other pollenizers half of the world's population died too," my father told me. "And everyone thought that was the solution, that with less people things would be better. But things got worse." This was the world into which I was born, a "worsened" world, but the only one I knew, and I loved it anyway.

Yes, a world of heat, constant storms, and either drought or non-stop rain. A world with little diversity in food, organisms and systems, but I had my dogs, my rabbits, there were trees and rivers and this "worse" world pleased me. People had adapted. I helped them to pollenize fruits and vegetables by hand and did not miss the bees or lament them because I had never known them, only in photos and videos.

When the dry season failed our crops rotted. There was hunger and we grew very thin. A long time back the Research Center had entreated the small farmers in the area to get rid of cows and pigs because their farting and breath were among the major causes of the worldwide disaster. The farmers consented to a point: but they kept their goats, claiming that they did not fart as much as cows. Goat cheese and milk – and even goat meat sometimes – helped us survive that year. And subsequent years. Because from that moment on there were no more seasons. In some tropical regions the dry season predominated; and when it came to ourselves we mainly had rain due to living in what is called, or used to be called, the Inter-tropical Convergence Zone.

But again, people adapted: we began to cultivate fruits and vegetables in greenhouses so that they would not rot and to regulate their growth since the rains could be both continuous and intermittent, erratic. To the despair of my parents and the folks from the Center, the year of no dry season saw the farmers go back to pigs and cows, semi-stabled, feeding them with genetically modified grain pollenized by the wind and resistant to excessive water.

In that year there was no dry season on the flanks of our volcano, nor were there any seasons in the rest of the tropics or in the temperate zone, only a change in the length of daylight, shorter or longer days. That's all that was left of this worsened world, the world my mother had traveled alone and in company, pleading with leaders to make a last effort and to decree a state of emergency.

Lalia recalled the Great Resistance and a group that had invented a new, simple and revolutionary communications technology called the *Assange* technique. I remember it because they were happy and used the *Assange* technique to unite the resistance, those ever more numerous dissidents who chose to leave the system. The Great Resistance began and spread quickly inside both capitals, the Asian and the American.

The American resistance was an enormous coalition of communities that had taken over urban terrain left vacant – the masses of empty plots and houses fallen into decay due to population shrinkage. There they had set up greenhouses and plantations, becoming self-sufficient through an ingenious barter system. Certain communities pollenized cotton fields by hand and exchanged that crop with food-producing communities. They spun the cotton into clothes, they were potters and with the wood and materials of the ruined houses they hand-made everything they needed. They made paper from vegetable fibers and their own ink too. The communities had their own sources of water. The movement grew rapidly for a very

simple reason: it made people happy. And the *Assange* system meant that were always in communication.

Backlash and revenge came quickly. There was no planetary system of justice and so, as happened with the death of the pollenizers, it was impossible to say who was guilty. But since the resistance fighters were the only people who did not buy cell phones, did not buy meat or bottled water or antidepressants or neuroleptics, and they never got ill, people suspected the Great Corporations were guilty.

First, they poisoned the fresh-water springs of the resistance fighters. Then they eroded their fragile agricultural ecosystems. Without food and water, they were crushed.

The Great Resistance also broke out in the Asian capital. The world population had been slashed in half but there were still so many Chinese that millions joined the Resistance. I remember seeing videos of men and women manually pollenizing acres and acres of apples and pears in a special area where the climate was more or less stable. This was before we lost the seasons. I also saw them doing collective exercises in the public squares and the fields - thousands of people beautifully synchronized, and my mother's words came to my mind: "It's a type of Tai-Chi". The empire used planes to eliminate the Asian Grand Resistance: poisoning them from the air.

Of course, none of this was let known. We knew it because of what remained of the *Assange* system and from the videos. The world's press said that a strange bird flu had killed half a million gringos and a million Chinese, what bad luck.

The result was similar but not the same in both capitals. In the Asian capital it went fast and there were no survivors. In the American capital there were survivors who rejoined the masses and continued to resist in their hearts. That's why there were some, like my mother, who carried on the campaigns. They appealed to the masses exhausted by subsistence living. But how was one to convince them not to eat meat when all

they had was filthy scraps of cow and pig flesh? The mass production of these animals in subhuman conditions had skyrocketed since the extinction of the bees and the masters of that industry were as rich as the old petroleum magnates or the moguls of the day controlling pharmaceuticals, bottled water, gas, and the latest generation of millimeter wave technology and cell phones.

Lalia has horrible memories of the last campaign, the year in which the seasons came to a halt. Mama, who was never depressed, for the first time looked worn down. I remembered the conversations – my brothers and I were always present – at meals times with Mama saying: "The leaders won't listen to us." "They have eyes but don't see, ears that don't hear." And then, after going to bed, I listened secretly and heard whispers, Papa saying to Mama: "We must prepare them."

Mama replied, anxiously: "No, they are too young, we cannot condemn them, there's still hope." And Papa: "But it's a mad hope, like believing in God." Little by little I had begun to grasp, from bits and pieces of their talk, that what they hoped for was a new ice age that would arrive when the Gulf Stream was blocked due to a surfeit of fresh water in the Atlantic. But the longed-for ice age never came and so when everyone started coughing and coughing for the second night in a row, when I heard them sinking into a terrible sort of gooey asthma, seeking air but unable to breathe, even when going out to the street or into the garden, we then knew that the oxygen levels had plummeted to the point of no return.

Lalia was the only one who managed to keep breathing and with no warning that this would happen to her.

I was twenty years old, tall and strong. I got my height and physical strength from my father. From my mother came my black eyes, brown skin and long, straight hair.

I sensed them in the night, stretched out on the ground, mostly outside in the gardens and the street. Men, women, chickens, beasts of burden and domestic pets. All dead.

I picked up a lantern and went into the village. I wandered through the districts that had been empty for a long time but in which, up until that night, some families had still been living. I was hoping to find someone like me, some survivor, a frog or a dog. Not a thing. Nothing was alive. Not even the rats.

I knew that in the rising heat the bodies would start rotting immediately and poisoning the air even more and, even though I could breathe it, the stench would be unbearable.

I could not stay a minute longer.

I grabbed a shovel and in the night by lamplight, began digging, spooked to find dead worms.

In that moment knowledge flooded me and I was no longer afraid: nothing could survive because the whole planet needed oxygen. Everyone but me. I buried Mama, Papa and my little sister in the garden and chanted to them: "Earth, be soft on them." Then I filled a knapsack with food – oatmeal bars, dried meat, powdered milk –, put on a cloak, a sweater and climbed to the top of the volcano.

It was not hard going, I felt doubly strong. I arrived as the sun was setting. I saw the corpses of the park rangers in the hallway of the welcome center. Dragging the bodies to the edge of the crater in the waning light, I rolled them down into the volcano. "Ashes and acid be smooth on them," I said aloud, crossing myself, a gesture I had seen made by the woman who had cared for me when I was young, the woman who gave me a Bible.

In the volcano, Lalia had the welcome center to sleep in. She ate a handful of the rations and drank sulfurous water from the creek. She felt healthy.

I stayed there for weeks, on the summit, next to the crater. When the stink of dead animals on the bleak plateau finally abated, I began thinking of going back to the Research Center.

Up there on the volcano I came to the realization that I hardly needed to eat or drink.

When I was halfway down it began to rain.

By the time I got to the facilities of the Research Center it was coming down in torrents. I thought of Noah but then laughed. This was no Genesis - it was climate change.

But this time it rained more, continuously, not like a universal deluvium but enough to clean the bones and remains, for which I gave thanks, not knowing to whom or why.

All that had happened exactly six years, three months and five days ago, I told myself, feeling with my fingers the grooves for the years and the smaller incisions for the months and the days in the dead tree trunk.

And then I thought it was time to move. To go down to the coast, to the capital, to the interoceanic canal.

I spent several days gathering flowers and seeds. I put these and some clean clothes in a knapsack, took a hat, a waterproof, an umbrella, a lantern and sunblock.

Then I went down.

It took me time. As I followed the blacktop road littered with the skeletons of buses and cars. I noted that nothing was as I had once known it to be. The trees and all the plants, with the exception of the *vincas* and some rare ferns, had all died. A kind of moss covered everything, like orange seaweed. The sky at night was blacker than ever, the stars and moon redder. But most oppressive was the silence. Before you would have heard the sounds of vegetation with its thousands of insects. Now the only sound was the wind or the rain, when those were present. Not one croak or buzz was left, not one miserable frog or bird.

The birds were what I missed the most.

It started raining again. I put on my raincoat but did not open the umbrella.

I was thinking of what I would encounter down there and remembered when the sea level had risen. It was a year or two before the slump in oxygen. It had risen 130 centimetres, but that had not stopped the canal from working, they simply built dykes to protect it from tidal surges and had reinforced the in-



stallations. Part of the capital had been abandoned and some people had died, but the rest of the city dwellers moved their activities to higher ground and life went on. Life went on all over the world. The New York subway became permanently flooded, part of New York was deserted, hundreds of thousands had died. Yes, in the coastal cities and above all on the islands the death toll was large, but the global empire was cheerful because less people meant less problems, the scientists in the Center told us and I was musing on that while descending to the capital.

Then I saw it. The capital. In ruins.

The water level had risen several meters and the canal installations lay underwater, only the tops of the cranes visible. Who knows what else lay beneath, I thought, since half of the city had disappeared? There were houses still, only on the hill-sides though, but these dwellings were in a terrible state, doors and windows fallen in, tile and zinc roofing shattered.

It was very strange seeing the Paitilla skyscrapers looming out of the sea. The sea's color had become yellowish in parts, red elsewhere. There must have been a huge increase in *sargasso* or other algae, I thought. A strange, very strong smell blocked my throat. But even more asphyxiating was to gaze at such a desolation and I felt the need for a living being – woman, dog, child, little fox – to share what my eyes beheld. But after a while the movement of the sea, the sound of the waves crashing against the debris was soothing and helped me to overcome sadness.

I walked to the wooded hill whose trees now lay flat on the ground and whose flowing water had dried up. That's when I realized that if there was no more oxygen, then the rain could not be water. What was it?

In the high parts of the hill lived the rich. I could see their immense mansions: collapsed, fallen to pieces, broken down. The only building still standing was a luxury hotel, its billboard intact: *Gran Hotel Ancón*.

She took the walkway to the *Gran Hotel Ancón* when she saw her brother Abel coming the other way. Abel! What was he doing here? He had gone to study in the Asian capital of the empire years before. How come he was not dead?

They ran. Hugged each other.

When we pulled apart, I noted something odd between Abel's eyebrows. It was like a tiny boiled egg. I stared at it and asked him if it itched

"At the beginning it itched, but no more."

I felt my heart beginning to thump and remembered I had one of these government allotted neuroleptic pills in my trouser pocket. I took it out and put it under my tongue.

Abel saw me.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, I took a pill, don't be so nosy."

Abel shrugged his shoulders. He was four years older than her. His skin now tanned like leather, the rims of his eyelids burned, the hands wrinkled. But he was not thin. Lalia observed his breathing. It was like hers: slow, deep, widely spaced. Suddenly he said to her: "You are pretty, Lalia."

Lalia felt sick.

I felt nauseous.

"They all died," I explained, "Mama, Papa, Lucía, the people who stayed in the village, those in the Center..."

He stopped me with a raised hand.

"Yes, Lalia, I guessed as much. I knew."

"How did you get here? Haven't you been in China?"

"No. I was in Siberia studying the *permafrost*. Do you know that the imperial chiefs finally listened to us and put up cooling towers ...?"

"That didn't work," I said.

"No, it didn't work. They would have worked thirty years earlier."

"Before we were born," I said, for no reason.

"When I was just born," corrected Abel.

"Was it the methane trapped in the *permafrost*?" It was a pointless question.

"Yes, and then the methane from the sea bottom was freed up."

"The clathrates?"

"That's right," said Abel with a sour smile.

"How did you get here?" I repeated

"I survived because I had a mask and because methane is lighter than air and rises fast," he told me.

"No. That's crazy! It can't have been the mask. It was something else."

"Yes, something else, but remember I was in the permafrost. The bubbles could have burst in my face. If I didn't have a mask ..."

"But if it's lighter than air the bubbles would not have burst in your face. It was not the mask that protected you. What did you do afterwards?"

"Afterwards I took my compass and walked. We walked for months. There were fifteen of us at the outset. All with masks on. There were violent electric storms and intense lightning. One after the other they all died. After six months I was alone. I kept walking."

"You walked through Siberia and crossed the Bering Strait and came down here, all by foot? I can't believe it, it's impossible," I said.

"It was not easy," replied Abel. "Water everywhere. I crossed the Bering Strait in a solar powered vessel. The whole trip took years."

"It took you approximately six years and four months," I told him.

"How do you know?" asked Abel.

"I have been keeping count on a tree trunk up there in the center," I said, feeling threatened.

"What happens is that not only ships, but also solar powered cars were working, those that had not been damaged or

vandalized. I covered large stretches in cars. Crossed the whole of Canada."

"Now I understand. Tell me, was there nobody else?"

"There was no other living thing, Lalia. Nothing, nobody."

"Are you sure, really sure?"

"Completely sure, my little sister."

Even though the pill was having an effect, I was frightened.

"So, the magnates must be hidden in Antarctica," I said.

Ever since we were kids my father called the world's richest people 'magnates'.

"For sure, together with the scientists who sold their souls to the devil, so to speak, surrounded by oxygen soon to give out. In any case, they will soon all be dead, if they aren't already," said Abel grimacing.

"Lalia," he continued, "let's find a place with some shade. That hotel we saw might be the place, the *Gran Ancón*. We could spend the night there."

I agreed and, hiding my reluctance, followed him.

The *Gran Ancón* was a mess of garbage and damp, but otherwise in one piece. Of course, nothing was working, including the lift. We found rooms on the first floor. Finding some plastic brooms in working order we swept and cleaned two rooms. Luckily, they could be locked from the inside with a solid chain. But how strong could Abel be?

We went out. Abel looked for the terrace. I followed him with my lantern, since night had fallen. The terrace looked out on the sea, now closer. The tables and chairs, also made of plastic, were dirty but in good shape. Abel cleaned them with a cloth. We took seats.

"Turn off the lantern," he said.

"Don't have to. It's solar and will last a long time," I replied.

"Put it out I said," Abel sounded authoritarian. "I have candles."

"Don't be silly. Candles won't light or burn without oxygen."

"Ah yes, what a fool. It was a childish idea. These I took from a First Nations crafts shop in another country, up in the north," he said, excusing himself in embarrassment.

"I suppose the First Nations also succumbed," I commented.

"Yes. Why would they have survived?"

"I don't know. Because we are still alive?"

"I have my theory."

"Don't tell it to me now," I stopped him, my heart fluttering even though the pill had worked. "I'm worried about this ugly thing you have between the eyebrows, Abel, like a boiled quail egg."

"It's part of this whole thing. Look, you have one coming out too. Like a membrane."

I touched myself and it was true. Soft, filmy. It didn't sting any more.

"What types of climate did you pass through?"

"There were no half measures. In some zones it rained all the time, in others never. But you know what, I hardly need water."

"How do we know it's water? It can't be water. Well, whatever it is, I don't need much either."

"Tell me, how were Papa, Mama and Lucy at the end?"

"They were fine for many years, surprisingly fine, as you'll know from their letters. But later they took antidepressants and sedatives. By imperial order the government bought them and distributed them for free, to everyone. The Center was opposed on principle. Eventually, they accepted it."

"Lucía took them too? How old was she when it all came to an end?"

"Seventeen and yes, she took them too."

"And you?"

"Me no. I never needed them. Papa towards the end talked a lot but I don't know if it was the effect of the pills. He talked about what he called the best time of his life, you know, when he was still single and helped our country to unite with this

country of the interoceanic canal, after the total disappearance of the bees, when most of the population died. There was no point having two depopulated countries, better to join them together. He was extremely proud of having lent a hand to that end."

I did not like the look of Abel's eyes. But I was hungry. I took out the small box of flowers and seeds.

"I eat this, would you like some?"

"I also eat those things. I discovered them in the United States."

Abel took out a small bag and opened it.

We ate.

After eating they felt very sleepy. But Lalia wanted to keep talking, despite Abel's insistence that they should go to bed.

"What do you think was the tipping point? The death of the bees?" I asked.

"Yes, the bees dying was one ...", Abel's eyes were closing.

"And the other?" insisted Lalia.

Abel was almost asleep ...

"When they crushed the Great Resist ...", he murmured, face against the tabletop.

"Let's go to sleep," Lalia begged, shaking him. She didn't want to have to lift him to his bed nor leave him outside.

Lalia helped him to his room, where he fell on the bed. Then she went to her room and after making sure the security chain was in place, lied down and fell asleep. At some moment by dawn she heard footsteps in the corridor, someone forcing the door. But the chain did not yield.

That's when the terror she felt on encountering Abel became a certainty. This was the future lying in wait for her. Like in the Bible. Because it went beyond climate change. Her brother was going to force her to reproduce with him. Like the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

No, she would not accept that, nothing would induce her to copulate with Abel. She would not have children with her brother. Not even if it were the only way to save humankind.

Stealthily she left the room barefoot. On tip toes she approached the door to Abel's room. She heard him snoring.

She went down to the ground floor. After searching for a while she found it.

She went up again. As she had suspected, Abel had not locked his door.

He was deeply asleep, lying on his side. Immobile.

Lalia moved rapidly and sure. When she felt the knife sink into his neck, cutting the artery, she vomited and vomited, pressing it in even deeper.

She had always hated killing animals.

# The Death of Mr. Teodorescu

---

CRISTIAN-MIHAIL TEODORESCU



*Cristian-Mihail Teodorescu was born in Bucharest in 1966. He graduated in 1990 at the University of Bucharest, Department of Physics. In 1990 he earned a PhD in Chemical Physics at the University of Paris Sud, Orsay. Several research positions in France, Germany, and UK. He is currently Research Scientist 1 (eq. of a full Professor) in the National Institute of Materials Physics, Bucharest-Magurele. About 100 scientific papers published, about 700 citations, Hirsch index 16. He started writing*

- Can someone call the wife of the deceased?, said the Doctor, sweating. Then he pulled back up his surgical mask and closed behind him the door to the operating room. Nurse Number Three clicked her heels on the floor of the waiting room.

- Mrs. Teodorescu! Mrs. Teodorescuuu! yelled the Nurse with a strident voice. The dusk was falling over the University Hospital XI, mingling with the fog and smog of Bucharest. Lately the car exhaust fumes had a pungent and organic smell, difficult to identify.

- Mrs. Teodorescu!...

Mrs. Teodorescu was a small old lady, somewhat coquettish and with a glass eye. She was just walking out with a confused look from the men's bathroom.

- Would you come over?

- He... (and the old lady could not articulate the second word "died")

But her tone of voice articulated the question.

- Yes. Let's go because we have to get it over with. Others are waiting too.

Mrs. Teodorescu was easily convinced to take off her old mauve Chanel jacket, worn at the elbows, and drop off the pink pocketbook. She did not put up any resistance and probably never will again.

- Please sign here.

Illegible.



- Please put on this coat and these slippers over your shoes.

The Doctor was muttering under the mask.

- Have you informed her?

- About the death yes. About the rest, not yet.

The Doctor swore profusely. He wiped off the sweat with the back of his sleeve, and took off the surgical mask. He looked at the old lady, straight into her glass eye.

- Mrs ... ?

- Teodorescu, whispered Nurse Two after she glanced briefly at a piece of paper.

- Mrs. Teodorescu, our team has done everything possible to save your husband. We used advanced technology, at the level of the year 2040. But acute appendicitis is, sadly, still an incurable disease and this surgery has only a very small chance of success, even for young patients. Mr. Teodorescu's heart has failed.

Mr. Teodorescu was lying down on his back, and the Doctor was busy with some scissors and pliers, poking around his lumbar area.

- Hospital's self-financing, grunted the Doctor. We are obliged to harvest all the organs which can be salvaged. I am convinced that Mr. Teodorescu would not have objected. The organs we are harvesting can save lives.

- This is true, said Mrs. Teodorescu. He would not have objected.

- We start with the kidneys and the liver. These are mandatory. For the others, we need your approval.

The Doctor continued his work.

- So little blood, said Mrs. Teodorescu.

Indeed. The body was open in a few places, but there was very little blood visible.

- Do you know about these things? asked Nurse Number One.

- Yes. I was an accountant.

*science fiction short stories in the early 1980's, achieved several publications before 1990 and earned the National Prize for Short Story in 1987. He published two short stories collections SF one in 2008 and SF two in 2010, while SF three is currently compiled. Several unpublished novels. Two major Romanian prizes earned in 2010 and 2011. Apart from that he is President of the Romanian Science Fiction and Fantasy Society, the main non-profit organization centred on science fiction culture in Romania.*

- The first thing we harvested was the blood, said the Doctor speaking through the mask. When it was clear that we could not save him, we pumped his blood out and sent it to the municipal transfusion center. I am convinced that he would not have objected.

- Or that he "did not" object ..., dared Nurse Number Three.

The Doctor pretended not to hear, with some hostility.

- Mr. Teodorescu was a blood donor, he continued. I am convinced that he would not have objected.

- That is true, said Mrs. Teodorescu.

- Look, the first kidney.

Nurse Number Two grabs a black register and a red pen.

- Right kidney, stated the Doctor.

- Quality? asked Nurse Number Two.

- Size 9.5, grade B.

The kidney was placed into a metal box, which was inserted into another - bigger - metal box.

Mrs. Teodorescu was watching with the empty eye. Yes, he will save a few lives this time, she thought. He always wanted that.

- Left kidney, size 9.75, grade FB, said the Doctor after some time. Next we move on to the liver, he added, after the kidney was placed into another small metal box.

The Nurse Number Two, in charge of the paperwork, prepared a few forms, which she presented to Mrs. Teodorescu.

- You will have to sign here, and here, and here, for each organ harvested.

- This is the only document which proves that we did our work, explained the Doctor, suddenly more friendly. Otherwise we will not be paid. Let's turn him over.

They turned the dead with the face down. Mr. Teodorescu was not too heavy. Mrs. Teodorescu helped too. She was conscious that everything must be finished as soon as possible. Others are waiting too.

The Doctor continued to cut with precise movements.

- What a big liver! exclaimed Nurse Number One.

- I am not at all surprised, said Mrs. Teodorescu.

The Doctor took out the liver and touched it carefully, examining it closely and from several angles.

- But it is perfectly healthy. Extremely healthy. No nodules or cavities. Grade – let's say B, size 10XXL.

- I have to find a bigger box, said Nurse Number Three.

The normal hepatic boxes were too small. The liver was placed into a small tray, until a bigger box could be found.

- Next is the pancreas, said Nurse Number Two. Sign here please. Only if you do not have any objections.

Mrs. Teodorescu agreed and signed in three places. Illegible.

- It is a good pancreas, declared the Doctor. Grade B, size 9.

- The heart will be more tricky, said the Doctor, and picked up the electrical saw. I don't know why they insist on harvesting hearts. No one has done a heart transplant in our country in the last twenty years.

- I heard that they send them to Hungary, said Nurse Number One.

Nurse Number Three joined them again, after having found a box for Mr. Teodorescu's liver.

Mr. Teodorescu's ribs cracked, one after the other. From time to time, the Doctor stopped cutting and Nurse Number One extracted carefully a piece of bone.

The Doctor felt the need to talk.

- Mrs. Teodorescu, it is my understanding that you have no objection that we use everything that can be used from your deceased husband.

- Yes, this is so, admitted the old lady. He would not have objected at all either.

- You don't happen to have any of his belongings at home? Clothes, personal effects? Or do you perhaps intend to give them away? The nurses shuddered at this suggestion.

- No, replied Mrs. Teodorescu quickly. We talked about this subject many times. We were both atheists, ever since we met. There will be no religious service, and I will not give any alms for him either. How can anyone imagine that the dead will have it better in the afterlife if one gives food or clothes as alms in his memory! ...

- Two millennia of superstitions are enough, declared the Doctor.

- Besides, where can you bury him in this agglomeration? said Nurse Number One. The cemeteries have been closed, at least in the city. Even at Bellu they are planning to extend the Mall over the cemetery. And normal crematories use fuel and pollute the air.

- The dead is dead and that is it, said Nurse Number Two, and then asked about the size of Mr. Teodorescu's heart.

- Grade FB, size 9.25.

Mrs. Teodorescu wanted to ask how could that heart be grade FB if it failed, but she always disliked being looked down upon by the so-called experts. She may have been an accountant, but she had her pride. For example. She glanced at the forms she just signed, and noticed three mistakes in the way they were filled out by Nurse Number Two.

The Doctor was still working to extract the heart.

- If you have no objection, then, we would ask you to bring us here, to the hospital, also the personal effects of the dead. Let us see what can be salvaged from them. You know, I told you about the self-financing problem.

- I knew that you will ask me about this, said Mrs. Teodorescu on an official tone. The personal effects and the belongings of my husband are sorted and packed, ready to be taken out of my apartment.

- It is better this way.

- He would not have objected.

- Too much emphasis on personal memories about dead people generates superstition.

- Sign here, here, and here. For the heart.
- What follows now? asked Mrs. Teodorescu.
- The eyes, said the Doctor. Was he wearing glasses? he asked.
- Never. His eye sight was very good.
- Then we have to harvest them. Do you know that in our hospital was performed the first eye transplant in all Sector 5?
- Then ... Then, dared the old lady, maybe you can help me with one of his eyes. You know ... I have a glass eye. The right one.

Four pairs of eyes of the medical staff rested first on the glass eye, then on the healthy one.

- Can't be done, said the Doctor.
- You don't have the same eye color, said Nurse Number One.
- Nor do you have the same point of view, stated Nurse Number Two, after she glanced at the medical sheet.
- The dead's eyes will be sent to our eye bank, decided the Doctor. He prepared the boxes.

He cut with dexterity, and shortly two black orbits were where Mr. Teodorescu's eyes had been. Two thin blood rivulets were trickling out from them.

- Please sign. What follows now? he asked Nurse Number Two over Mrs. Teodorescu's head.
- ??? .. the testicles
- So. The Doctor grabbed a big pair of scissors and clipped the scrotum. The Nurse Number Three prepared the boxes.
- Do you have children? Asked the Doctor while cutting.
- No.
- One can tell. Size 4, grade S. They fit into one box.
- It is not only about children, said Nurse Number Two looking in the files. It seems that he was a nobody. Everybody was mocking him. Sign here.
- Is there more? asked Mrs. Teodorescu.
- This will take longer, said the Doctor. We have to extract the brain, the spinal cord and the bone marrow.
- The brain? But what do you do with? ...

- Mrs. Teodorescu, you know as well as I do that brain transplants are not possible. On the other hand, we are interested in retrieving the neurons, even dead ones. The neuronal cytoskeleton is made up of microtubules, which are extracted and are used in the computer industry. Obviously, not in our country. But we export them.

- It says right here, said Nurse Number Two, pointing out on the form. Look, the article: prime quantum material.

- In fact it is for quantum computers, says Nurse Number Three, proud of her knowledge.

This time, the preparation of the procedure took somewhat longer. The Doctor took a drill and used it to drill a hole between the orbits. Then he grabbed another device, and started to twist it in the hole, with precision and patience.

- He is threading. Makes a thread, said Nurse Number One. A technology perfected in our hospital, a first for our city.

After he made the thread, the Doctor grabbed another drill, smaller than the first, and drilled for a short time. The cephalorachidian fluid seeped through the hole.

- Aren't you interested to find out what kind of brain he had? asked Mrs. Teodorescu.

- Not at all. We recover only the microtubules. These are the same for all individuals. They differ only among species.

- Look, even here on the form there is no entry for size and grade ...

- Yes, but for the unit of measure it says kilograms, observed Mrs. Teodorescu.

- We weigh it at the end.

- In fact, we will extract the spinal cord and marrow through the same method, said the Doctor. Pumping. He inserted and screwed in a tube as those used for compressed air, which had a big blue valve attached. That tube continued with a thicker, semitransparent hose, which led to a jar (also large), to which it was attached by Nurse Number One. The Nurse Number Three connected the jar to a vacuum pump.

- Ready, said the Doctor. Start the pump.

The pump was rattling loudly. Through the transparent tube one could see first as thin threads, and then in big gobs the brain and spinal marrow of Mr. Teodorescu.

- We have to exchange this pump, yelled the Doctor. Make a request and take it to the procurement division.

The pump noise went up one octave, which was a sign that the pumping was approaching the end. The Doctor flipped the button with his foot and silence was reestablished in the operating room.

- Mrs. Teodorescu, said the Doctor, to be more efficient, and since you are already prepared, it would be good if you would go home and bring us the personal effects and the items of the deceased. Maybe in two-three hours we can finish him off completely.

- We have to do another procedure which can take a bit longer, continued the Doctor. We have to collect the skin and the bone marrow. By the time we are done, you will be back. You can take a taxi, the cost is covered.

Mrs. Teodorescu left. She took off the white coat, put on her old Chanel jacket, and walked out in that pungent smell. She was already missing, not her husband, but the operating room, with its filtered air, pure and clean.

She reached the building where she lived, stepped into the elevator, pressed the button for the 7th floor, got off on the 6th floor and climbed the stairs to the next floor. In the apartment everything was gleaming clean. After she had taken her husband to the hospital she had cleaned the entire apartment and put everything in order, even better than at the Central Accounting Office of the Health Insurance. Mr. Teodorescu's clothes were wrapped in small bags, which she could easily carry. She took a few trips downstairs, where the taxi was waiting, carrying with small steps the bags and then the cardboard boxes where she had crammed (without trying to order them) the papers on the desk, from under the desk and from around the desk of Mr. Teodorescu.

As the trunk of the taxi was full, she had to put some of the boxes on the back seat.

- Let's hurry, lady, move it, yawned the bored taxi driver, and he picked his teeth, after which he blew his nose loudly out of the window. He was listening to Manele music on the car stereo.

- I am almost ready, she sighed. Just a little more and it will be all over with. We go back to the hospital, she said after she collapsed on the front right seat.

- You have a dead? asked the taxi driver with interest, after realizing that a little politeness may not be out of order.

- My husband.

- God rest him.

Mrs. Teodorescu was horrified hearing these words, but she remembered that she was living in a free country and the right to religious beliefs was guaranteed by the Constitution, although officially discouraged by the Presidency and mass media. But then she thought that the taxi driver did not say the words with too much conviction. He was probably angling for a tip. With this view in mind, he engaged her into a discussion about how bad is this organic gasoline which "these" are selling at the pump, and how he "puts" only the other one, "the good one". He thought that he saw a gleam of approval in Mrs. Teodorescu's eye on his side (the glass one). But she did not reply in any way.

He did not get any tip. Moreover, Mrs. Teodorescu asked for a receipt. The taxi driver did not bother to get out and ostensibly turned the music louder at maximum level. Mrs. Teodorescu unloaded alone the 5 bags and 6 boxes and left them at the curb while she walked up to the postoperating room.

In her absence two more jars materialized in the postoperating room, marked "bone marrow", and the skin was rolled up carefully and placed over the sink to dry. All that remained from Mr. Teodorescu was a pile of cut bones and bleeding flesh, without a form, piled up in a tub on a small cart.



- Sign here.

- What will happen with the rest? She asked.

The Doctor straightened up. He was visibly tired. He took off his mask and gloves.

- This is not within my responsibility. But you should know that we have in our hospital German technology on the cutting edge. It would be instructive – if you have the time – to see what will happen next. You can go with this young lady.

The young lady was the Nurse Number Two, who gained somewhat Mrs. Teodorescu's sympathy because of the thick file she was filling out. She started pushing the cart, and Mrs. Teodorescu followed her docile. She was talking to her over the shoulder.

- The installation arrived two years ago, but they turned it on only last month. The tissues are subjected to high voltage discharges, in ultrashort pulses, which break up the cell membranes. The result is a total dehydration, and we extract all the fluid, together with salts, oils and minerals from these cells. The end product is a kind of oil, which after distilling, becomes prime material for the oil industry.

- Gasoline?

- Yes, this is one example. Or engine oil. Or detergents.

They walked past several metal doors marked with the sign *Danger of Death* written in Romanian and German.

- Help me, asked Nurse Number Two.

Both of them strained to push the contents of the plastic tub into a metallic trough, then the Nurse grabbed a sort of paddle and pushed the flesh and bones towards the entrance to the device.

- Look here.

The remains of Mr. Teodorescu were now in a transparent cylinder of thick glass. Everything was connected by thick cables to the high voltage installation whose buzzing could be felt from a distance.

- You can press the button, if you want.

The button was big and of course red.

- Not much will happen.

Mrs. Teodorescu did not expect that much would happen anyway. Her experience as an accountant taught her many times that the technological wonders hyped by doctors and engineers were usually big disappointments. She pressed the button.

A discharge started to take place in the glass cylinder, which opacified the glass walls almost completely. Mrs. Teodorescu could not tell what the body was transformed into or what was left of it. Then she saw a big piston, which compressed all that could still exist in that cylinder, after which through a hose she saw a few liters of a yellowish fluid flow out.

- It is good this way. Everything is recovered, she thought out loud. She chased away a stray thought about that penetrating smell the car exhaust fumes in Bucharest started to have over the last few months.

- Let's go back now. Next we should deal with the personal effects.

The bags and boxes brought by Mrs. Teodorescu were carried into the post-operating room. The Doctor opened one of the bags with clothes and inspected the contents together with the Nurse Number Three. He had put on again latex gloves.

- You are positive that they are well sorted, Mrs. Teodorescu?

- Yes. We had another dead in our apartment building, just last month. I saw how it was done.

- Well, then, said the Doctor. Fabrics – with fabrics. Shoes – which shoes. Leather? he asked. Perfect, he continued after Mrs. Teodorescu's affirmative answer. Everything is being recovered. German technology. This will contribute significantly to this week's self-financing. Such an organized death we do not see every day. You know, one can tell that you were an accountant, Mrs. Teodorescu.

- What do we do with these papers? asked Nurse Number Two pointing at the cardboard boxes. She started to have a certain respect for papers.

- You can take them to the recycling center. The Doctor turned towards Mrs. Teodorescu.

- We have the recycling center with the highest conversion efficiency in the sector. Swiss technology.

Nurse Number Two came closer to the Doctor, whispered something, then she turned towards Mrs. Teodorescu.

- I weighed the papers. 32 kilograms. Sign here.

Nurse Number One entered, carrying under her arm a sort of cardboard disk.

- Mrs. Teodorescu, do you want to take home ... what is left of him? ...

She offered her the disk-like object. It was a sort of compressed cardboard, soft at touch, but with a hard consistency, dark brown with shades of scarlet.

- This is what remains after the process of electrical discharge, dehydration, and compression. I just took it out. It is still a bit warm, you see?

- If you don't need it, I will take it, said Mrs. Teodorescu. Can you do something with it here?

- Not here, said the Doctor. But it can be used as construction material. From such panels are made for example pedestals for statues. They are sufficiently elastic and earthquake resistant.

- If you don't take it, said Nurse Number Two, we will donate it to the City Hall. They are just building a statue of Caragiale on Eminescu Street.

- Send it to the City Hall, said indifferently Mrs. Teodorescu.

- Sign here. Now we can go with the papers to the recycling station.

Mrs. Teodorescu took two boxes and the Nurse Number Two the other three boxes. They staggered under their weight and let them slam down on a cart.

- The recycling station does not run continuously, but only when we have a delivery of prime material. They put the papers into the shredder, and then Nurse Number Two closed the door, made of thermo-resistant glass.

- That was it, she said. Start the shredder, then the mill. Press here and then here.

Mrs. Teodorescu pressed, and the shredder started to work. The papers were turned quickly into thin strips, which were then transformed into a soft paste – and Mrs. Teodorescu thought that these inventors and engineers sometimes do also something useful. Look how they recovered everything they could recover from him. "It is good that he was useful for something after all."

The gray paste was twirling faster and faster, absorbing the last remaining shreds of paper. Mrs. Teodorescu saw one last piece of paper fluttering, almost clinging to the glass door, trembling as if it wanted to escape. She could still barely distinguish on it "The Death of Mr. Teodor",

...escu.