

# PROBE

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## PROBE 191

March 2022

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Email: [gailjamieson@gmail.com](mailto:gailjamieson@gmail.com)

*Probe* is typed by Gail Jamieson and other contributors.

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# PROBE 191

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# Editorial

# Gail

Probe is delighted to confirm that SFFSA is once again able to publish new science fiction and fantasy stories written by local authors. Nova 2021 was successfully run and we are publishing the first and second placed stories in this issue. And we are even more pleased to say that three of the top stories, including the winner come from club members. We are also printing the winner from our Italian compatriot RiLL, and we will once again have a story for them to publish in their next collection of winners from competitions around the globe.



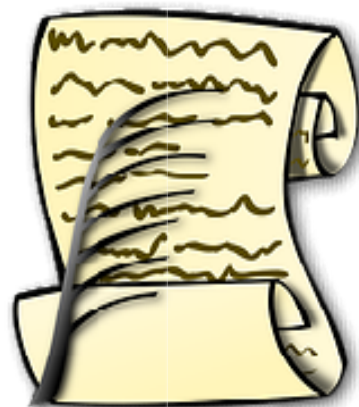
We continue to hold our monthly Zoom meetings and have had some very entertaining talks. Please remember that they are recorded and can be downloaded from our website [www.sffsa.org.za](http://www.sffsa.org.za) if you missed the meeting. The last one was presented from Paris, France by Colin Voisin who spoke about French writers and mostly about French graphic novels. It was very enlightening and I've got a new list of items to go and see if I can find.

SFFSA has an exciting prospect. Through Nick Wood we have been approached by Wole Talabi, a Nigerian SFF author. He is part of a team that publishes "Omenana" – a speculative fiction online magazine. Their home page says "But Africans don't do Speculative Fiction" They are going about showing that there is a lot off speculative fiction coming out of Africa. And they are publishing it.

And even more exciting they want to do a collaborative issue with SFFSA. There will be a request for stories going out in early May. There will be articles from our own Deirdre Byrne and stories from PROBE. Hopefully local artwork will be included. All of this will happen in the next six months and we are looking at a publication date of September. We'll send out information to our mailing list so keep an eye out for it. Long live African SF and F.

# Chairman's Note

Well what do you know, summer finally arrived, woohoo! What on earth happened this year? I'm not talking about the new post Covid normal, I'm talking about the weather. I do not recall ever having such a wet summer before, it practically rained almost every second day. Great for the plant life which is absolutely blooming at the moment. The atmosphere is lovely and fresh, with little of that dust that so often permeates the end of summer from how dry everything has become.



Everything is so lovely and green and happy.

But I wanted summer! With the heat and the sunshine and the sunscreen if you stayed in the sun too long, and until now, it felt far more like the United Kingdom with its four seasons in a day type weather. I was on holiday at the end of January and went to the coast for a week. It was awesome. I had sun practically every day, it was hot during the day and night, I could even swim! Just a pity it was so hot that the pool temperature was too high, thus you didn't really cool down a lot when jumping in, but still, swimming is something nice to do in summer. Though I don't think my girlfriend appreciated the heat as much as I did, but everyone has their favourite season.

I guess if you don't believe in climate change, all you have to do is look at how every year the weather changes. If you watch any nature documentary they will often tell you how nature survives on the predictability of the seasons.

Watching any recent documentary and you will see how in many places that seasonal predictability has changed: The rains come too early, or not at all, so some places are flooding and some places have drought, so the animals are having a hard time of it. Like everything in life, moderation is good, not too much, not too little. Last year we had too much sun, this year too much rain (and there are still places in the country experiencing drought). So what will the future hold for our weather? I guess with the current yearly trend, it will mean that we cannot really be sure what each year will hold, and this may

severely impact the farming crops. We need those crops for the human population to survive, though at almost 8 billion people in the world, are we sure the Earth will be able to sustain us in the coming years with an ever-growing population? Will the weather become worse? It certainly doesn't look like it is going to get better, and with worse weather, how will this impact the entire planet? Both from an animal and a human perspective, the coming decades look like they are going to get tougher and tougher. So those of us in our forties or more, we will likely still see how this planet will change, but worry less about this as we head into our retirement years. What about the twenty-year-olds, how will they find the world in another twenty years, and their children? I think any youngster you see nowadays are going to have a hard time as the years pass, as there are more humans in the world, as the weather of the world changes, and as life on this planet heads who knows where.

So for now, enjoy the sunny weather we have here in abundance in South Africa (despite the oh, so wet summer this year), after all, you could always like in Alaska where the average summer temperature is only around 23°C... and an awesomely cold -25°C in the interior, ouch.

Cheers

Andrew

## **Nova 2021 Results – Prof Deirdre Byrne**

As usual the stories were all read by five preliminary judges and last year eleven stories were sent to the final judge. Interestingly enough four of the stories, including the winner were written by club members. Here are her results and comments

First	The Visitor by Des Brown
Second	Beyond the Bay by Shameez Patel Papathanasiou
Third	Contaminated by Martinus Stander Conradie
Fourth to eleventh (in alphabetical order)	
Bot Vs Drak	Alison Smith
Claudia	Simon Ratcliffe
Converse	Fiona Tanzer

Eternity	Deon Schneider
Hive Mind	Gary Kuyper
Incredible Soap	Andrew Salamon
Planet of boulders	Gary Kuyper
Family business	Dawn Rae

### **WINNER: THE VISITOR**

This is a remarkably elegant story, in which a hapless journalist is persuaded to prevent an alien civilization from landing on Earth to disastrous effect. The first-person narrative ensures that the reader identifies with the journalist's perspective and allows them to follow the journalist's unfolding relationship with Bancroft, a strange man from Victorian England, who apparently knows all about the aliens' impending arrival. The story's brilliance lies in its inducing the reader to follow the journalist's progress from Bancroft's unwilling listener to his willing assistant, as well as the multiple resonances of the title, which refers to Bancroft, the alien civilization, and the journalist himself.

### **SECOND PLACE: BEYOND THE BAY**

This is a "zero to hero" story, in which the main protagonist, Eliza, is a young woman with the magical gift of being able to "bend" water to her will. Being a woman in a patriarchal world, though, means that Eliza is not allowed to attend magic school, where male element-benders, including her young brother Ben, perfect their skills. Eliza becomes a hero when a tornadic waterspout is discovered bearing down upon her town and she saves the day, in concert with her brother. The story is told with great attention to detail; it does not leave any threads untied, and it revels in the reversal of the prejudice against women as element-benders.

### **THIRD PLACE: CONTAMINATED**

This is a magical mystery story, with a malicious magical book at its centre, and more than a hint of cyberpunk. Lukas Niemand (nobody) is an everyman who has decided to unravel how the inhabitants of Bloemfontein are being duped into submitting to a conservative ideology called the Devout Patriots. He is a hard-bitten semi-criminal, out on probation, with a romantic weakness for a woman called Laura

(similar to Petrarch). The story is slick and fast-moving, with a ferocious boss thrown in for extra spice.

## **COMMENTS ON THE OTHER STORIES**

### *General remark*

It is intriguing that nearly all the finalists in this year's Nova Short Story Competition fall into the genre of fantasy. Is fantasy somehow easier to write than science fiction? What is the reason for its powerful resurgence? It would be interesting to ask the authors why they chose this particular genre.

## **HIVE MIND**

This is a science fiction story, in which the protagonist explains to the rest of humanity that a race of aliens, called "The Swarm", who share a collective consciousness, have come to rescue, not to destroy, the human race. The story lyrically extols the virtues of collective thinking. Unfortunately though, there is not much narrative tension: the tale opens with The Swarm's arrival on Earth and its domination of humanity as a *fait accompli*, as well as their having persuaded the protagonist to act as their mouthpiece. The rest of the story simply expounds on this situation.

## **BOT VS. DRAK**

This story recounts how Count Dracula, having slept through countless eons, is tricked by his one-time servant, called Robinson (shades of *Robinson Crusoe*?), who has now become a mechanical bot, into giving him control of his enormous fortune and resources. It is a thoroughly enjoyable tale, but loses verisimilitude at the point when the Count, realizing that humanity has died in a pandemic, immediately and joyfully gives instructions for his own death. This simply does not fit into vampire lore.

## **THE FAMILY BUSINESS**

This is a fairly accomplished "secret" story, centring around the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse from the Biblical Book of Revelations. Most of its energy goes into keeping this fact from the reader while developing the complex dynamic between the



narrator and his mother (two of the Four Horsemen). Unfortunately, though, there are too many unexplained features. Why is Mira (the mother) so antagonistic to her son? The story only gives us the clue that he is “her mistake” for an explanation. And, if the son is not part of the “family business”, what exactly does he do? These aspects need to be developed.

## **CONVERSE**

This is a vampire tale, in which the vampire is simply the last stage in an alien life cycle, which leads from imago to pupa, to plant-sap-sucker, to pupa, and finally to vampire. The protagonist, unoriginally called Professor van Helsing, kills the vampire as soon as he realizes where its life cycle is heading. Regrettably, there is too much coincidence in this story. Why do the plant-sap-suckers pupate under Castle Dracula, of all places? Why does the mycologist share the same name as Van Helsing in Stoker’s novel? Finally, the killing of the pupating vampire is too similar to the original method to be interesting.

## **ETERNITY**

This story is too derivative of earlier love stories to maintain its intended emotional force. The tale of a woman astrophysicist, trapped in a malfunctioning space ship which may or may not emerge from a fiery heat death, is told by her husband. From the beginning of the story, we know that there has been an accident, and this immediately removes much of the narrative tension from the story. We never find out whether the woman makes it back alive. Most of the story’s energy goes into the unfolding love affair between the woman and the narrator, who eventually marries her, and the reader is supposed to feel the man’s devastation as he realizes that he may never see the woman he loves again. But ultimately the whole situation is too sentimental to be convincing.

## **PLANET OF BOULDERS**

This story is a very close runner-up for third place. The lonx Renmar is a misunderstood scientist type; his invention of long-distance communication makes it possible for him to converse with a human who has been floating around in outer space looking for intelligent life. The human is an annoying person called Billy-Joe

Brown, who belongs to the children's song "Ol' MacDonald", and exudes cheer from every pore. Nevertheless, this is not enough reason for Renmar to kill him by giving him false coordinates for the entrance in the planet's surface to the subterranean lonx dwellings. Also, it is not altogether possible that Billy-Joe Brown's spaceship would emit enough heat to turn the entire surface of the planet into glass and destroy all the lonx. In brief, the story conceals too much information.

### **INCREDIBLE SOAP**

This story revolves around the invention of a soap with fragrance that makes a person feel invincible, and earns the attraction of anyone he (or she) meets. Azola, the lucky person to find a bar of the soap in his hotel room, has the short-lived illusion that all is well in his life, that his business of selling alarm clocks is flourishing, and that he can win vast amounts of money racing tortoises. However, most of the incidents that make up the story are simply absurd; Azola's life crises are not solved by one shower with the soap, and the reader is left wondering what all the fuss was about.

### **CLAUDIA**

Claudia is possibly the only white child left in the world, kept in a special facility in Lagos, Nigeria, where Sergeant Ceba Mti has been taken to inspect her and give his opinion of her status and future movements. The story skilfully builds up to the revelation of Claudia's race, via Mti's eventful journey through Lagos in the company of two Nigerians, leading the reader to believe that he has been sent to Nigeria for a more weighty security concern than the existence of a little white girl. In fact, though, the revelation falls flat as the author does not do much with it besides having Mti shed tears on meeting the girl. There is no indication of what will become of her beyond the elliptical allusion to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the story, which is already quite long at 22 pages, remains incomplete.

# Magazines Received

**Stapledon Sphere** (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead [reecejbm@gmail.com](mailto:reecejbm@gmail.com)

Issue #55 December 2021

Issue #56 January 2023

Issue #57 February 2022

## **Ansible** David Langford

December 2021 413 <http://news.ansible.uk/a413.html>

January 2022 414 <http://news.ansible.uk/a414.html>

February 2021 415 <http://news.ansible.uk/a415.html>

**WARP 111** is now available for your reading pleasure!

Download from our website: [http://www.monsffa.ca/?page\\_id=20361](http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=20361)

Our heartfelt thanks to Danny Sichel for editing, and to Valerie Royall for the beautiful layout!

Cathy Palmer-Lister

Ste. Julie, Quebec, Canada

[cathyp@sympatico.ca](mailto:cathyp@sympatico.ca)

<http://www.monsffa.ca>

# Nova 2021 First Place

## THE VISITOR

Des Brown

### FIRST CONTACT

"It's actually a time machine," he said sharply, and more than a little pompously, just a few minutes after I first met him.

I was at a celebratory party in Johannesburg arranged by friends of mine, old high school buddies, an upwardly mobile group of scientists and innovators whose recent accomplishments included – among others – collaborating on the SpaceX BFR design, developing a low-cost water filtration device commissioned by the UNHCR, and working as part of the South African contingent team at CERN.



Unlike me, they were actually highly qualified and jaw-droppingly smart, and they'd already accomplished some amazing things, despite their relative youth. By comparison, I was the very definition of a career slacker: unsettled, curious, aimless, with neither academic bragging credentials nor any kind of actual wealth or success to show for my erratic efforts at life.

The one skill I did have, though, was a healthy dose of dry cynicism combined with a (mostly inappropriate) sense of humour, which had the habit of sabotaging me at the most inopportune times. And at the poolside on this particularly beautiful evening, surrounded by happy, champagne-drinking overachievers who had quite clearly not only won the intellectual genetic lottery, but probably designed it too, I decided that it might be better to simply surrender to the absurdity and see where it took me.

The man I was speaking to was unknown to me. I had no idea how he was connected to the group and of course I didn't particularly want to know. Although I was chiefly there in my role as a journalist to write an article on the occasion celebrated by my friends, I had also welcomed the opportunity to just relax, enjoy the party, and catch up with one or two acquaintances who I had been longing to see again.

Well, really just one, if truth be told.

"I see you've already met Marguerite," I said, catching her eye over his shoulder and raising my glass in an apologetic acknowledgement. She smiled back, dipping her chin as if to indicate that she understood my predicament and was forgiving of my absence.

He half-turned his head as if momentarily acknowledging the presence of a painting on a wall, before engaging me again.

"Indeed," he said, drawing out the word in an oddly precise but clipped English accent that sounded like he was auditioning for a Sherlock Holmes role. "A delightful woman, I'm sure."

*A de-lateful woman, I'm shore.* I mocked his accent in the recesses of my childish mind for a brief moment.

She was. And if I could get rid of Randolph Bancroft – as he had introduced himself – quickly enough, I could get down to the serious business of revitalizing my relationship with my occasional lover.

"Sorry, Mr Bancroft," I said, trying to retrace my train of thought. "Did you say-"

He nodded a seemingly curt affirmation, a pretty sure indication that he was, indeed, mentally unsound. My justification for thinking this was because I have a proven record when it comes to attracting the attention of crazy people.

"Yes, I did. It's a device for travelling through time. And the reason for my forwardness in telling you this, if you will indulge me, will quickly become apparent."

*Not quickly enough*, I thought.

"Of course, you may be sceptical," he said, the staggering understatement of the evening. "But I am hoping to sway you. And it's very important that you believe me."

"Okay," I said slowly. "And why is that?"

Bancroft was a little older than I was, by my reckoning, and if the uncanny valley could be applied to a human, he was the poster boy. His clothing was... well, let's just describe his fashion choice as eclectic, a vaguely unsettling blend of adequately dressed lawyer and digital nomad. Try to picture a less symmetrical version of Ryan Reynolds, sporting a handlebar moustache, wearing a cheap grey suit, and carrying a battered leather briefcase or valise of some sort. Add a pair of brass-rimmed, yellow-tinted spectacles that look like a badly designed steampunk prop, and a string of roughly shaped small dark stones wound around the left wrist like a chakra bracelet, and you start to get the picture.

He leaned in, and I was momentarily overwhelmed by the scent of old books, cherry tobacco, and peppermints.

"Because, my dear fellow," he said, "something is going to happen that will have terrible consequences for our planet, and I'm depending on you to prevent it."

I stared at him for a long moment before taking a very deep drink from the glass I was holding.

"Oh. Consequences for our... planet? Do you mean environmentally?"

*Please just say yes and then go and bother someone else.*

He shook his head.

"Unfortunately not. I'm, ah, referring to something a little more serious, I'm afraid."

"Climate change is pretty serious in my book," I said breezily.

"My good man," he said, without a trace of irritation at my levity, "I fully understand why you would choose not to believe me. The curse of your era is that everything must be submitted to the sterile lens of sceptical scrutiny, which renders blind the

classical faculties of mystery and intuition. So much observation of the universe without, and nothing of the universe within."

He raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

"They are the same, you know. Inseparable."

"So," I said drily, ignoring his little lecture on the mystical, "which era are you *from*, then?"

Bancroft stood a little taller, as though readying for an inspection at a parade.

"To this place and time, I am but a visitor. However, the era within which I had the good fortune to be born, and from which I travel, is that of Her Royal Majesty, the Queen."

"Queen... Elizabeth?"

He frowned.

"Good heavens, no. Queen Victoria."

"Hmm. Queen Victoria of Great *Britain*. That would be halfway up the world from here. So, uh, what brings you to the Southern tip of Africa, in that case?"

He sighed.

"Your attempts at humouring me are understandable, if somewhat vexing. Nevertheless, quite predictable, given my abrupt appearance and somewhat outlandish pronouncement. But I do not have a great deal of time to explain everything in detail."

"Mr Bancroft, I'm afraid-"

"Suffice to say that my window of transportation is somewhat limited. My colleagues have had to search - very diligently - for an extremely narrow conjunction that I could exploit in order to get to you, and I've had to do so under the utmost secrecy. It's a very serious breach of the convention, you know. I have only this one opportunity, and I will have to return very soon, so it is rather important that you pay attention to me."

I tried to suppress my annoyance. I'm usually happy to indulge the crackpots... but come on now. In the background, Marguerite was stripping down to her bathing suit.

I inhaled deeply.

"Alright. Hit me."

He blinked.

"I shall do no such thing."



I shook my head wearily.

“That’s not what – actually, never mind. What is it, exactly, that you think makes me so important?”

Somewhere inside the house, someone cranked up the volume, and the anthemic chorus from Europe’s *Final Countdown* echoed through the open windows and across the fairy light-illuminated garden, a seemingly fitting tribute in light of the burgeoning absurdity before me.

Bancroft stared intently at me, commanding my reluctant attention.

“First contact,” he said, his eyes locked onto mine through his amber cosplay spectacles. “Nine days from now, the human race – as a technologically enabled sentient species – will no longer be alone in our solar system.”

I grabbed a full glass from the tray of a passing waiter. Sometimes, the best way to deal with staggering levels of psychosis in others is to simply ride it out. The cocktail would no doubt help.

“Oh,” I said, “Let me guess. The aliens – am I right? – are going to land in my back yard, and... I’m either going to have to fight them or convince them not to blow us all up.”

Bancroft smiled.

“Quite the wag. A suitable enough attribute, given your choice of profession.”

Before I could take offence, he continued.

“Oumuamua. Are you familiar with the name?”

“Of course,” I said with false confidence, racking my distinctly non-astrophysicist brain. “It was that, uh, thing that came through the solar system quite a few years ago...?”

He grimaced – I assumed, at my lack of scientific acumen, and, probably, general knowledge – and cleared his throat theatrically before continuing.

“Yes. Now: Oumuamua was not – *is* not – a long-period comet, as so many of your modern supposed intellectuals would like to assert. The fact that it had no tail or coma should have been a dead giveaway. The truth is that it is a scouting device, a visitor, and when it passed by in the year two thousand and seventeen, it was already reporting back to the craft following it. The second vessel is capable of moving a great deal faster, and as I speak to you now, it is -”

He glanced down at some kind of pocket watch that he had fished from his jacket pocket.

“... already within thirteen and a half million miles of Earth.”

“Hold on a second,” I said. “It’s a great story, but even if it was true, and there’s going to be some kind of all-consuming threat to Earth because of it, how can you be exactly sure of what’s going to happen, anyway? And how do you know that whatever’s supposedly going to happen can even be changed?”

I had watched quite a few time travel-related movies and felt confident in my pseudo-intellectual rebuttal to his theory.

*Okay, crazy dude, let’s play.*

Bancroft stared at me as though I was an imbecile. He raised his left hand, tapped the little circlet of dark stones wrapped around his wrist.

“This. Is. A time travel device.”

He spoke slowly, as if to a small child.

“It operates by harnessing immeasurably small fluctuations in the Earth’s vibratory pattern – I believe your modern mavens know it as the Schumann resonance - to create folds in the firmament. And where there are folds, there are transportation pathways.”

“Yes...?”

“That means we’re able to travel through time. We’re able to see, at first hand, what has happened and what *will* happen. Most relevantly, we’ve also had ample opportunity to witness how seemingly unchangeable outcomes *can* be changed, with a little careful intervention.”

“Okay. But is that really a good idea? I mean, what if you get it wrong, or trigger something worse?”

I quietly commended myself on still being able to pretend that this was a serious conversation.

Bancroft’s moustache twitched.

“Generally, it is most certainly *not* a good idea. It’s against our charter for that very reason. But in this case, the extinction of humanity is virtually guaranteed unless we take action.”

“Hang on. First off, who’s ‘we’?”

“The Antiquarian Society, if you must know,” he said, his face momentarily unreadable. “And if you perchance should grasp the opportunity, you may come to know very well who we are. In fact, I look forward to welcoming you. But first, you need to know what it is that I am about to request of you, and why.”

I sighed.

“Fair enough. But after that, would you be kind enough to excuse me? I have someone waiting for me.”

“Allow me five minutes of your time,” he said, his demeanour oddly not as antagonistic as I had perhaps expected it to be. “A short recounting of history to come, if you will. Pray sit with me and I will endeavour to sway you.”

I nodded and we made our way to some seating that had been placed on the lawn under a sprawling Jacaranda tree, the luminescent purple blossoms littering the grass like pale butterflies in the semi-darkness. And it was there, amid the fragrance of the flowers and the sharp chlorine odour from the pool, that Bancroft imparted his account of history that was to come.

The vessel he had described would arrive in high Earth orbit, nine days from now. The visitors, contrary to popular memes, would be highly intelligent, pacifistic, and conspicuously non-confrontational. Their makeup would be part-biological, part-technological, and something else, an aspect of life that could perhaps be described as metaphysical in nature.

They would reach out, communicating with relative ease based on the extrapolation of language and custom assimilated through analysis of transmissions from Earth. As refugees, victims of a vast conflict that had unfolded unimaginably far away, their mission would be to request safe harbour, and perhaps even a permanent abode. In exchange, they would offer humanity access to certain technologies, both physical and non-physical, that would otherwise not be dreamed of for another five hundred years on Earth.

“Sounds pretty good to me so far,” I said, leaning back and crossing my ankles as I finished off my cocktail. “Not sure I see the problem with that, to be honest.”

Bancroft was sitting stiffly, seemingly distrustful of the mechanics of the garden lounger he had appropriated.

“The problem does not lie with the visitors,” he said, something softer entering his tone. “The problem lies with us. Humans. With the vexatious propensity of *Homo Sapiens* for duplicity and greed and betrayal.”

He went on to tell me how, in the turmoil of global shock and wonder at the appearance of the visitors, and the sudden requirement for international governmental and social consensus that would result, a rogue element would subtly assert itself.



An ideological coalition of military and industrial players would conspire to exploit the situation, with the tacit approval and funding of several high-profile arms manufacturers and financiers. Analysts loyal to these consortiums would assure them that the visitors, highly peaceable and seemingly naive, possessed no credible means of defence and would be vulnerable to a surprise attack.

The strategy would be simple: a high-casualty false flag event staged by the conspirators, blamed on the arrivals, and instant Security Council countermeasures that would require decisive military action, capture and incarceration of the arrivals, with confiscation of all technology as the proceeds of victory.

Of course, the advanced technology was the grand prize: it would be appropriated for the supposed benefit of the human race, ostensibly as a safeguard against future 'attacks' from other, undefined, extraterrestrial sources.

This plan would be set in motion, and as the horror and outrage of the supposedly hostile and unprovoked false attack resonated around the world, the next step – swift military reprisal and capture of the visitors and their craft – would proceed, so they thought, with ease.

It would, Bancroft informed me soberly, turn out somewhat differently.

The arrivals, with access to shielding and sophisticated weaponry that had been until this point undetected and unsuspected, would respond to the joint operation with overwhelming retaliatory force, decimating two of the largest militaries on the globe within a matter of a days. In desperation, and with the support of allied countries, one of the now-crippled leading nations would then launch a nuclear strike on the visitor craft, now positioned in the Atlantic.

The attack would fail, the nuclear warhead redirected back toward the country of origin, where it would detonate on a major city, causing unimaginable devastation.

In the resultant breakdown of international power grids and communication systems, chaos would ensue, pre-emptive military protocols would be activated, and the result, an oddly ashen-faced Bancroft informed me, would be the triggering of a global nuclear holocaust.

An extinction level event.

I sat, in the silence after he had stopped speaking, and contemplated the empty glass in my hand. Of course, he was a lunatic – delusional and probably highly psychotic – but the conviction with which he'd delivered his apocalyptic vision was

more than a bit unnerving. The hallmark of true insanity, I reminded myself, was exactly that kind of unswerving belief in the manufactured delusion.

“Look,” I said, as gently as I could. “I’m sure that to you this is all very real, maybe, and I understand that it might seem that way, but... I’m a journalist. Maybe you knew that already. But I deal in facts. I deal with corporate press releases and people winning prizes for their gardens and cats getting rescued from trees. If you’re maybe telling me this in the hope that I’ll-”

“Broken window,” he said abruptly.

I gaped at him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said ‘broken window’. The window facing the garden on the side where your friends have their ridiculously immodest outdoor bathing tub is going to be broken, fortunately without serious injury.”

I blinked, stood up from the lounge.

“Right. I think I’m going to take my leave, Mr Bancroft. It’s been... interesting. But I really have to go now. If you...”

I hesitated for a moment.

“If you need to, you know, talk to somebody, I can recommend a very helpful professional who I’ve visited personally. She’s here in Joburg and she’s really reasonable.”

Behind me, the chatter and laughter of the group around the pool was interrupted by the crack and crunch of glass being shattered, the shards tinkling onto the stone verge between the house and the lawn. I whirled around in time to see one of the partygoers in the living room being pulled back by friends, having lurched accidentally into the broad window fronting the pool area. In the immediate aftermath, it looked as though the curtains had prevented him from being lacerated, and there was a momentary babble of consternation followed by exclamations of reassurance.

I swung back to face Bancroft, my scalp prickling. He had not moved.

Some years ago, I had experienced the misfortune of my car being stolen while I was inside a shopping centre. I remembered the odd feeling of disconnection with reality in the instant of coming out and discovering that it was gone: standing numb, puzzled, in a haze, somehow rationalizing that I must have parked it somewhere else. I *must* have. A refusal – utter, point-blank denial – that this could have happened.

Bancroft pulled out the odd fob-watch from his pocket again, glanced at it.

"I do not have much time left," he said. "Now. Do you see the gentleman standing in the doorway over there?"

I shifted, followed the direction of his pointing finger. One of the guests, a man in his forties, dressed in a pair of baggy slacks and an open-necked shirt, was leaning against the doorframe of the small cottage adjacent to the house, idly smoking a cigarette as he scrolled through something on his phone, the screen illuminating his face in a pallid blue glow.

"That is Gus Hornsby. Doctor Gus Hornsby, to be precise. He is the senior scientist in charge of the Square Kilometre Array, along with Professor Julian van der Merwe."

I shook my head.

"Sorry. The square... the what?"

"The large radio telescope array situated in your own country's Northern Cape province. I'm somewhat disappointed that you don't know of its existence, Mr Logan."

He did, truthfully, sound quite disappointed. My mind was spinning; I felt as though I was somehow being spectacularly gaslighted, yet powerless to prevent what was happening to me.

"I want you to go over to him," said Bancroft, his voice firm, "and ask him whether he has an update on an object he's been tracking for the past two weeks. Tell him that you're talking about Uniform Seven Zero Three."

I shook my head, not in refusal, but in utter confusion and disorientation.

"Just do it," said Bancroft, so compellingly that I could have sworn he was hypnotizing me. "Go. Now. Remember: Uniform Seven Zero Three."

I found myself crossing the patch of lawn, skirting a flowerbed, approaching the man Bancroft had pointed out. He looked up as I drew near, dipping his head in polite acknowledgement. I stopped, squeezed my eyes shut, opened them again. He was looking at me quizzically.

"Doctor Hornsby?"

He nodded affably.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Hi. I'm Ben Logan. I, ah... I wanted to ask you something. I hope you don't mind-"



"Not at all," he said, switching off his phone and pocketing it as he looked at me a little more closely. "With pleasure. What's your specialty?"

I cleared my throat.

"Actually, I'm a journalist."

He pursed his lips.

"Oh. Alright then. What is it you'd like to know?"

"I want," I said, feeling like the world's greatest idiot, "to know about something you've been tracking. On your, um, radio telescopes? Something called Uniform Seven Zero Three."

Hornsby started as if he'd just been electrocuted, his eyes white in the shadows, the cigarette falling from his fingers and sparking as it landed on the ornamental flagstones.

He came out from under the narrow cottage porch with astonishing speed, and I instinctively recoiled, but he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back into the shadows where he had previously been standing idle.

"Who told you that? Who are you?"

I stared at him in astonishment.

"I'm a journalist, I told you. Why are you - what does that mean?"

He looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"That's impossible. Only two people-"

He was abruptly silent, but continued to look warily at me, his grip still steel-like on my arm.

"Tell me the truth. The *truth*. How do you know about this?"

I was at a complete loss, stunned at the rapid escalation of events and the unnerving implications of what I had just experienced a few minutes ago in the presence of Bancroft. I half turned, gestured back toward the Jacaranda tree-

"Well, that's actually the person who told me to-"

And, of course, Bancroft was nowhere to be seen.

Hornsby was wired, adrenalized, his suspicions fully aroused, his hostile incredulity palpable.

"Have you published anything? Are you trying to leak information? Because I promise you, if you are-"

He shook his head.

"You don't know what you're doing. Nothing's been confirmed yet. That transmission could be a false positive. It could be anything. For god's sake, if you really are a journalist, do the ethical thing, just this once, and keep a lid on this until we know more."

"Doctor Hornsby," I said, with as much composure as I could muster. "I can promise you, on the grave of my mother, that I haven't written anything, I haven't heard anything beyond what you've just said, and that I'm not going to do anything. In fact, I'm going to walk away and hopefully never bother you again."

I'm not an idiot.

I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I had just been clued into something that I had no right to know. I also knew that it tied directly into what Bancroft was supposedly trying to accomplish, and the thought that his nihilistic fantasies might carry even the slightest bit of credibility was so sickening, so soul-disturbing, that I felt like vomiting onto the lawn as I strode rapidly away from Hornsby, my face hot with embarrassment and bewilderment.

I rounded the corner of the cottage, fully intending to leave the party, along with the whole inexplicable mess of whatever this was. I could give Marguerite a call in the morning, I reasoned, make up some excuse, maybe arrange a conciliatory date or something. The whole episode had just been too bizarre to fathom, and the only rational explanation I could think of was that I had somehow been made the target of an incredibly sophisticated prank.

A little ahead of me, a figure detached itself from the wall, and I seethed at its reappearance.

"How did you even know I'd be coming this way? And what the hell just happened back there?"

My tone, now, was one of genuine anger; I was ready to punch someone in the face for doing this to me. Bancroft, by comparison, was his infuriatingly normal blend of insistent calmness and lunatic clarity.

"I'm glad you're starting to pay attention. I know you'd prefer to simply leave and never see me again, but that won't be possible."

I balled my fists, stared at him.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Well, for a start, there's going to be a citywide electricity failure in about two or three minutes, and the gates to the front of the property will be unavoidably locked."

He chuckled.

"Which means that you quite literally *won't* be able to leave. Quite droll, actually. Also, I happen to know what you're going to do."

"Listen. If you think this is-"

He gestured abruptly, cutting me short.

"Let us repair to one of the rooms inside. It will be a little more private, and I have only a few minutes left at my disposal."

Numbly, I followed him - why, I had no idea - and once inside, we made our way through the bustling living room to a quieter space adjacent to the kitchen near the back of the house, a laundry room by the look of it.

"Right," said Bancroft, almost breezily. "As with all things, the final decisions are always ours to make. And although this course has already been set, you have the capability to alter events as you choose."

He unslung the leather satchel from around his neck and shoulder, holding it reflectively for a moment before extending his arms, offering it to me.

"I fervently hope and trust that you will follow through in accordance with your nature."

I backed up, shaking my head.

"Before we even start to have this... discussion, or whatever it's supposed to be, you need to tell me exactly what your-"

"*Take it.*"

His voice was commanding, tinged with urgency. His gaze flitted downward, toward the satchel.

"Everything you need to know is in there."

Reluctantly, against my better judgment, against all logic, I reached out and took it from him. It was surprisingly heavy.

Discerning my intent, Bancroft shook his head.

"Do not open it until you are well away, and alone. The reasons will become apparent when you do."

I cradled the satchel in one arm, rubbing my eyes with my free hand.

"Mr Bancroft... I've got to be honest: I'm so out of my depth right now that so don't know what to believe any more. I just need some time to think about what's happening here."

The room was plunged into darkness, along with the entire house. From the next room came calls of exasperation and laughter, a typical reaction to the periodic blackouts caused by outages in South Africa's erratic power grid. One of the hosts was saying something about lanterns in the hallway cupboard.

A spark, then a flame: Bancroft had produced a lighter from his pocket. His face seemed to soften in the flickering yellow light, the dancing shadow of his silhouette indistinct on the wall behind him.

"I'm off to the water closet," he said, turning and heading up the passageway leading from the laundry room. I followed him helplessly in the gloom, wondering what he was talking about.

The answer became apparent when he stopped at the door to a guest bathroom and pivoted to face me briefly.

I realised that there was another, very faint, source of light that had manifested itself as he walked: the small, irregular black stones tied around his wrist were giving off an almost imperceptible phosphorescence, a violet glow so nebulous that it only became visible when he briefly extinguished the lighter.

"Yes, they do that," he said in the darkness, as though he knew where I was looking. "It's an indicator of imminent resonant alignment. I've also been told that it stimulates hemispheric synchronisation in the human brain, which is helpful when you're in transition."

The lighter flared again, and I saw that he was extending his right hand, his expression oddly tranquil. Reflexively, I reached out in return, and we shook hands. "If everything proceeds as it should, I shall be seeing you again soon," he said. "Goodbye, Mr Logan."

"Uh - goodbye," I replied, completely confused, attempting a semblance of normality. I expected him, then, to walk up the passage toward the front section of the house, but he opened the bathroom door instead, slipping inside and closing it behind him.

Part of me knew that it would probably be polite to wait until he was done, and then to bid him farewell properly when he left, but another part of me suspected, contrary to everything I thought I knew, what would actually happen.

Through the door, I heard Bancroft inhale once, deeply, like a free diver about to enter the depths, and then there was silence.

I waited another minute or two before tentatively rapping on the door.

"Mr Bancroft?"

There was no reply, but as if prompted by the sound of my voice, the lights came back on, momentarily dazzling me. Somewhere else in the house, music started up, and there was a muted cheer from outside where most of the guests had congregated on the lawn.

Glasses clinked; laughter and conversation swelled, and two women rounded the corner into the passage, chatting animatedly as they approached the spot where I was standing.

Holding onto the leather satchel as if it were my only grip on reality, I opened the door.

The bathroom, windowless and without any other exit, was empty.

## **SIX DAYS LATER**

Doctor Hornsby lay on the floor of the container shed, blood trickling from the open wound on his scalp where I had smacked him against a metal stanchion in the heat of our struggle, ten minutes earlier.

I hoped – prayed – that I had not injured him too seriously.

He'd surprised me, surreptitiously entering the sprawling utility shed through another door, taking advantage of the darkness to sneak up on me while I was crouching over the transmitter module and attaching the mounting clamps according to the instructions Bancroft had left me.

Just before I re-entered the building, I glanced up at the night sky that soared majestically overhead. Here, in the cold, arid expanse of the vast and uninhabited semi desert Karoo region of the Northern Cape, the stars were impossibly brilliant, flung against a velvet black canvas, glimmering with ferocious intensity, and partially illuminating the observatory building compound. Farther away, the cluster of impossibly large radio telescopes were darkly silhouetted against the starlight, each one an enormous, silent sentinel pointing at the sky.

The soft sand underfoot was uneven and gritty, each step kicking up a puff of dust as I moved. I was returning from the nearby processor building where I had, I hoped, accomplished what I had come here to do. On one side of the processor building was an external interface where the insulated bundles of optic fibre coming in from the sixty-four interlinked radio telescopes were located. The transmitter module, one of the items in the satchel Bancroft had given me, had been modified to fit snugly onto the branched cable stem, with the aid of two sturdy clamps.

There was nothing else to do, except to rely on the utterly unfamiliar technology that Bancroft had assured me would work.

As I opened the metal door and stepped inside, Hornsby groaned faintly, his eyes fluttering open, and I glanced across at him. I'd tied his wrists and ankles together with electrical cable off cuts I'd found on a shelf, and he was probably not going to be mobile for quite some time.

He focused on my face and grimaced as I closed the door behind me.

"I don't know what you're doing, but it's senseless," he said in a ragged voice. "If this is some kind of terror attack, it's not going to accomplish anything. This is a radio telescope observatory, not a military installation or something like that. I don't know what it is you hope to accomplish by doing whatever you're doing."

I paused, shook my head.

"Doctor Hornsby. I'm sorry. I'm *really* sorry. I didn't mean to hit you like that. This is not what you probably think it is... and I'm not a terrorist."

"Yes, you are," he said flatly. "You're clearly trying to sabotage the array. And I can tell you now that it won't do you any good. No matter what you blow up or destroy, there are two other observatories that are now monitoring-

He bit his lip.

"Look," I said, "I'm not trying to destroy anything. I know you won't believe me and I'm not going to try to convince you otherwise. I've done what I needed to do, and I've already posted a message for someone to come and help you. I mean you no harm, and after this, you'll never see me again."

"The hell I won't," he said shortly. "I'll see you get exactly what's coming to you. And it's going to happen, regardless of what you do."

I looked askance at him.

"And what is it that you think is going to happen to me?"

"You really don't know?"

"Enlighten me."

He scowled, wincing at the pain it seemed to cause him.

"Control of our local operations, since the beginning of the month, is no longer vested in the South African authorities. It's been ceded to the US intelligence services. *They're* overseeing this facility now. And I'm estimating that their security contractors, who you managed to bypass – god only knows how – will be here any

minute now. They're not going to try and negotiate with you. I can promise you that. They have standing instructions to shoot intruders on sight."

I looked at him intently, feeling momentary sympathy for him. I had, after all, just denied him the chance to become the most famous scientific figure in modern human history. Perhaps, as a means of apology, I could attempt to offer him an explanation, if he would hear it.

"Doctor Hornsby," I said, as gently as I could. "I want to tell you what I've done, and why."

"It won't help you," he said.

"I know. But it might help *you*. And the reason I say that is because I know more about the visitor – about U703 - than you do."

He stared at me with contempt.

"You? A... *reporter*?"

I winced. I preferred 'journalist' myself. It made me sound marginally less like a tabloid hack.

"Just give me a couple of minutes," I said, "and maybe you'll understand. You won't believe me, but in time, you might."

He looked at me impassively. I took a deep breath and seated myself on a toolbox.

"Alright. When I approached you last week, I had no idea who you were. Believe me when I say that I had not even heard of you until that moment. Fact is, I'd just met somebody, a man who told me a story that – quite frankly – made me instantly think he was insane. And I'm going to tell you that story, too, as quickly as I can."

I didn't mention Bancroft by name. But as I began to relate the details of our first meeting, I could see Hornsby reddening, almost apoplectic with incredulous disbelief. By the time I reached the part about Bancroft's claim to have somehow travelled from Victorian England to prevent a global catastrophe, he could no longer restrain himself.

"You're insane!" he shouted. "You're as mad as he is! How can you even think that there's anything credible about that? Wake up, man!"

I raised a conciliatory hand.

"I know. I *know*. And nobody thought he was a stark raving lunatic more than I did. In fact, even after I'd had a chance to go through everything the next day, I was *still* wondering whether I hadn't somehow lost my own mind. Believe me. And maybe I am insane. But let me finish."



I told him about the nature and outworking of the arrival of the craft that he had been tracking – and from which his observatory had been receiving communications signals – and what would happen. At this point, his expression was a blend of utter disbelief, overwritten with a level of blind fury that rendered him almost inarticulate. Before he could explode again, I rested my elbows on my knees and leaned forward, trying to keep his eyes on me.

“I understand what you’re feeling right now. I felt the same way. And when I tried to make sense of it afterward, I was thinking exactly the same things you’re thinking right now. Maybe... I was being set up by someone to deliberately sabotage a research program or something. Maybe it was part of an elaborate intelligence-gathering operation and I just happened to be a handy stooge. Maybe he was an agent of some kind, acting on behalf of a rogue state or something like that, with a convoluted story and a massively clever setup. A psy-op, with me as the fall guy.”

I shrugged.

“In an extremely far-fetched scenario, maybe there *was* an extraterrestrial contact that had somehow already taken place, or was about to, and somebody – a government or an intelligence agency – wanted to prevent you, or the Americans, from being the ones to make history. Because quite honestly, all of those are an infinitely more believable hypothesis than a time traveller, right?”

“If I could, I’d shoot you myself,” said Hornsby sullenly. “What the bloody hell have you done?”

“I’ve turned your radio telescope array into a transmitter. The device that I took outside with me-”

I shook my head apologetically.

“Sorry. You didn’t get to see that part. But I’ve attached a device to the array data feed that – if I understand it correctly - shuts down the processor and uploads a signal to the entire field of telescopes. That signal is being transmitted from the radio telescope array to U703 right now.”

Hornsby closed his eyes wearily.

“Bullshit. That’s not even technically feasible. How could you even fall for something so blatantly stupid? You idiot! You’ve been hoodwinked into installing something else. Probably malware to cripple our array.”

“It’s not technically feasible given today’s technology,” I said. “But this is a little more advanced. It’s something that comes from the same place that your tracking target does. It’s a beacon. And the truth is that I *can’t* explain it to you. I can just tell you what it is.”

He softly bumped his head against the polished concrete floor, his eyes squeezed shut, his expression one of anguish at my obvious madness.

"I want to show you something before I go," I said, and he paused to look at me, his breath misting the frigid air.

"You're not going anywhere," he muttered.

I unslung the satchel and opened it, the leather straps stiff, the brass buckles freezing against my fingers. The object I extracted looked like a brass paperweight in the shape of a pyramid, about the size of a matchbox. I rubbed my finger vigorously against the base for about ten seconds before placing it on the floor a few feet away from him.

An image, slightly grainy but discernible, appeared in the air just above the device, the luminosity startling in contrast to the gloomy surrounds.

I turned the device slightly so that Hornsby could better see the projection. It was a photograph, a screenshot, of a CNN news headline:

*Alaskan Coast Oil Spill An 'Unforgiveable Disaster', Says Vice President.*

Hornsby had gone rigid at the sight of the near-holographic projection. "What is that? Where did you get it?"

"I think you can guess where I got it," I replied. "And believe it or not, this little thing was manufactured in 1848, according to one of the notes that, uh, that the individual in question left me. It houses something called a self-illuminating Daguerre refractor crystal. But that's not the point. See that headline? You probably saw it yourself. That oil spill - which made international headlines - happened on Tuesday last week, two days after we met."

He stared at me. Hard.

"I know. So?"

"So, this was given to me – in this bag - *on the same evening* you and I met. Two days *before* the tanker ran aground."

He was silent.

I reached out, tipped the small pyramid so that it was standing on another plane, and the image, too, changed. The next picture projected was of another news headline, this time carrying a Reuters banner:

*White House Confirms Historic First Contact*

Beneath the headline was a photograph of a seemingly enormous cigar-shaped vessel, sharply contrasted against the dazzling blue of the Earth's curvature and the blackness of space, the picture taken, it seemed, from the vantage point of either a very high-altitude fighter jet or perhaps a rocket that had just breached the Karman line.

I pushed the projector a little closer so that Hornsby could see the picture in more detail.

"Look at the dateline. That's two weeks from now."

"You've clearly never heard of Photoshop," he muttered, but I could see he was badly rattled, his eyes flitting between the image of the orbital ship and the odd, featureless little brass artefact.

"It doesn't need a lens," I informed him. "And honestly, I have no idea why. I'm also not going to try and make a case for what I've just told you. This is just to show you that there's more to this, whether you believe it or not."

Hornsby drew his knees up, tried to adjust his position on the hard floor.

"And this supposed transmitter of yours? What do think that's supposed to be doing?"

"It's the equivalent of a lighthouse," I said, borrowing from the terminology Bancroft had used in another one of his copious notes. "It's a signal that's understood among... well, a whole number of civilizations out there-"

I glanced up through the high, oblique windows of the warehouse, at the mist of stars beyond the glass.

"-and it means that a planet, or a system, is off limits. Usually, apparently, because an apex species hasn't yet reached a point of suitable maturity, and there's a high risk of aggression or self-destruction."

The silence was overwhelming.

"And there's a common understanding, a treaty of sorts, that compels any visitor to steer clear. They have no choice. They're have to look somewhere else, even if it's a crisis situation for them."

I did not tell him about an incidental footnote that Bancroft had added, about a previous, unsanctioned first contact, hundreds of thousands of years ago, that had already caused enormous problems for our little blue planet and its inhabitants.

Hornsby rolled his eyes sarcastically.

"Well, then, I suppose we'll have to see. Assuming you're insane, or you've been played, then U703 will keep on course regardless of any damage you try to do to the observatory, and we'll know within a couple of days whether the signals we've been

getting are legitimate or not. If you're somehow right – which I completely refuse to accept – then it will change course or stop transmitting, I suppose.”

He shook his head.

“I don't know why I'm even entertaining this nonsense. And if that's all the supposed 'evidence' you have-”

“Oh, there's more,” I said. “But... I think time's about up.”

I opened the satchel flap, peering inside, then scooped up the small pyramid, which I tapped lightly on the floor before putting it away. Against the stillness of the night, I had heard the first faint burring of approaching helicopters, and I knew that I only had a minute or two left before the entire site – and the building we were in – would be swarmed by reaction teams.

I stood, hooking the satchel around my shoulder.

“What about your precious transmitter?” said Hornsby. “Aren't you going to try and retrieve it?”

He was hoping, obviously, that I would go outside. I shook my head.

“The tech inside the casing is nothing that anyone right now could use or even figure out. It's a polymer-based gel that uses gravitational waves as a power source. Have at it, if you really want to, when this is all over.”

Outside, erratic fingers of halogen light and the sound of high-pitched engines marked the arrival of multiple vehicles, spinning through the compound gates at high speed. The helicopters were almost overhead now, searchlights piercing the darkness and almost blinding me as one raked across the near high window. I could hear commands being shouted, the crackle of radios.

I smiled at Hornsby.

“Do you have a water closet here?”

He looked at me blankly.

I saluted him – why, I have no idea; it was just a childish reaction triggered by my nascent fear – and turned away, walking briskly toward the makeshift office at the back of the warehouse. It was, quite literally, a steel shipping container that had been repurposed, with one door, a few filing cabinets, and an air conditioning unit.

I entered, shutting the door behind me. The darkness was absolute. I placed my hands on the satchel, my stomach knotting. There comes a point in every person's life at which a very great leap of faith is required, and despite my longstanding

philosophical equanimity about dying, I suddenly did not feel so happy about the idea.

There was, as I had told Hornsby, more evidence, after a fashion: the other images stored on the Daguerre refractor were not news clips, but no less electrifying.

One image was an aerial photograph of a city, I suspected New York, utterly ruined, the horror of nuclear devastation much worse than I could have imagined or had ever seen in a Hollywood production.

The other image, equally unsettling, had been the clincher: a picture of myself. I was standing next to Bancroft in front of a Baroque-styled building, looking intently into the frame, and holding a handwritten placard.

In my own inimitable scrawl, writ large, was a message:

*Remember Vonnegut.*

Kurt Vonnegut famously once said: *Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the centre.* It was my lifelong mantra, my inner guide, and I had never shared it with anyone.

I opened the satchel.

Outside, there was a loud bang, a stun grenade being detonated inside the warehouse, followed by the thud and clatter of boots, a melee of voices, Hornsby somewhere in the mix, screaming: "There! In the office! He's in the office!"

A shouted command, a split second of reorientation, and then the crack and roar of shots being fired from a dozen or more rifles. Holes appearing in the steel wall of the container, pinpricks of smoky light appearing as if by magic, and bullets smashing into the cabinets behind me, just above where I was crouching on the floor in sheer, blind terror.

I pulled the string of stones from the satchel, dimly aware of the wraithlike phosphorescence sparking from them, and wound them around my left wrist, my heart racing like a trip hammer, adrenalin flooding my system and reducing me to helpless jelly.

There was a sensation that could only be compared to sharp vertigo, the faintly visible walls of the container warping, the bullets still wreaking havoc above me, a sudden bright strobe flash that I knew was not part of the assault.

*Breathe, dammit. Remember. Breathe!*

I inhaled as deeply as I could, and all of a sudden, I was weightless, deep subsonic vibrations passing through my body that both terrified me and shifted me into a state of undreamed-of clarity.

My surroundings were suddenly whipped away, fragmenting into shards of disconnected matter, but I knew – instantly and utterly - that I was the one being whipped away.

*One more breath.*

And then, as everything dissolved, Bancroft's voice, alive and present, echoing in my head:

*If you perchance should grasp the opportunity, you may come to know very well who we are.*

*I look forward to welcoming you.*

## **L.O.C. Lloyd Penney**

1706-24 Eva Rd Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2

December 29, 2021

Dear SFFSAns:

Greetings from a place colder than where you are...we are lucky here in Toronto, for elsewhere in Canada, we've had wind chills going down to -55C, which translates on any scale as dangerously cold. I have here Probe 189 here, and I am definitely staying inside...

This issue actually arrived on December 23, and I had a look at the postmark on the envelope...2021-09-23. It took three months to get here...good thing a responding e-mail only takes a few minutes. Are the international mails getting worse?

No matter, wonderful cover, I don't see any details about the artist. I see by the index I have two letters in this issue, hope I get this out to you before 190 hits those international posts.

COVID-19 is affecting everyone in different ways...we've been social distanced for so long now, it's a wonder we ever caught it in the first place, but we did, about 10 months ago as I write. Since then, we have had an Astra-Zeneca shot and a Moderna shot, followed by a Pfizer booster. Got all three on the score card. All this time at home has meant the opportunity to work remotely, and I was so lucky to get a full-sized e-book to edit/copyedit/proof. That's what I have been busy with the last few weeks. Yvonne has kept herself busy, being fully retired, but I say I am semi-retired, only because I can't find work. The payment from the afore-mentioned e-book will really help. There are so many people around (especially in the building I live in) who will not mask up or even get a vaccination. They cannot or will not realize that they could be spreading the virus around, and are a distinct hazard to the health of the general public. They simply couldn't be bothered, and as a result, I believe more have died in this pandemic than did in the Spanish flu pandemic of more than a century ago. Back to normal? I hope for better than that.

My first letter... I am still connected to *Amazing Stories*, even if its frequency has been cut down to annual because of a money crunch. I still hope to take part in the preparation of the next issue, but I have been busy with other works, including a screenplay. Everything makes the resume a little better.

I enjoyed Junk Bernie Ackerman, and I am sure there has been an anthology of space law short stories in the past, perhaps we need another one!

My second letter... I had hopes for this pandemic passing, but COVID has re-energized itself with the Omicron variant...still potentially lethal, and easier to catch, but not as severe symptoms. Perhaps with an even weaker variant, COVID vaccines could become part of our childhood vaccination regimes, and part of our annual flu shots. That suggests that we might never be rid of it, but we have the technology to ensure that it is manageable, and no one would ever die from it again.

Off it goes, and I hope it is in time for 190. Many thanks for this, and let's hope the mails speed up, now that Christmas is over with. Happy New Year to all!

Yours

Lloyd



# Nova 2021 Second Place

## Beyond the Bay Shameez Patel Papathanasiou

The light drizzle rattled against the window as Eliza twirled her wrist to twist open the faucet. Ice cold water rushed out as one of their usual clients walked in wearing a short, silk robe. "What's with the sour look on your face?" the client asked, leaning down and running her fingers through the water in the bathtub. She inhaled sharply, retracting her hand. "It's chilly!"

"I only heat it up after the water's been drawn. You should know that by now," Eliza said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at the old woman who had been frequenting the bathhouse for years. With a quiet tut, the woman turned around and snapped her fingers - lighting the candles all around the room while Eliza inhaled deeply to focus on raising the water temperature.

Another day. Another bath. Eliza couldn't believe that this was all she would ever be allowed to use her magic on - and even then, it was more than most. Being able to work at a bathhouse was one of the few places that allowed female water-benders and while it gave her the option to play around with the water - there was only so much she could do in between clients.

The rattle against the windows was soon accompanied by a loud thumping against the roof. Louder and louder. Louder than she'd ever heard before. She walked over to the window and peeked through the curtains - all she could see was her own reflection, her own pitch black hair and olive skin. Her grey eyes reflected that of the dark, grey clouds.

Moving her hand from side to side, she shifted the water that blurred her view, revealing the thunderstorm raging outside.

Just then, the town alarm sounded. Once. Twice. Three times.

An emergency.

Eliza cracked the window open and harsh, cold air slapped against her hot cheeks as the sound of an air-bender's voice carried through to her.

"Evacuate Fenya Bay. I repeat: Evacuate Fenya Bay. All water- and air-benders report to Fenya Bay immediately. I repeat: All water- and air-benders report to Fenya Bay immediately. A tornadic waterspout is heading towards the bay."

The words knocked the air out of her and for a few seconds she stood frozen, letting the splatters of rain wet her face as the message sounded over and over.

Thunder rumbled, sending a chill down her spine and pushing her into action. Slamming the window shut, Eliza spun around and grabbed her boots to pull them on.

"Where do you think you're going?" her client asked, now fully immersed in the steaming bath.

"Didn't you just hear that? Don't you hear this?" she said, gesturing to the *thump thump thump* that came from above which was still getting louder.

"You're not a man, what use will you be?" she said, dipping her head back to rinse her long blonde hair. "Besides, who is going to keep my bath warm?"

"The heat of your bath water won't matter if the roof is torn off," she snapped and bit back the rest of her comment before running out of the bathing chamber and straight into her manager who stood in front of the backdoor, sipping from a bowl of vegetable soup. The smell of garlic made her stomach grumble.

"Don't do it," he said, his thick brows bunching up in the middle.

"You're a water-bender," Eliza started, "And a man. Why aren't you going?"

"I'm not suicidal," he said, taking another sip.

"But-

"But nothing. And you shouldn't either. You'll be punished for it." He lowered his empty copper bowl, letting it hang at his side.

"Move," she said, firmly.

"They'll make an example out of you, like they did of my sister."

"Then let them," she bit out and watched his face twist in anguish. "Samuel goes to school in Fenya Bay."

"Your little brother?" Eliza nodded and he sighed heavily, stepping aside and cracking the backdoor open. The wind whistled into the bathhouse along with the air-bender's call for help. "Salt of the sea, Eliza," he said and she pushed herself out into the alleyway.

The pouring rain immediately soaked through her clothes and puddled in her boots. She launched herself towards the bay, a route she'd done before whenever she went to fetch Samuel from school.

A school where only male benders were allowed to attend, to train, to learn to reach their full capacity. Most female water-benders never bothered controlling their magic further than bathing and watering their own gardens. What was the point when using it in public meant public lashings?

But none of that mattered now.

A gust of wind smacked into her, knocking her off balance and onto her backside, her hands slipped as she steadied herself and scrambled to her feet. Pulling the hood of her raincoat back up, she tightened the drawstrings as far as they could go before breaking into a sprint.

The alarms continued sounding, she could barely hear the message over the thundering of the water hitting the ground, of the wind pulling trees from their roots.

Eliza grabbed a lamppost and held on as another blast of wind flew by. Her feet were pulled into the air, but her hands stayed firmly clasped around the pole. The second her feet hit the ground, she continued towards the bay.

The tornadic waterspout came into view, a swirl of air and water, connecting the seas and skies and swallowing everything in its path and Eliza skidded to a stop. Her heart was pounding at the sheer size of it, at the way it roared. Her body shook, withdrawing as her legs took a step back.

This was a bad idea. This was a bad idea. This was a bad idea.

*Why would she think this was a good idea?* She'd only ever practiced bending in the bathtub. This was insane.

The sound of a horse snorting silenced her thoughts as she turned around to face the animal who was charging directly for her. Eliza threw herself sideways, missing the horse as it galloped by - the carriage attached to the stallion, clattered to the ground, throwing out the passengers. The coachy was nowhere to be seen.

A man, woman and child crawled out of the carriage. Eliza broke through her frozen limbs and managed to help the woman to her feet while the man lifted the child in his arms. He stretched out his hand to the woman who took it willingly.

"We need to find shelter!" the man yelled at Eliza, pulling on the woman as he ran. Without thinking, Eliza followed them. Her heart was pounding too quickly to figure out her next move, but as the wind slammed her against the wet floor, she knew she was in trouble.

Dodging fallen trees and collapsed carriages along the way, Eliza focused only on the very next step she had to take. The rain was pouring so quickly she couldn't see more than a metre ahead of her anyway.

More than anything, she just wanted to go home. But there was no way she would go home to face her mother without her little brother - without knowing he was safe.

Without knowing they were using him on the frontlines.

But it wasn't unheard of in emergencies.

And he was talented.

The man pushed open the door to a nearby building and pulled his family inside. He held it open as Eliza looked at him. "Come on," he yelled. "I can't hold it open much longer, the water's getting in."

Eliza stretched out her arms and pulled them towards her body - the water that flowed through the open door was dragged out. "Close the door!" she shouted and the man's eyes shot wide open in surprise. "Use your coats to slow the flooding."

As soon as the door slammed shut, she released the water and spun around, her boots splashing the water which reached her ankles as she ran back towards the bay, back towards the tornadic waterspout which grew in width in the flashes she saw of it, in between the falling rain.

Her lungs burned but she pushed forward, locating herself - if Mount Noric was on her left, she was going in the right direction.

The closer she got to the bay, the worse the storm became - screaming echoed in her ears as horses neighed and the ground shook violently. Everyone was running away from the very thing she was running towards.

The alarm blared over and over, the plea for help was as desperate as it was when she'd heard it in the bathhouse sending fear into her bones, making them heavier with each movement.

The earth rumbled beneath her, shaking her knees and throwing her to the ground as a large Darry tree was uprooted. Eliza scrambled on all fours as the brown wide bark plummeted towards her as if in slow motion. But her foot was stuck. Scrambling

to pull off her boot, she looked up at the bark as it froze a finger's width from her face as a light wind brushed against her.

"Move!" a woman shouted, her arms lifted in the air. Eliza left her boot behind and the air-bender dropped the tree to the ground which landed with enough force to have crushed her.

"Thank you," she managed, her breath coming out in quick, short rasps. "That was amazing."

The red-headed woman smiled widely. "Thanks, but I have to go." She pointed at the tornado and Eliza nodded.

"Me too."

They ran together, quicker now with the red-head at her side who was shifting elements out of their path as they ran. But the closer they got, the higher the floods rose and bodies floated beside her. Eliza stopped in her tracks, grabbing the body of a child as she closed her hand in a fist and pulled back, a stream of water was pulled from the boy's mouth - something she'd never done before. The child coughed, opening his eyes and she handed him over to a man who was wading through the water trying to get to him - who thanked her profusely, but she couldn't hear him, not because of all the noise, but because of her own internal thoughts.

*It could have been Samuel.*

The second they reached the bay, the air-bender raised her hands and closed her bright green eyes, controlling the gusts of wind that shattered the nearby structures. The entire bay had been flooded - Eliza lifted her hands as she tried pushing the water back into the ocean - looking around for other water-benders, but there were none.

Summoning as much magic as she could, she forced the water out and opened her eyes to see the water still in place - she tried again, shouting as she did it. She *would* do it. Pushing forward, the water followed, peeling away from their homes, their roads, their people and moving back to the ocean it had come from. Her stomach ached as she pushed, a strange coil wrapping around her insides awakening something, a part of her magic she'd never used before - never been allowed to use before.

The desperate screams caught her attention as people were pulled out of the water. Eliza ran up to them, extracting the water from their lungs as she'd done with the boy before.

"Water-bender," a man's deep voice called out as she saved the last person who was dragged out of the ocean. "We need your help beyond the bay." She glanced over at him and her hood fell down. *Was he actually asking for her help?* "Oh, you're a woman," he said, brushing his wet brown hair out of his eyes.

"I'm a water-bender," she snapped as she pushed up her sleeves. Pleased to see that the wind was being calmed by a group of air-benders, including her new red-headed friend. "Tell me what to do."

He considered her for a moment, his dark eyes searching hers as he spoke, "The tornado will come back if we don't shift it out far enough. I'd say we'd need to double

the distance we have between it and us," he looked down at her, brushing his hair back once again. "Can you do it?"

She nodded and followed him to the edge of the eroding jetty. He raised his arms up quickly and smoothly, lifting the water in front of them before effortlessly pushing it forward into the ocean. She mimicked him, praying, hoping her magic wouldn't let her down.

The water rose up, crooked but rising and she pushed it forward, the swell she created combined with his before, in unison, they pushed forward - the water shifted towards the tornado, edging it further away.

After a while, the tall man beside her groaned loudly, dropping his arms and using his left hand to massage his right arm. A cramp. She'd only ever experienced it once before when overusing her magic. "Keep going," he instructed and her muscles threatened. He fell to his knees, his chest rising and falling. "Come on, you've got this." Something about the tone of his voice made her believe it.

She inhaled deeply and pushed through, pulling magic from deep within the very fibres that made her and found the will to continue to do what they had been doing.

From the corner of her eye she noticed a capsized boat and beside it, someone was clinging on for dear life. Eliza focused all her magic on the water around the boat, around the person. Gently, she tried nudging them to the shore. The man beside her pushed out his hand and cursed. "I'm dry," he said, throwing his head back. "Where are the other water-benders," he yelled at the heavens before pushing himself up to his feet. "I'm going to get another bender."

"You're leaving?"

"I told you," he said. "You've got this." He turned around and ran off, leaving Eliza behind as she tried nudging the boat closer and pushing the tornado further away.

Something dropped in her belly - rattled - like a coin falling to the bottom of an empty well.

*Dry.*

The person holding onto the boat was slipping and a quick glance around showed nobody nearby to help her.

Eliza kicked off the remaining boot she was still wearing and ripped off her raincoat before jumping into the ocean. Tornado or not, the one thing she knew about herself was that water would never harm her.

The ocean water warmed her body, her bones and she opened her eyes, feeling that initial sting before it acclimatized. She could see the person, the man, sinking ahead of her - she kicked her feet, propelling herself forward towards him.

She wrapped her hands around his waist and pushed herself to the surface. He was heavy and her muscles were aching. As she surfaced, she inhaled, replacing the lost oxygen and gasping as she struggled to extract the water from his lungs, but nothing happened. She was dry. Too dry and too tired.

He wouldn't make it back to the shore. But she had to try. Before she could propel herself forward, her body was lifted from the water into the air as soft winds wrapped

around her. She was being pulled to the shore where a group of air-benders had their hands raised high.

Lowering her to the ground, she collapsed beside the unconscious man. She closed her eyes, feeling weakness overwhelm her. The man beside her coughed and she opened her eyes to see a stream of water being pulled from his mouth at the hand of her little brother.

"Hey sis," he said and offered her a hand, pulling her upright. She glanced around, the ocean was calm, blue as it usually was and the tornado was so far out she could barely see it. All that remained was the damage it had done.

The way the ocean roared one second and slept the next would always fascinate her.

"Master William Flynn," Samuel said, "this is my sister I told you about." She looked up at the tall, dark-eyed water-bending man she'd bent with just moments ago.

She'd always expected him to be older - considering his title and reputation of power. Master William Flynn towered above her, a smile across his face. "I should have known someone that powerful and determined was related to you," he said to her brother before turning to face her. "Eliza, I believe."

She nodded.

"Well," he said, exhaling loudly as a group of Enforcers approached them. They raised their hands and fire swirled in their palms. "Now, now," Master William Flynn said, raising his empty hands. "What's with the fire?"

They looked at Eliza and she felt her blood chill. The image of seeing other women being lashed flicked into her mind, tearing at her skin.

"She knows the rules," the shorter Enforcer announced.

"She saved your life," Master William Flynn replied.

"Rules are rules," the Enforcer said, grabbing Eliza's wrist and searing her skin. Her legs wobbled underneath her as she screamed, shutting her eyes before feeling his grip loosen.

Blurry-eyed she looked up and saw Master William Flynn with his hand balled in a fist. "Eliza, consider this a sneak preview of the lessons that await you. The lungs are made up of water, amongst other things." He tightened his fist and the Enforcer opened his mouth and closed it, soundlessly as his lips paled. "The kidneys," he said, lifting his other hand and closing it as the other Enforcer fell to his knees, "also plenty of water." He turned to face Eliza and dropped his hands at his sides, his breath heavy with exhaustion. "And if these men value their lives. They'll leave. Now. And report to their seniors that Master William Flynn will be taking female students."

The Enforcers stood up, scrambling away without another word.

"But," he said, glancing at Eliza and Samuel with a sheepish smile. "When you're ready, we should probably start with something simpler."

## **Blast from the past – Dinner with Raymond E. Feist 2014**

**From PROBE 162 December 2014**



What is it about SF writers? There's none of the jaded arrogance, the over-exaggerated sense of self-importance, and conceit so often associated with celebrities!

At a packed dinner hosted by SFFSA on the 24th of September – appropriately, on Heritage Day which celebrates culture, and we know which cultural genre ours is! – renowned, popular and successful Fantasy writer Raymond E Feist told us of the warmth he experienced from everyone he encountered during his visit to South Africa. Well, the feeling, as they say, is mutual: Mr Feist was himself warm and genial, in a friendly chat about himself, his work, and writing in general, in his post-dinner talk at Cesco's in Kelvin, Johannesburg.

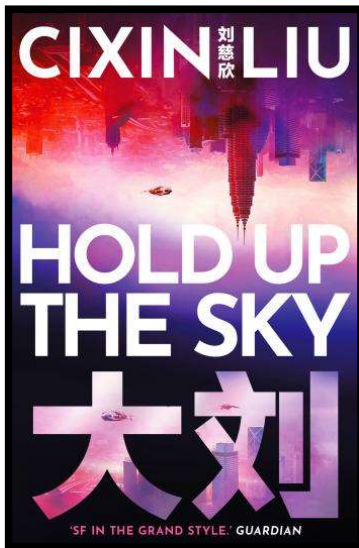
He confirmed what we all suspected: that SFF writers encounter negative publishers, and experience an anti-SF bias through the media. But soldier on they must: he confided that he had been a writer of humorous short stories, but after losing his full-time job, was challenged to do a serious novel. The challenge was by a publisher, who, on condition that Feist worked on it for 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, would cover his rent and food! And publish! (Nice arrangement if you can get it!)



Answering many questions, he also told us “how to write”: “Put butt onto chair, fingers onto keyboard, and keep writing until its good enough to go to market!” But then he added this rider: “I tell all writers not to write, but they never listen!” Well, what can we say? Except thank goodness he didn’t listen when he was told to “get a decent job”!

## Book Reviews

### Cixin Liu Hold Up the Sky



This volume of short stories gives us a chance to read Cixin Liu translated by a variety of translators, none of whom is the usual Ken Liu. They all seem to do admirably well

In his introduction Liu gives us some of his intentions and that includes imagining the relationship between Small people and the Great universe.

“The Village Teacher” chronicles the travails of a

dying poverty stricken educator who manages to teach his students just enough about Newton’s three laws to save the earth from a planet clearing interstellar team who are tidying up the universe, before he dies.

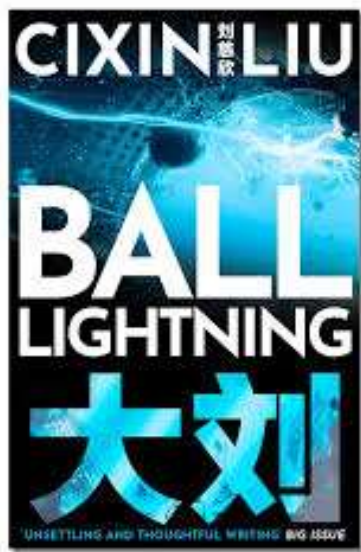
“Time Migration”, uses hibernation as a means of time travel. A group of people leave their desperate situation and travel forward in time to a set of increasingly unpleasant future situations

In “Ode to Joy”, and “Sea of Dreams” we are introduced to art minded alien invaders, the latter being one who wishes to use all of the water in the earth’s oceans as his medium

Finally there “The Thinker”, which is a quirky, cosmically inclined love story. A young medical doctor becomes infatuated with a young astronomer whose quest to prove that lines of communication exist between suns.

There are eleven stories in total and Liu’s fiction seems to involve more of community than we are perhaps used to in western SF, and he also tends to use vast eons of time. But underneath the somewhat Chinese cultural background there is still the essential core of hard science fiction – physics, maths and biology – but not forgetting the uniqueness of man and his human heart.

### **Cixin Liu Ball Lightning**



The novel follows the life of Chen, whose traumatic childhood encounter with ball lightning kills both his parent on his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday and so begins his single-minded, obsessive quest to discover more about the phenomenon. Over the course of the novel, Chen joins forces with Lin Yun, an incredible engineer and weapons expert, and Ding Yi, a brilliant physicist, to study and weaponize this force of nature.

Chen alone seems to struggle with the idea of using ball lightning as a frightening weapon; Lin Yun and Ding Yi only see the possibilities

of destruction of enemy armies.

I have to say that I found the long narrative about Chinese army on and off funding a little uninteresting, and Chen’s character is wooden and not well fleshed out

Indeed, while each character in the novel is motivated by an intense obsession, Liu is not interested in plumbing the consequences of their obsessions in a meaningful way—instead, the various obsessions of the characters stand in for real character development, a touchstone that Liu can refer to at appropriate moments.

In the Afterword to BALL LIGHTNING, Cixin Liu locates his novel within the genre of the “invention story” This, in part, explains the narrowness of focus as Liu follows certain conventions that the reader may not be aware of. However, he says that his

work breaks from the traditional format of Chinese speculative fiction with his own “flights of fancy”

It is these very flights of fancy that will appeal most to readers. Liu’s novels are at once singularly focused and wildly expansive as he takes readers from the mundane to the quantum realm and back again. The supernatural *is* the natural in Liu’s novels—the inexplicable and the eerie are simply elements that science has yet to explain, although even those scientists on the cutting edge may find it difficult to fight instinct with explanation.

Overall, BALL LIGHTNING is a flawed but ultimately intriguing novel. While you might have to slog through some sections, Liu’s imagination and the technologies he invents were enough for me to keep turning pages and lovers of hard sci-fi will find it enjoyable.

## **Leucosia** *by Laura Silvestri*

Winner of the XXVTrofeoRiLL (2019)

*Translated by Paul Virgo*

### **Didone Interplanetary Transport Ship Captain’s Log**

#### **August 16, 2175**

What was I thinking, getting an unwilling girl to come with me?

Someone should set up a truly socially useful service: a memo reminding mothers not to expect any sense from 16-year-olds.

What the hell! Is it too much to want to spend a little time with your daughter? I don’t think so, but it clearly did not go down well with Siby. And I thought the silent treatment only applied to husbands and wives... but my little one knows how to make me suffer. This might not be the sort of thing to put down in a ship’s log, but I don’t have anyone else to talk to.

She has been silent since she got on at the *rendezvous* on Europa. Almost two days of nothing but monosyllables. It had been a while since I’d seen her and, watching her after several months, she reminds me of a little animal, a sort of alien cub with those dyed locks of hair that she’s got on her head. She grumbles she turns her back to me, but her growls don’t count for much: she only triggers tenderness in me when

she curls up against one of the portholes and is still, on her own, staring at the luminous trails of *faster-than-light* travel.

Today I asked her to give me a hand, just to make her cough up a few words. She said some, but I didn't like them much. "Why should I help you with this space cart?" I bit my tongue, overlooked her tone and I tried to explain that time would pass more quickly and she might learn something. How naive I am sometimes. She shot me down with: "I'm not interested in repairing an antique. I want to be a lawyer when I grow up, like dad".

I should have expected it and kept quiet but I thought: "there must be a crumb of desire to be with your mother left". It seems I was wrong.

I swallowed my pride, and restricted myself to saying that, if all she wanted to do was look at the lights, she might as well holo-film them, as we were about to lift up the ramps ahead of the passage into Leucosia.

"Do we absolutely have to cross the worst area of the sector aboard this piece of junk?" she grumbled.

I must seem like some sort of second-hand spacecraft dealer to her: even the aircraft that Jason takes her to school in must cost more than the *Didone*.

"This *piece of junk* can fly anywhere with the right maintenance. If we try to go around the zone, we'll put four weeks on the journey and run along the gravitational field of a white dwarf - doesn't seem a great idea to me," I answered back. If she could have killed me with a look, I'd be dead now.

How long has she had so much contempt for my work? I don't make us rich, that's true, but transporting provisions and medicines for the Union is no walk in the park and, as jobs go, it is a more than dignified. She shouldn't think that way and she wouldn't unless someone had put nasty ideas in her head.

That's why I insisted on us spending the summer together touring the systems. I thought it would be good for her to have a change of scene and, with all the days of access I had in the bank, Jason couldn't say no. Naturally, that bastard could also have told me that he'd promised to let her spend her birthday alone with her friends on Caribbean IV. But the idiot didn't do that because he knew I wouldn't agree to it. Just think about it. Sending a girl to a tourist planetoid is not just a colossal waste of money. It also sends the wrong message and it is *dangerous*. You hear about all

sorts in this corner of the galaxy... attacks, robberies. Only a moron like my ex-husband would have been able to say yes. Luckily, I put my foot down.

It's just a pity that Siby has no intention of forgiving me for having to spend her birthday aboard the *Didone*.

At the end of the day, I'd make do with a smile. It was easy to make her laugh when she was little: a little tickle on her tummy, a sudden poke of my tongue. Now, on the other hand, I get her silences and her long face. Another day like this and I'll go crazy without any need for *Leucosia's* microorganisms.

Anyway, tomorrow we'll start the crossing through the asteroids and I'd better rest. Everything must go smoothly: the procedure has its risks, Siby isn't wrong about that.

I could never put her in danger, nor could I stand her sarcasm if a *recovery* action were necessary. She'd say: "this wouldn't happen to dad" or something like it.

Well, it's gotten late. I'll go back to being depressed about my failures as a mother tomorrow morning in front of her sulky face as she ignores me at breakfast.

Over and out, log.

### **August 17, 2175**

I don't know if it was seeing me swearing away as a I fiddled around that got her worried, or whether she got tired of sitting brooding in the bulkhead, which was now just a uniform, steel-coloured screen. But in the end, she decided to talk to me.

Thinking about it more carefully, it's more likely that it was out of a lack of trust in me. It can't have been reassuring to see me toiling with the anti-parasite filters, the scanners and all the other technological junk that needs to be right to pass through *Leucosia*.

The long-faced one surprised me with a question. "Why is it called that?" she fired at me suddenly, with an air of indifference, while I was bending over a panel starting what was perhaps the hundredth routine procedure.

I almost couldn't believe it and what followed seemed even more incredible: all it took was a single question to have an hour telling stories. The legend of Ulysses, his journey to get back home. And the sirens, with their songs that enchanted the sailors and got them lost in dreams and visions, so they forgot everything. "*Leucosia* was the name of one of the sirens," I explained. "But not just any one. She is remembered for her ... *humanity*. Because she let herself die for an unrequited love".

Siby listened to me with her little child's nose turned up and her eyes wide open. "They should teach this stuff at school," she commented, feigning a distant air. But I saw that she would want to know more, like when she used to ask me for a bedtime story when she was little and could never get enough. It was just that now there was the pride of a teenager in the way. So I decided to keep going.

I told her about how the micro-parasites that live between these asteroids work, the miniscule assassins who try to penetrate the ships and get breathed in by the occupants in order to feed on their neural tissue. About how they take their hosts to dementia, consuming synapses and playing with their thoughts to keep them in this sector and about how many ships crashed into the rocks in previous decades, giving the strip its name. She was attentive and she even asked a few questions. I was so proud of that little head, which had gone into overdrive right away.

I kept going until my tongue went dry. I explained the precautions that needed to be taken, the procedures to follow: the sensors to detect the presence of parasites on the ship and in the joints of the bulkheads, the filters that stop them getting in, the decontamination devices that are used and the antidote that every ship taking this route must carry and which must be taken at the first sign of psychosis. For a girl with no intention of working for the Union, she listened with great patience. Who knows? Perhaps she remembered that there's no need to growl at me every time I open my mouth.

It was a truly lovely afternoon. Pity it was short. After so much chatter, I had to get serious. She seemed tired: I let her sit in a console to check messages from her friends.

I did what I had to do: the systems are sorted.

When the work was done, we had dinner in comfortable silence. I didn't want to force my hand, but I would have loved to grab her and suffocate her in a hug that would make her giggle and try to get away.

But I knew that it wasn't yet the right time and it's better to proceed with small steps. I've just checked that all the screens are pulled down properly and the filters are activated.

Tomorrow we enter the Leucosia strip. It's best if I lie down in the bunk now and rest my eyes.

Over and out, log.

## August 18, 2175

Siby knows how to handle computers, even old ones like the ones on board. After sleeping until lunch time, she started to nose around, out of boredom. She said she'd found an unusual file.

"Look mum" she said and, as I heard that word, my heart leapt up into my throat. I think that, if I hadn't been sitting down, my knees would have given way. "Here's an unallocated out-of-sequence memory trace".

I must have looked at her languidly because she pulled a face that, nearly, very nearly, turned into a smile. She concentrated: she told me that it was some sort of computer residue, as if someone had read a message and decided to delete it and then hidden the trace file amid old files.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to throw me off the scent while you exchange letters with your boyfriend?" I joked. "Remember you are still a minor".

She blushed, swore that she didn't know anything about it and insinuated that I'd done it, that I had gotten rid of a collection of romantic holo-films.

Trumpets blow and angels sing – my daughter had a laugh with me!

I laughed, perhaps more than I should have.

It's a shame that I really didn't know anything about that deleted message. I think it was her contorted way of telling me not to meddle in her private affairs: teenagers don't always speak clearly. So I played along and told her that, if it really was a mystery, she was free to get busy and dig into the computer. Obviously, staying away from the navigation and security procedures: after all, we are deep into Leucosia.

"*Mum*, it's just us and the space bacteria. You do realise that it was them who rummaged around your computer to give you trouble, don't you?" she grumbled, pulling one of her locks onto the top of her head.

"I don't think so kid: if they had come here inside, you would have heard a nice concert of alarms," I replied and she shrugged her shoulders. A little while later she dropped it: she obviously didn't feel like concentrating on something so challenging.

It's her birthday in three days' time and maybe she wants to think about how to celebrate. In truth, we won't be able to do much: we'll still be in Leucosia, even going at top speed. She'll get bored to death and I don't think the mystery she has uncovered will keep her busy for long. Even if it weren't one of her schemes, it could



be a memory-saving procedure, the routine deletion of old files that I don't remember setting up. After all, I'm not a kid anymore and the stress doesn't help.

Anyway our first *almost laugh* together, after months, did me a lot of good. If we keep going like this, I might even strip a hug off her... but its best not to get my hopes up.

I'm going to get some rest and tomorrow we'll see. I hope Siby sleeps well. She's a good daughter, although she has grown away from me. Luckily, now I have a bit of time to fix things: I'll make sure I don't waste it.

Over and out, log.

### **August 19, 2175**

The journey continues, with the protective shields pulled down firmly over the portholes, the filters activated... everything is as it should be.

Now, while I dictate the log and check the travel statistics for the last time, the sensors indicate that we are at the exact centre of Leucosia. According to my plans, we'll start to feel a bit queasy shortly. It's inevitable.

In truth I can already feel something: nothing important, a vague sense of nausea, a bit of dizziness.

I suppose it's because of my age if the micro-gravitational fields the ship is sailing by get to me. Siby, on the other hand, is fine, luckily, and she even seems intent on treating me like a human being.

She hasn't yelled at me once in the last 24 hours. Of course, there haven't been any sudden displays of affection yet either, but, now that the ship is totally in the hands of the computer, we are together... me and her. With no choice but to be close to each other, with nothing to do.

Familiarity came through, a little bit at a time, in the similarities that we had both forgotten. We rediscovered that we have the same way of sitting, with a leg folded under our behinds, the same bad habit of playing with the synthetic food, of blowing hair out of our faces when we are bored.

I proposed playing chess and she agreed. It had been a long time since we'd played each other.

We had lots of matches, one after the other. I lost; I won and I lost again. And it couldn't have been any other way: my daughter is intelligent, she has a mathematical mind, and I felt so proud. She gave me hell all afternoon.

I have to say thank you to Leucosia, to its asteroids and its parasites, which forced us to be recluses, to sniff each other like animals to recognise one another. Even though she tries to forget it, she is still my child, the same one that used to put her feet under my nose so I could smell them when she was five years old and laughed until her sides split when I pretended to run away in horror.

And now that she's a teenager, no longer Siby but *Isabel*, all long legs and giraffe neck, she still has the same dark eyes that never stay fixed on anything. I've had time to think about it, lots: she's at a difficult age. Maybe things wouldn't be ideal, even if she had grown up with me, now that she wants to do things her own way.

So no, captain's log, today there will be no complaints. Apart from the fact that my head is spinning. *A lot*. In the past, I would have been feeling like this after a few full days, sometimes even three. But, as everyone knows, space is not a place for tired women who have one foot in the menopause.

Ok, let's wrap things up. She is sleeping and I'd better too.

Over and out, log.

### **August 20, 2175**

I don't feel too well today. Maybe Siby was right when she said that this cart is not the best thing to go through Leucosis in.

Maybe the bio-filters could do with an *upgrade*, who knows? I'm not sure I understand what's wrong: the scans say everything is fine and the kid has not lost her verve. I'm the only one without the strength to stand up. Maybe I'm scaring myself, but, when you think about it objectively, the risks of this mission are high. Those risks are almost completely eliminated by the technology, but a fault, although unlikely, is never totally impossible. I have done this route 30 times in the last three years, and yet, now that I have brought Siby with me and taken this gamble with her, it doesn't seem tolerable any more.

I fear I'm getting anxious. It doesn't matter: we have just passed the sector with the highest density of asteroids and come out more or less in one piece. In a few hours the ship computer will increase the cruise speed, according to the navigation plan. Top speed the day after tomorrow.

I have nothing to worry about, apart from the wobbly gravity that Didone's absorbers are unable to counterbalance properly.

At the end of the day, I should be thankful for this weakness of mine, which seems to have found a way into the heart of my daughter. Given that the sickness gives me no peace, Siby took me back to my bunk, got me to lie down and even sat next to me.

We didn't chat as much as I would have liked, but it's still all right. I snoozed like an old dear and she stayed close to me, with her eyes on the terminal.

When I managed to lift my eyelids, she told me she'd started investigating that file she'd found a few days ago. The empty one that shouldn't have been there. It seems that she hasn't found the solution to the mystery. At least she hadn't until 10 minutes ago, when she left to go and sleep.

Before that she brought me dinner in bed. Good heavens, isn't she *adorable*? There was no more trace of the long face.

And it is enormously lucky that I have her with me. She didn't even want to come, her father had to make her after I threatened to call my lawyer, but if she weren't here, I'd have been in bad shape: today I wouldn't even have been able to get a ration and eat it in bed.

And, on the other hand, without jumping for joy, she has taken care of her old lady, and the way in which she helped my lie down was like a hug.

Tomorrow is her birthday and Siby tucked me in. She said I seemed more like her gran than her mother, but then she smiled... and that is much more than I expected.

Over and out, log.

### **August 21, 2175**

She found it. Siby found the file.

No, that's not true, it wasn't her. I was *never* her.

It was me.

I was the one who hid it. I was the one who brought it back.

I can't believe it. I feel like throwing up.

I shouted, *God*, how much I shouted. My fist is still red with blood because I hit the console so many times.

She's no longer here. No, that's not right. She was *never* here.

There's something here with me, which talks to me, which sits next to me. But it's not her. It's not real.

The recording came out in the end, dated August 13, 2175. Jason sent it... it must have arrived as soon as I left the Luna II outpost.

There was never any *rendezvous* on Europa. Siby ran away with her damned rich friends. They took a private transport, for fuck's sake, with all the money that children *should not* have and they got to Caribbean IV.

There was an attack, so Jason said. A group of terrorists rigged the planet's environmental-control system. An earthquake hit as they landed.

They *all* died.

What shall I do now? No, not now. Now is not what I thought it was. There are whole days missing from my mind.

When I got the news I must have taken a decision. I'm struggling to remember, but it's the only possible explanation. I either went back, and killed that bastard incapable of being a father with my own hands...

Or I kept going, as if nothing had happened.

I must have deleted all the log entries and the recordings from that period until I reached Leucosia. And that's why the side effects seemed so strong: I've been here for at least five days. I took myself into the strip, I deleted the data of who-knows-how-many hours of travel, I rigged the calendar, the sensors. I lower the filters for the necessary amount of time and waited for the parasites to do the rest. I entrusted Leucosia to give me back what I had lost: Siby.

If I stay much longer, I'll die. I'll stop reasoning; I won't be able to handle the ship, I'll crash into the asteroids. I was perfectly aware of that when I put this plan into action. I even jettisoned every dose of the antidote into space. There's no trace of it on board.

My head is spinning and I think I have cried all my tears, like I hadn't cried since I lost custody of Isabel. But now she is here, together with the files I recovered. Two perfectly overlapping sets of memories: a weak one that is fighting to emerge; another that is horribly vivid. I can't say which is more devastating.

I remember seeing her come aboard, bad-tempered and angry, with her many-coloured locks. She seemed *real*, like she does now, as she looks at me confused without saying a word.

But Siby isn't here anymore. This is just a vision, a gift from Leucosia's parasites: they want me to stay here and they have given me my siren. My sweet little siren with a child's expression, so young that she seems destined to never die.

What should I do?

I could try to set a route, program the computer to send out an SOS once out of Leucosia. Maybe I'm still in time for a ship returning from the Colonies to find me and take me to the nearest Medical Centre.

Or maybe not.

Siby is reading. Everything seems so normal. It's even my girl's smell; she talks like her, smiles with her head in the clouds.

I imagine it was instinct of survival that made me find that file. My mind must have fought to stop me getting lost in this illusion. But if I delete everything again, if I hide my traces *better*, in a few hours it will all be forgotten, once again. And soon I won't move anymore and I won't talk. I'll only dream.

No, that's not right. It's madness. My daughter is dead, but I'm still alive and there's something I can still do. Can you keep going purely for revenge? I should kill Jason and the witch he married after me.

God, there's an abyss, a black pit at the centre of my chest.

Siby... when was the last time I really gave you a kiss? The memories of when we laughed together are too distant, the memories of the games and the hugs with a strong girl, an unstoppable girl, an *alive* girl.

My girl with black hair and a restless nature.

Oh *fuck*.

She's gone.

My child has gone.

### **August 19, 2175**

The journey continues with the protective shields firmly down, the filters activated... and everything is as it should be.

Now, while I dictate the log and check the travel statistics for the last time, the sensors indicate that we are at the exact centre of Leucosia.

I woke up with a nasty fever. I can't stand on my own two feet, my head hurts so bad it feels like I got kicked in the head while I was sleeping. Every movement takes an intolerable effort. Did a flu that I didn't realise I have come out overnight? I might have caught it on Luna II.

I don't know and I don't care either. It's not worth worrying about a bug that will pass. After all, I have Siby here with me.

And nothing else matters.

*Laura Silvestri was born in 1982 and lives with her family near Rome. Graduated in Management Engineering, in her spare time she dedicates herself to reading and writing, preferring science fiction, fantasy and everything in the middle.*

*Her short-stories have appeared in anthologies or e-books published by numerous Italian publishing houses and have won or placed honorably in several literary contests. In particular, she won the XXV TrofeoRiLL with “Leucosia”, which came first out of the 345 stories submitted.*

*Moreover, she wrote the fantasy novels “Nel nome della Dea” (Edizioni Giovane Holden, 2015) and “Jingu – La Leggenda di un’Imperatrice” (Watson Edizioni, 2019). In 2020, RiLL edited “La Luna e l’Eden” (published by Acheron Books), a collection of her best fantasy and science fiction short stories.*

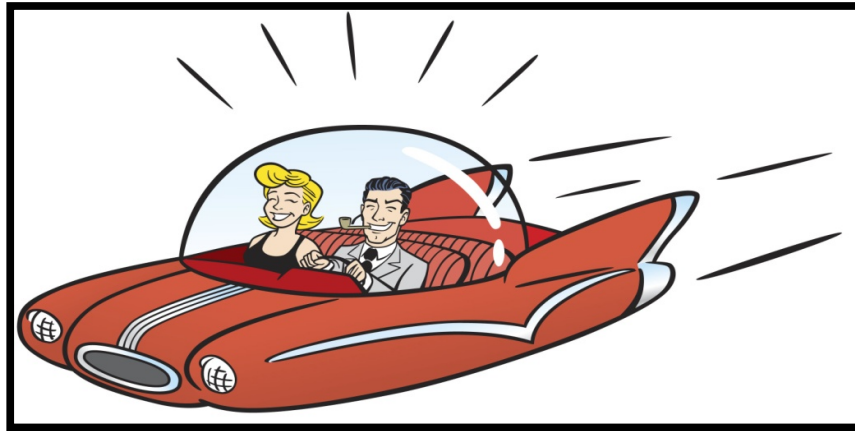
*The TrofeoRiLL is an Italian literary award for budding speculative-fiction writers. The contest has been run since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di LuceLunare, a non-profit club based in Rome.*

*Each year the TrofeoRiLL features around 350 short-story participants, from Italy and other countries. The winning entries are annually published in MONDI INCANTATI, anthologies that are edited directly by RiLL.*

*The TrofeoRiLL final awards ceremony takes place at Lucca Comics & Games, the Italy’s most important festival for festival of comics, illustration, speculative fiction, games and animation, which since forever patronizes the TrofeoRiLL.*

*Info: [www.rill.it](http://www.rill.it) ; [info@rill.it](mailto:info@rill.it)*

## **Flying car now closer to reality**



Slovakia's Transport Authority recently issued a certificate of airworthiness for flying car model AirCar, a first step towards the commercial production of the invention.

"AirCar certification opens the door for mass production of very efficient flying cars." Said Stefan Klein the founder and chief executive of KleinVision, a company that designed and manufactured the prototype of the dual-mode car-aircraft vehicle

"It is an official and final confirmation of our ability to change mid-distance travel forever." Klein said

AirCar completed its first intercity flight in June 2021. The vehicle is powered by a 1.6 litre BMW engine and needs a runway of 300 meters to take off. It has a flight speed of up to 170km per hour and a flying distance of about 1000km.

The process of transforming from car to plane takes less than three minutes.

Everything is automated, so a single button command is all it takes to change it.

Before certification, the Slovak flying car had to complete 70 hours of flight testing, with more than 200 takeoffs and landings. "Based on the fact that the aircraft met the conditions of national regulations for individually manufactured aircraft and the required level of safety was demonstrated, the Slovak Transport Authority has issued a special certificate of worthiness. Now AirCar can apply for aircraft-type certification and after obtaining this it can manufacture the aircraft commercially.

(Picture from Clip Art)



