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An extract and a short story

## CHAPTER ONE

### Interview

October 24, 2006

"What makes you think you belong on Wall Street?" asked Trader Guy.

Peter Ostbergs sat forward in his chair and delivered his line. "I'm a mathematician and I'm an actor. I know numbers, and I know people. I'll make the bank money."

Trader Guy -- Peter had forgotten his name as soon as they shook hands -- fingered the resume on the table in front of him. Perhaps two years older than Peter's twenty one, he sported a scraggly beard, had rolled his expensive dress shirt up to his elbows, and slouched in his chair like this was the least important conversation he'd had all week.

Stiff and clean-shaven, squished into a charcoal suit from the discount rack at Men's Wearhouse, Peter felt like a schoolboy by contrast. He suspected that was the point.

"So you took college calculus," the guy said. "You think that qualifies you to trade?"

Peter inclined his head, as if this required serious thought. From behind the partition to his right came laughter, easy, relaxed. Sounded like his competition was having a better time of it.

The grand old Wall Street house of Arnis Brothers needed to fill three spots this Superday. Peter was up against twenty graduates of top colleges and business schools. The field of battle -- an open plan office with gray industrial carpeting and cold fluorescent lights. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked Avenue of the Americas and Radio City Hall, but the color and noise of Manhattan made no dent here.

"Math gives you tools to understand the markets," Peter said. "Of course, I have much to learn about trading."

"Where's fed funds?" the guy asked.

"Five and a quarter." Peter hadn't even heard of fed funds a few weeks ago. "But the decision's tomorrow, and they might raise."

"If you think they'll raise, do you buy or sell 10-year treasuries?"

"Sell." Peter recalled a sound-bite from Cramer. "Unless the expectation of a raise is priced into the market already."

"You've got an accent," the guy said.

Peter blinked. "Sure. I grew up in Latvia, came here for college."

"Latvia. That's like, near Kazakhstan?"

"It's a small country west of Russia. On the Baltic Sea. South of Finland." South of Estonia, really, but experience had taught Peter that wouldn't help.

Trader Guy grunted. He scrolled on his Blackberry. He looked out the window. He picked up Peter's resume and crumpled it in his fist.

Peter heard the crinkle of paper, watched the sheet disappear. His 3.8 GPA, his semester in Budapest, all extracurriculars gone in an instant. Heat crept into his cheeks, but he kept his breathing even. He'd spent too much time reading Dealbreaker to show fear at so simple a provocation. "Is there a problem?"

"You make all the right noises," Trader Guy said. "But you simply don't belong here."  
Peter looked Trader Guy in the eye. "I do." He kept his gaze steady for one second.

Another.

A third.

Peter didn't blink. Neither did Trader Guy.

The guy's eyebrows drew down into a frown. A muscle twitched in his cheek. His teeth seemed to grind together.

Don't look away.

Don't look away.

Don't look away.

Trader Guy laughed. Slapped the table. Got up. "Convince the others," he said. "Maybe you do belong."

#

"What makes you think you belong on Wall Street?" Leyla Demir had asked Peter, a few days earlier.

Peter mashed the buttons of his Xbox controller. On the screen of the Japanese Theme Dorm's boxy television, a leather-clad ninja stabbed and kicked a giant creature with too many slimy tentacles. Leyla sat with her legs curled under her at the far end of the couch, as if in defense against the geekiness of the proceedings.

"I'm into economics," Peter said.

"You're into Ayn Rand. That's not the same thing."

"Please," he said. "That was freshman year. Besides, Rand got the failure modes of socialism. Maybe she was crazy about capitalism, but--"

"Yeah, yeah. The point is, why would Arnis want you? You're a math nerd part-timing as a comics nerd."

"A comics nerd part-timing as a math nerd. But they don't need to know that."

"They'll know."

"I use a pen name."

"No, really. They'll know."

Peter shot her a glance, caught her thoughtful smile. Leyla did thoughtful well. There was often a wistfulness to her angular features. An abstracted focus that said -- I might not be fully here with you, but only because I've got Kant to think about. She'd moved to Portland from Istanbul in her early teens, and spoke a stately English that reinforced the impression.

Peter had asked her out their first day at Reed. Her poise had struck him, and the sharp, strong lines of her face, a cartoonist's dream. She'd dumped him a few weeks into class -- still virgins the both of them.

The Xbox controller vibrated. The tentacle monster had picked the moment of Peter's distraction to lash out. The ninja toppled to the dirt. The screen darkened. GAME OVER glowed in reddish-white letters.

Peter tossed down the controller. "How will they know? I clean up, don't I?" He picked at his baggy Ziggy Stardust T-shirt. "I'll shave, put in lenses, wear a suit. . ."

"I'm sure you can fool them," Leyla said. "It's not your acting skills I'm worried about."

"What then?"

"I think you'll get bored. I think you'll stop caring, and you'll stop pretending."

"The markets are fascinating," Peter said. "Lots of interesting math."

"How's that thesis coming along?"

Peter crossed his arms. "What's that mean?"

"You're pretty relaxed for a senior."

It was true. Reed was a college for learning -- a school for four-eyes, *zubrilas*, the bullies at Peter's middle school would have said. Reed advertised by telling kids to go elsewhere if they wanted to party.

The thesis was the pinnacle of the Reed experience. As early as October, seniors wandered the campus with pallid faces and bloodshot eyes, clutching mugs of coffee in trembling hands. By April, there would be breakdowns, rages, substance addictions -- and theses worthy of a Master's degree, other places. Leyla herself was eighty pages into a treatise on 19th century French colonialism in Morocco.

Peter hadn't touched his thesis since the first week of September, when he'd written fifteen paltry pages on the representation theory of Lie groups. Not a single original idea anywhere, but he figured he could spin it for a B. You could spin anything, if you wrote well and could act.

Peter picked up the Xbox controller, hesitated, put it back down. "I sucked at math before coming to Reed."

"Yeah, right."

"I mean, I had good teachers and stuff, but I never cared much. I was going to be an econ major, when I got here."

"So what happened?"

"I took Lieber's calculus. It was hard. I mean, really, really hard. I almost dropped the class. Then something got into me." The catalyst had actually been Leyla dumping him -- but he wasn't going to tell her that. "I had to prove I could do math, and do it better than anyone. Problem sets other kids got done in five hours I spent twenty on. Then I showed up in class and acted like it was easy."

Leyla shifted on the couch. "Seriously?"

Peter shrugged. Academic hubris was not a Reedic thing to confess, but he'd always been allergic to the Reedic code. Everyone else could learn for the sake of learning. He made sure he stayed at the top of his class.

"Sophomore year, I started to enjoy what I was doing. Junior year, I learned to believe it. I'd do something big one day. Solve a big-name theorem, whatever." He glanced at Leyla. She watched him quietly. "When I told people I was a mathematician, it felt great."

"You found a new dream. What's wrong with that?"

"It didn't stick. This summer, I was supposed to be doing research. Every time I sat down to read a paper, I started daydreaming. Every time I opened my laptop, I ended up coloring my pages. I put out sixty pages of webcomic over the summer, Leyla."

"So you switched dreams?" Leyla asked. "To banking?"

"Did you know a first year banking analyst makes more than the President of Latvia?"

"That doesn't sound like much of a dream."

"Look, my dream is drawing my comic, living in a mansion, and swimming in cash Scrooge McDuck-style. Until that happens. . . I took out thirty grand in loans for this degree."

"As long as you're not selling out," Leyla said.

To Peter, Leyla's had always seemed a simplistic worldview -- like everyone was supposed to have some righteous mission. "You're one to talk. Isn't Columbia Film a bit, well, low-brow for you?"

Leyla gestured loftily. "Exposing the crimes of imperialism requires the use of mass media." She shrugged. "Besides, fat chance I'll get in."

"I've got a good feeling about that." At Reed, Leyla was a known superstar. She'd co-authored a paper on e-coli the year before, while a history major. "The question is, can you get the oppressive classes to fund your tuition?"

"I'll visit you with a camera next year. You'll star in my first production -- The Dirty Laundry of Arnis Brothers."

Peter snorted. "I'm keeping my hands clean."

"Seriously," Leyla said. "Don't you feel like you're applying for a job on the Death Star?"

"There's plenty of honest work to do at an investment bank. I'll do my job, get paid, and get out."

"Right. Because you're a man of principles."

"Exactly." Peter grinned. "I've got principles."

#

"Why do you want to work on Wall Street?" asked Susan, Head of Rates Structuring.

Peter studied her. A severe figure. Straight black hair to her shoulders. Hardly any makeup. Arms crossed. Deeply unimpressed.

"The truth is," Peter said, "I'm here to make money."

Ever so slight, a widening of her eyes. "That's all?"

Elsewhere in the hall, an older man yelled at an interviewee. The words came unintelligible over the drone of other voices. Beads of cold sweat collected on Peter's brow.

"The markets fascinate me," he said. "I want to work with smart people, in a competitive environment. But I do want to make money, for the bank and for myself."

"Some people would say that's a shallow reason."

Peter knew that. He'd read *Liar's Poker*, Michael Lewis's slice-of-Wall-Street novel, which warned against this very answer. But he figured every other applicant had read it too.

Peter wasn't from an Ivy League school, hadn't interned at a bank. The other kids had been dreaming of Wall Street for years -- he hadn't even cracked open the *Journal* until a month ago. He needed to stand out.

"That's politically correct but nonsense," he said. "Everyone's here for the money. It's important to understand that."

Susan uncrossed her arms, sat forward at the desk. "Why?"

"Knowing what motivates people makes them predictable. You can't trust anyone motivated by money."

The corners of her lips twitched. "You can't?"

Was she pleased or was she laughing at him? "Of course, there are always exceptions--"

"No, no," she cut in. "We can't be trusted, that's good. So tell me -- why am I here talking to you, when I could be on the floor making money?"

"You're looking for someone to help you."

"On my desk, it takes years before a new hire adds revenue."

Peter hesitated. "I don't know your situation, but there's something in this for you. Some political angle."

Susan raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Peter racked his brain. Most of what he knew about politics he'd learned from Alan Moore, George R. R. Martin and the like. In their stories people wore super-hero outfits and chain-mail more often than suits -- but the principles had to transfer, right?

"Maybe this gets you on HR's good side," he said. "Helps you when it comes to promotions."

Susan laughed. "HR doesn't get a seat at the table, not at this bank. I like your thinking, though."

"You do?"

"You're a cynic. That's good for your health. But don't overdo it."

"What do you mean?"

"A wise person is cynical of cynicism itself."

"You mean," Peter said slowly, "that some people are idealists, and assuming otherwise can be trouble."

"I mean that otherwise you become an asshole."

#

"Wall Street?" Mama had asked the day before, when Peter Skyped to say he was flying to New York. "Slava bogu."

"What do you mean, praise God?" Peter asked, under his blanket in his dorm room.

Four thousand miles away, in Riga, it was seven in the evening. Mama leaned on the kitchen table, bony forearms protruding from the unbuttoned sleeves of her dark blue dress shirt. She must have just gotten back from the hospital.

"I mean," Mama said, "at least my son won't be starving on the streets, doodling Superman."

Peter saw her smile, let her bait him anyway. "I don't do superheroes."

"Best not. Someone might try to pay you for that."

She had a point. Peter's webcomic, *The Cattle Express*, followed a Latvian teenager exiled to Siberia during World War II. The story's heroine -- modeled on Peter's paternal grandmother -- fought cold and hunger, and evil in the hearts of men.

The story had started out with a supernatural slant. He'd hinted at a conspiracy between the Cheka -- the Soviet secret police -- and mysterious, shadowy forces intent on destroying the Latvian intelligentsia. But every time he came close to actually revealing these mysterious forces on the page, something inside him resisted. It had seemed wrong, to suggest that there was something supernatural behind the persecutions and deportations and executions of the Stalinist purges.

Peter recalled what his grandma had told him, not long before she died -- one December night in her kitchen, as they baked gingerbread together. "Those people who packed us on the trains, they were ordinary people. Some were angry. Some were scared. Some were fools. But evil? Not that many."

Where, then, had the evil come from? It was there in the statistics, in the thousands of the dead and the exiled.

Peter had dropped the supernatural angle and decided to explore this question instead. It hadn't proved a stroke of commercial genius. He barely cleared a hundred pageviews per day. Last month, Bozo's Indie Comic Review had called Peter the Marjane Satrapi of Eastern Europe, which was the sort of comparison Peter was aiming for. Unfortunately Bozo's Indie Comic Review was a Wordpress blog run by a teenager somewhere in Nebraska, with all of a dozen readers.

"Art isn't about money," Peter said now.

"Exactly," Mama said. "So I'm glad you're getting a job."

"Applying for a job," he said.

"What's this about a job?"

Papa drifted into view of the camera, stood behind Mama's chair and rubbed her shoulders. He was a slender man, thin to the point of gauntness, but there was a solidity to him that Peter felt even through the video feed -- though perhaps that was but a trick of memory. In any case, Mama relaxed under his touch.

"Our Pēterītis is flying to New York." Mama switched from Russian to Latvian, as they often did around Papa. "He's getting a job on Wall Street, with capitalist pigs."

"Great," Papa said. "Is it what you want, Peter?"

"I'm definitely done with math. And I have to pay off my loans."

"Your grandma wanted to be a dancer," Papa said, as if for the first time. "She never went back to it, not after Siberia. But that was her dream."

Mama shifted under his hands, her lips tight. "Your other grandma wanted to feed her little sisters, growing up in Leningrad. She couldn't. But that was her dream."

"It's not '45 anymore," Papa said. "It's not even '85."

"All I'm saying is, he's got an opportunity."

"All right, all right, guys," Peter said.

"I guess the country house could use a new roof," Papa said, "as long as you're going to be rich. And maybe one of those tractor lawnmowers."

Peter groaned theatrically. They all knew how he felt about lawnmowers. Peter had spent a considerable fraction of his childhood summers mowing their 5 acre orchard with a hand-pushed Husqvarna. When you finished, it was almost time to start over again.

"But really, Peter," Mama said. "Don't listen to us. Do what you need to do."

Papa nodded. "Things are pretty good right now. Lots of EU money at the university. If you need anything. . ."

"If things don't work out, you're always welcome home." Mama made that sound almost like an afterthought. Almost.

It was different for Papa -- he had all his family in Latvia. Uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins. When Mama moved to Riga from Leningrad in the early eighties, she came alone. She was friendly enough with Papa's side of the family, but it wasn't the same. When Peter left for Reed, Papa was all the family left to her.

"I'd better get up," Peter said. "My flight's in a few hours."

"Of course," Mama said. "Yes."

"Say hi to Times Square from me," Papa said, as though he had ever been there.

#

"You're all over the place." Jaime Martinez, Global Head of Special Investments, folded Peter's resume in two. "Math. Languages. Computer science. Econ. Literature. Looks to me like you don't know what you want to do."

"It's the opposite." It was Peter's fifth hour of interviews. He had left caution behind some time ago. "I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and I worked to get the skills I will need."

"Explain that." Jaime spoke perfect English, but Peter could hear traces of an accent. He was a short man, and almost too bulky to look natural in a suit and tie -- but not fat. The kind of man who spent his nights at the gym.

"Math has obvious applications," Peter said. "So does computer science. I'd like to work on international projects, so picking up different languages made sense. And literature, that's about knowing how to get your message across."

"Yeah? And theater? You found time to act in five plays while in school?"

"Acting is very applicable. I can be a different person with different people. Clients, colleagues, whoever. I can let them see what they need to see, hear what they need to hear."

"How do I know you're not doing that right now?" Jaime asked.

"You don't, if I'm good enough."

Jaime studied him. Peter fought not to shrink into his seat.

"We did Streetcar Named Desire senior year of high school," Jaime said. "I played Stanley."

Peter smiled.

Jaime nodded. "Great, right? Not only the way I look, but the accent, everything. You know that line, Stanley's like, I'm not a Polack, I'm American born and raised?"

"Sure."

"Talk about cognitive dissonance."

"I know what you mean."

"That's like every day in this job," Jaime said. "I mean, the things you have to say. Strasberg couldn't do it."

"That's funny."

"I mean, I go see Mike Rayns, our CEO, he says, push this deal, get aggressive, let's put something on the board for this year. So I say sure, that works, we're all in. I leave the office, and there's Bob Reynolds from Credit, and what do I say? I got this hot deal, a bit risky but Mike's all over it, let's push it? Hell, no. I tell him, I got a sure thing for you, a real sweetheart of a deal, low risk, profitable, we got the client bending over. So Bob's happy, but then the client calls, and I gotta excuse myself, go take the call, tell him how much money he's going to make off us, what a favor I'm doing him, and would he like to go see a Cowboys game next time I'm in Dallas. I can't stand the Cowboys, but hey."

"I see," Peter said.

Jaime gazed into the distance for a moment, as if contemplating something vital. "On the Special Investments desk, we do the deals no one else at Arnis dares touch. Floating oil storage. Radio spectrum auctions. Power plant construction. Big deals, chunky revenue." He looked at Peter expectantly.

Peter nodded. Had he missed a question somewhere along the way?

"We're a small team," Jaime said. "Three people. Everyone gets exposure across the board. Management, Credit, Market Risk, Accounting, and the client -- we face them all. Best of all, come year-end, we don't have to split the pie too many ways."

Wait. . . was this still an interview? "It sounds like a great role."

"We actors have got to stick together," Jaime said. "We see things that other people don't."

"Absolutely."

"But enough with this interview stuff. Is there anything I can tell you?"

[...]

## Fragmentation or Ten Thousand Goodbyes

Every day, Mom says goodbye to me for the last time.

I need to go to the office or meet Lisa at the airport or pop out for some milk. I'm lacing my shoes in the hallway when I hear the tap-tap-tap of her heels. I freeze for a moment, then rise to meet her.

Mom stands in the door, elegant in a simple dress. No matter the silvery hair. No matter how her skin, once a smooth dark brown, wrinkles over her bones. You'd never guess she has lived a century. She has no titanium knees, no vat-grown veins, no concession to modernity inside her.

If only her mind were as strong.

"Mom." I smile at her.

"Rico." She smiles too, uncertainly. "Must you go?"

"Just for a minute."

Her breath catches. She reaches for me with one trembling hand. Halts when I wince. Her fingers linger mid-air, gnarled and stained with ink.

She's been drawing in her upstairs studio. She's been drawing with the door locked, her work a secret to the world and her agent and me.

I haven't pried. What might I find, if I opened her sketchbook -- scribbles, blotches, scrawls? Proof that her time is up?

Ashamed of the thought, I take Mom's hand -- bony and warm and strong. "I'll be right back."

She steps close and presses her face into my chest. Her shoulders tremble. I feel her tears soaking through my shirt.

"Lo siento, Rico," she whispers.

Every time Mom says goodbye to someone, it's for the last time. She thinks -- no, she knows -- that she'll never see them again. Not the mailman. Not her best friend Abby. Not me.

It's no tumor, no disease -- we've run all the tests. Her reasoning is strong as ever. She can tell you how the milkshakes tasted in Miramar, before Fidel came down from the mountains and she left on the Peter Pan airlift. But deep within her mind, something has begun to fail.

And I can't fix it.

So I pat her back and murmur reassurances in her ear, and try not to think what she's feeling. Try not to imagine how I would feel, if I knew that I'd never see her again in my life.

This happens every day.

Still I delay what I must do.

#

"Just build the habitat. You'll feel better."

Lisa packs shirt after lopsided shirt into her green Samsonite. After three decades of marriage, the sight is comforting. Lisa's only happy when in motion. Even her business suit has a space age streamlined look, the collar chic-asymmetric.

"It seems too. . . permanent," I say. "Like I'm giving up on her."

"It's hard, I know. But what if she strokes tomorrow?"

Lisa's right, of course. The habitat's a contingency. I won't have to use it until it's that



or the crematorium.

But can I watch Mom suffer day after day, once there's an alternative?

"You're giving her a gift," Lisa says. "You of all people should know that."

Me of all people.

I walk to the viewport in the north wall. It sits mounted in a steel band like a ship's porthole. Below it, a brass plate reads "George Dieter -- Captain, Husband, Father. 1960 - 2049."

Dust covers the screen. Has it been that long? I reach up to wipe it clean.

Blackness flickers into life.

A turquoise sea laps against a stretch of sand. The beach glares blinding white, studded with regal palms. Beautiful.

I could grab my immersion headset, feel the heat of the sun, hear the breeze coming off the water. But then I'd have to face the man on the sand.

He lies in the shade of a thatched beach umbrella. Perhaps thirty, his body lean and muscular, tanned bronze. Arms stretched out at his sides, eyes closed, face relaxed.

George Dieter. First habitat upload in the world.

"Hi, Dad," I whisper.

It's been long since I said those words. Long since I descended into the world Lisa and I built two decades ago. I miss Dad -- it's not that. But every time I went to see him, I didn't find the man I was looking for.

"Mom's drawing again," I tell Lisa. "She won't, after."

I offered to give Dad a ship, after he uploaded. I offered to give him virtual seas to sail, cargo to carry, battles to fight. He only told me, "I'm tired, son."

I learned that lesson well, those early years before our IPO. Maybe it's the lack of biochemical stimuli, maybe it's a shortcoming in the iterative neural matrices -- uploads just don't care.

Lisa zips her suitcase and comes to me. She slides between me and the viewport, wraps her arms around me. "Come with me to LA. Emily and I, we've got miracles to show you. There are breakthroughs coming down the pipe that--"

"Breakthroughs?" I pull back without meaning to. "Every month, heck, every week we get some breakthrough. We all rush to try it and blog it and show it off. Aren't you scared we're losing our humanity?"

"Oh, but we're not human anymore! We've fragmented into a thousand different species. With every new technology we choose to adopt -- or not -- there are more of us."

"You're spouting Emily again."

Lisa turns away, goes back to her suitcase. "She's a brilliant woman."

"She's our competitor."

"Should we miss out on a chance to change the world again, just because Emily works for the wrong corporation?"

On the screen, Dad gets up on his elbows and watches someone approach. A lithe figure and beautiful, strikingly dark against the white sand. A simulacrum of Mom as she once was. The thing can't even hold a conversation, but Dad doesn't seem to mind. He reaches out a lazy hand and grasps her, and draws her down atop him.

The screen blurs.

I turn away. "I never wanted to change the world. I wanted to preserve it."

Lisa seems not to have heard. "I'll call you from LA." She wheels her suitcase to the door.

Before she can open it, a knock comes. We jump, both of us. "Come in," I call.

Mom enters. "Rico, I-" She sees Lisa. "I. . . I thought you left already, dear."

"Hello, Alina." Lisa keeps her gaze on the floor. "I'm running late."

As Lisa walks past, Mom parts her lips in a silent cry. She reaches for Lisa's shoulder. Pulls back as if scalded.

Just like that, Mom lets Lisa go.

I watch the tear that rolls down her cheek. I watch it, my eyes dry as they have ever been. I envy her.

#

I'm a coward that night. But the next day I call Mom from work.

"Mom."

A faint draw of breath in my cochlear. "Rico." Pause. "I'm glad you called."

I wait for more, but nothing comes.

"Mom, I've been thinking. Your house in Miramar. The one with the grand patio and those big old doors. What color were those doors?"

Silence. "What's this about?"

"You showed me those photos a thousand times. I close my eyes, and I see that house. But I got to thinking I never knew the colors." When Mom says nothing, I add, "That's the place you were happiest, isn't it?"

"You're building me one of your things."

Your things. That's all she calls the habitats, ever since she saw what Lisa and I created for Dad.

"Must you do that?" she asks me.

I press my face against the window, look across Northwest Portland to home. The tiles of our roof shine red amidst the trees of Nob Hill. I imagine Mom on the veranda, the question in her eyes.

"We need to prepare," I tell her. "Before you. . . Before it's too late."

". . . okay."

"Okay? Really, you're fine with this?"

"This has nothing to do with me," she says.

"I don't want to lose you, Mom." The words come out hard and fast. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"The doors were green," she says, after a while. "Green like bananas not yet ripe. We had the greenest doors in all of Miramar. They stood out from blocks away. On the last day, when my father drove me to the airport. . . I looked back at the end of the street and saw only a glimpse of green. I knew that I'd never see those doors again."

"You'll see them again."

I stand there by the window, listening to Mom breathe. Waiting for some answer, question, request. Anything to let me believe this is an actual dialogue, a real conversation between two human beings.

"Rico?" she asks at last.

"Yes, Mom?"

"Don't hang up." Her voice catches. "Stay on the line for a while, will you?"

I do. For a while.

#

I go home late -- late enough to be sure Mom's asleep. Lisa calls as I close the door behind me.

"Rico!" she chirps in my cochlear. "Check the mail."

I scan the shelf by the door. A cardboard box. I recognize Lisa's cursive on the label.  
"What's this?"

"Something Emily and I cooked up."

Emily again? I tear open the box and extract an immersion headset -- a thin gray headband, with the initials LE etched on the outside. "Tonight's a bad time for toys, Lisa."

"Put it on. Trust me, honey." I can hear her smile. "Just get yourself comfortable first."

Perplexed, I move into the living room and sink into my reading chair. A heavy leather recliner, it's the only piece of furniture in the whole house older than a decade. I had to fight Lisa to keep it when we moved up to Portland.

I put on the headset. "Okay."

"Meet you there!"

One by one my senses disconnect. The world quiets. I can't feel the leather under my fingers. I notice the faint scent of Stumptown Organic -- Mom's favorite coffee -- just as it evaporates. Black falls across my vision.

Then, immersion.

Warmth envelops me.

My toes curl on cool glass.

Nighttime. I look out over a golden city. Ten thousand towers lit up bright, far below. New York revolves stately around me.

No, it's not New York that revolves, but I. A glass box of a room surrounds me, suspended at the end of a lever from the top of the Chrysler Building. The lever turns, and the streets of Manhattan float past below.

My breath comes fast. Dizzy, I brace myself against the glass wall.

"It's a Bocelli design."

Lisa stands behind me, at the side of a gigantic mahogany bed covered in white satin. She too wears white -- sheer silk pajamas that cling to her skin. Her perfume caresses me delicately.

I struggle to resist, but I feel myself stiffening inside my own pajamas. This place. . . I note the clear glass shower booth in the corner. The mirror centered in the ceiling.

"Really, Lisa? You know I don't go for this stuff." We tried immersion sex, early in our marriage. It never felt any better than dream sex -- than mental masturbation.

"This is different," Lisa says. "We've hit on something."

She gestures, a flick of her wrist. Her clothes melt away, as do mine. She stands before me naked and beautiful -- and real, so very real. No glorified avatar, this. I see the stretch marks on her thighs, the slight flab of fat on her midriff, the wine-stain birthmark on her left breast.

She smiles, a slight upturn of her lips.

Blood pounds in my ears. I'm hard as I've ever been, the brush of cool air tantalizing against my skin.

"So you got modeled for textures," I manage to force out. "That doesn't mean--"

"It's more than that." Lisa steps forward, reaches for my cheek. "This is me, Rico. Genetically. Chemically. Truly."

Her fingers make contact.

There's no faking her touch. No faking the bolt of electricity down my spine.

I embrace her. Pull her close, shivering at the wonder of her skin against mine.

We fall onto the bed and cling tight to each other. My body recognizes the whole of her pressed against me -- her heat, her scent, her strength, and so much more.

With a hunger I'd forgotten I possessed, I slide into her. She arches against me. We gasp as one and slip into an urgent beat. I kiss her lips, kiss her nose, kiss her sweat-slick brow as we climb the slope to climax. She smiles at me and cries out my name.

When the end comes, some wonderful minutes later, I convulse against her and think -- this is better, this is better, this is better than the real thing. . .

After, I lie on my back, her hand in mine, and listen to my heart calm its beat. "We've got to put this in our habitats." What if Dad could feel this real? What if Mom could? Might it make a difference?

"I've already started negotiations. Emily's offering us a joint venture."

"Oh. That's great." I pause, uncertain. "Lisa? I've missed you."

She smiles. "Me too, Rico. I want to be there for you. With this new tech, we can see a lot more of each other."

"That's not what I meant."

"You should hear what Emily's got in mind," she says. "Once you're capturing genetic makeup, it's a single step to information transfer. Immersion induced pregnancy."

". . . pregnancy?"

"Procreation is the only limit to our fragmentation as a species," Lisa says. "But procreation is just information exchange. Theoretically, I could mate with a piece of software."

I gape at her.

Lisa pats my cheek. "Don't worry, I won't. Not with a stud like you around. Now I've got to go. Say hi to your mother from me, will you?"

Before I can answer, she disappears.

The living room snaps into reality around me as my teeth click together.

Lisa's voice reverberates inside my skull. Can you imagine. . . ?

I sit there alone, covered in sweat. Somewhere in the house, a clock ticks the seconds away. Cold sperm dries on my leg.

#

". . . it's like she sees another person in me." I pick at my omelet. "Like we disagree on who I am."

Mom sips coffee and draws in a sketch pad with her free hand. She glances up at me once in a while. Hers is an artist's gaze, all-encompassing.

She used to draw me every morning, while I ate before school. The price of my breakfast, she called it. I pretended to mind, but I kept all the drawings. A thousand penciled sketches of a teenager slurping down rice and beans.

That was long ago. Today, it feels right that Mom should draw me. I need her to look at me. I need her to see me as I am and reassure me.

She only says, "Your father gave me black soles."

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw the home you built for him. The beach. The palms."

"That's what he asked for."

"I saw the girl," Mom says. "He asked for her too?"

"Dad didn't want to be without you. You can have a companion too, in your habitat."

Mom stops drawing. "Why would I want that?"

"I thought. . . you loved Dad, didn't you?"

"I've said my goodbyes," Mom says, "even if he hasn't."

"What do you mean?"

Mom sets her pen aside. "George was a good man. He loved me well. But understand, Rico -- I was more than a woman to him."

"You were the love of his life."

"Yes. The black love of his life."

"Mom, I don't think--"

"I left Havana in '62. Two hundred miles between Miramar and Miami. You know what else was two hundred miles? The distance between a Cuban and a nigger."

Mom speaks the word nonchalantly, without anger, but I flinch even so. "Dad. . .did he. . . I mean, he never called you. . .?"

"Of course not," Mom says. "Your father gave up three jobs over me. He fought big men for me. Once he got stabbed for me. So what if he wanted me to meet all his Waspy friends? So what if he wanted the whole world to know I was his? I loved him, and thought he loved me."

"Didn't he?"

"So he told me. He always told me sweet things." Mom smiles. "One day he said I was God's only perfect creation."

"I'm sure he meant it."

"A few days later, we were messing around by the pool. He grabbed my foot and held it up. 'Here!' he shouted. 'Proof that God screws up!'" Mom gestures grandly, the motion eerily evocative of Dad. "I was beautiful and perfect to him -- except for the pale undersides of my feet. Like God poured a bucket of brown paint over my head, and forgot about my soles."

"He was joking."

"I've seen the girl he's got, on the beach you gave him. The girl who looks like me. I've seen her soles."

Could it be? I rack my memory. Did Dad tell me what to do? I wouldn't have made a mistake like that, would I?

"Don't glare like I've spit on his grave," Mom says. "George loved me. I know that. Just as I know that Lisa loves you, even if she sees a man in you that you don't always recognize. Our lovers are never the people we love, not exactly."

#

It happens a week later, as I'm leaving for a client dinner.

Mom catches me in the hallway and wraps me in her embrace, and weeps on my shoulder. She clutches her sketchbook in one hand. Its edge digs sharply into my ribs.

I pat her back and murmur assurances, thinking ahead to the evening's negotiations. Then Mom twitches and gasps, and collapses.

For some moments I stare at her. I'm shocked, and surprised that I'm shocked at this most expected of events. Then I start CPR and dial the office. Within minutes we're in an ambulance, screaming across Portland. An oxygen mask on Mom's face, her sketchbook still locked in her grasp.

Severe heart attack, my team tells me. No repairing the damage.

They rush her into OR One, and strand me in the marble-and-gray-leather waiting room. I watch through the wall as a dozen figures in scrubs fight to stabilize her for upload. With all my practice at saying goodbye, I should be calm, but I can't breathe.

At some point in the next hour, Lisa comes. She hugs me and kisses me and does her best to console me.

I stare at her head. She has shaved it bald since this morning. It gleams in the sterile

light from the OR.

"I'm getting a port installed," she explains. "It's for this new crossfire app. . ."

I let her words drift past me. When she falls quiet for a moment, I speak into the silence -- because speaking is easier than thinking.

"What if every goodbye is really the last one we get?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You talk about fragmentation. Every time you stuff a new gadget into your brain, you fragment away from the human race, right?"

Lisa shrugs. "Sure."

"I don't think you need a gadget. Every time you leave the room, you come back a different person. Ten times a day you fragment away from me. A hundred times. Every time you walk out the door, I'll never see you again."

A thousand times I should have said goodbye to you. A thousand times, as I lost the woman that I loved.

"That's great, Rico." Lisa chuckles. "We're human fractals, huh?"

"Yes."

Loosely coupled fractals -- that's what we are. We split and divide, hoping that the near-random walk of our fragmentation will bring us close enough to interact. To procreate. To love.

Once Mom is conscious and ready for upload, I ask Lisa to leave me with her.

"I'll see you at home," she tells me.

I'm not sure she will.

#

Mom lies entangled in wires and IV lines. She was never a small woman, but the operating table dwarfs her. She looks out of place and powerless and scared.

But a faint smile curves her lips as I approach. "Today's the day, huh?"

I sit down by her side and take her hand and tell her the truth. "I'm not ready to let you go."

"I know."

"See what I built for you, Mom." I press a few buttons, and the circular walls of the OR light up.

A house with an elegant colonnade, its doors a rich green. An indoor patio lit by a soaring skylight, with dark wooden rocking chairs and a blinding white canvas stretched on an easel. A bedroom with tall windows that look out on the sea -- they hold no glass, only wooden shutters to close against the evening chill.

Wonder touches Mom's eyes. "It's beautiful, Rico. Just as I remember it."

I get to my feet, my heart pumping fast. "You want to go there, Mama?"

"This house belongs to the girl I was." Mom sighs. "That girl is gone."

"But Mom, you love this house--"

"Don't you give me black soles!"

My hands drop to my sides. "I'll do whatever you decide, Mom. I want you to be happy."

"I am happy. A little bit afraid, but happy. I've got no more goodbyes to say but one." Mom smiles. "You can keep me in that house if you like. It won't be me, not really -- but you know that, don't you?"

"I need you." I blurt out the words before I can stop myself. Then I stand there, my face flushed, as vulnerable as I have ever been.

"Where's my sketchbook?" Mom asks.

"It's outside. It's not sterile."

"What does that matter?"

So I bring it in. Mom gestures for me to open it. With trembling fingers, I flip the cover.

I stare for long moments at the drawing that faces me. Then I turn the page. And another.

I leaf through the sketchbook in a confused daze. This is what Mom's been working on?

"I draw what I see," she says.

What she saw was a hundred figures. A hundred middle-aged men. In t-shirts and business suits and bathrobes and beach shorts. Some tired, some eager, some angry, some sad.

All of them me.

I recognize none of them.

That's fragmentation too. It's not just the people around you who change.

I'm not the boy who loves Mom's rice and beans.

I'm not the guy who loves Lisa.

I'm the man who can't let go.

"I loved every one of you," Mom says to me.

I cling to those words like a lifeline. Here's one constant throughout all my splintering changes. It's not fair that I must give that up.

"I said goodbye to every one of you," Mom says to me.

I stare at her for moments. I stare at her for a long time, even as her breathing grows labored and her heartbeat uneven.

The decision races at me full speed.

Can I give her up?

Can I keep her bound? Constant, unchanging from year to year in her virtual prison, while I fragment and break and splinter away?

Will she love me if I do?

Will I love her?

Or will I let dust gather on the screen of her viewport?

#

I only know this:

In a while, Mom will take her final breath.

In a while, I'll make a decision.

And then, whatever that decision, I'll say goodbye to her for the last time.

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