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about 118,500 words

THE VOLITION DIRECTIVE

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0.

Listing gently, Olive is a buoyancy. A tumbling omniscience.

A warm breeze turns things inside out, gradually, like water lapping at the side of a boat.

She feels a prickling cat's lick. A small kitten, all eyes, alien skull, and desperation.

She sees images: a burning tanker spills fire over the highway onramp, in Denver. A child's vomit on the floor at school. Hospital lights, in a hallway, reflected on bleached linoleum. The Earth, glowing with sunlight, outside her capsule window.

None of this makes any sort of sense.

Olive is dreaming. She is dreaming or she has died. She is dying. She suffered some kind of horrible accident. She was part of a mission. A very important thing.

Maybe an idiotic thing. An impossible thing.

Olive settles on it: there's been an accident.

I was caught in an accident, she thinks. On the mission.

She's been burned alive.

Olive has a left hand but she cannot locate it, within her brain. Her mind is like spilled jelly, broken open -- dashed, more like -- across a Roman mosaic of her memories. She has a right foot. She knows her toes, even if she can't locate or move them, but the ones on her left foot were burned completely off. That sort of thing cannot be held in the mind -- it cannot be

contained, just known logically, like a string of words. How can I no longer have toes on one foot?

If she is a bundle of different things, the binding has snapped and come apart now. One of these pieces is all panic -- a little girl screaming outside a house fire. Some other part of her, a much bigger part, is still slowly, gracefully, turning. Like the capsule did, far above Earth.

More words: I was on a mission. I was in outer space. We traversed the Anomaly. We came back down. We sought to defy natural progression.

The feeling of a kitten's licks -- this alone is persistent. Kneading with front paws, left right, left right, left right, eyes half open, licking, licking, licking her. It thinks Olive is its mother. It is consumed by some animal impulse.

But it is not really a cat. It is some kind of machine. Working on her. Is she in a hospital? Is this the year 1912? No.

It cannot be the year 1912. It was only supposed to be the year 1912. They left from the year 2032. They were supposed to have traveled in time. A preposterous ambition. It should have been obvious. Impossible. And for what end?

A yellow farmhouse. Her cousin Callum's chortle. A windy day. Joey, her son.

"He is dead," Olive says.

It is very important that this fact remain so, regardless of everything else. This is critically important. Joseph Arthur Hoffmann, Olive's baby boy, died on June 2nd, 2027. Repeat: Joseph Arthur Hoffmann deceased June 2nd, 2027. Repeat...

"No, I don't need to do that anymore."

Though Olive thinks she's spoken this, she can feel no physical lips, so it must have just been imagined. It had to be.

No, she does have lips -- *I have lips*, she thinks. She asserts. She simply cannot move them.

If this is her death, will she see Joey? Her dead father and grandparents? Her great aunt, the center of so much of her historical research. Can this be what's happened? She's in heaven or some clearing house of massed personalities -- a holdover, maybe just for the failures, a place for your accrued personality to finally be scratched away at, like rust.

Olive knows she is actually inside some kind of silver-faced structure like a skyscraper. Is that right? In something like a hospital suite. This is medical attention she's receiving. They're giving it to her. In a private room. And inside the room, she is inside some kind of fabric, like a cocoon. Her with what feels just like a dozen kittens. They lick and knead at her, all of them.

No. That is just the medical machine, working.

"I am the SEA mission's historical officer," Olive says.

Again, without lips and voice; without air she can push or use, it's doubtful she's actually speaking, but it sure feels like she is.

She draws oxygen with real difficulty and the panicked side of her is given fuel: she is trapped inside some tube of cloth, RIGHT NOW, with some kind of clear veins -- tubing -- stuck down inside her making her breathe -- it is very difficult, and VERY claustrophobic.

"Do not panic," Olive tells herself.

The answer is in her memories, if she can just look at them. It's like her whole life is just that pile of objects that have been littered onto the floor of her mind. She feels like someone else is looking at them, too -- no, a team of figures, with flashlights. Investigators.

Panic.

“No. Not yet.”

Olive is hallucinating. This cannot be real.

She has an obligation to sort it out. So she will stay calm and she will organize.

The memories come:

Falling over the planet’s surface. This is before everything went completely off. Olive was actually in outer space, weightless, above the Earth. She was in a spacesuit. In a space capsule. With the mission team of four. SEA is the corporation. Her cousin Callum is the SEA CEO. He headed the mission. Callum Donan. It is really his mad obsession.

Light so hot it liquefies you -- making your skin something that snakes right off the muscle beneath it like a damp sheet.

Yes, a blue light burned her. Dr. Margaret Potter was also on the mission. Her friend.

Margaret! Remember her?

“I’m going to panic,” Olive says.

These are pretty close to actual words -- she is wheezing through the tubes and pushing against the machinery -- she is inside a sack, sealed in a cocoon. Something is inside it with her. Is it really a medical machine? She can move her body.

“I’m going to panic very soon...”

Outside, she sees something move, darkening the fabric of her cocoon.

Olive tries to swallow around the plastic object that chokes her; she is going to cry out, she is going to spasm and claw and shriek...

“Can you hear me?”

A calm voice speaks to her.

This is a man's voice, coming through several layers, and she tries to nod but the thing in her throat prevents it.

"Help me! I am going to panic, do you understand?" she says.

No. She tries to say.

Olive sees a window in the cocoon -- it is small and glossy -- but a man's face appears there. He is wearing a tight-fitting suit, black. He has curly dark hair. He is tall and has a square chin. He is handsome, with decent, smart, wide-set dark eyes and a thoughtful brow. His expression is frustrated or strained. His tie is tight and black.

I have seen him before, Olive thinks. Where do I know him from?

But he does not seem to be there among her memories.

"I am..." she tries to say.

He smiles, and it changes him, it shifts his entire face -- it makes him look like a different person, maybe kind, and this causes her to shudder and tears to flood into her eyes.

"Please, do not attempt to speak," he says.

He leans his face closer to the window, with that smile -- warmth, a generosity. It bends his eyes -- it creases his cheeks and pits them with dimples.

"I want you to understand that you are going to be all right," he says. He speaks formally. Is it English? It is.

Then he addresses someone else.

"Can she hear me? Can you hear me?"

He tries to speak more slowly, loudly, and he has some sort of foreign accent, it seems to her.

Olive tries to nod.

I must look a splattered mess, one of those loose parts of her brain thinks.

I am literally a splattered mess.

“If you can hear me, I want you to know that you are going to be just fine,” he says.

When she looks into his eyes, for some reason she believes him.

“All right?”

She tries to nod again. She tries to nod and there is a pathetic spasm in his brow, and this is how she realizes he’s seen her movement of affirmation.

“I believe she has heard me,” he says.

The feeling of a cat’s licks has gotten so ferocious. She tries to kick them off of her -- maybe they are rats, in fact -- she tries to look down but cannot tip her head that far. It feels like they are biting her.

“They are hurting me!” Olive says.

She tries to say this, but instead it’s just a gurgling at the plastic, and the panic comes right back, but then she hears a foosh -- it is a flushing of air -- it is not unlike on the capsule, on the SEA spacecraft, when it pressurized -- and then the intensity of the bites goes away very very quickly, and she is smothered in a feeling like a very soft, deep, warm quilt.

Inside it, the buoyancy returns -- it spreads out, like a droplet of cream in coffee.

“Oh God, thank you,” Olive says.

Anesthetic. They’ve drugged her.

She remembers different hospital lights. The children's hospital. Sleeping on the folding chair against the window, she is woken up every time the nurses come in. Day and night, mixed together.

No, Olive pushes this away. Go away. I want to really sleep!

But it comes right back at her: her baby Joey in surgery, just after his first birthday.

Premonition. She had a premonition, just before. It's so strange how these things anchor her, like dividers. They create the distinct sections of her life.

Her wedding day. Another divider. Fierce winds, black skies, no rain.

She is divorced now.

Swinging off the face of the blacktop, on a swing, as a little girl, going so high with her feet kicked out that she might sail up into space...

Up...

Down.

Up...

Up...

"Can you still hear me?"

Up...

"... you should understand that you have been burned badly in an accident..."

Up...

"...you came into contact with a beam that accidentally incinerated parts of your body. But we believe you can be entirely restored..."

Down.

Olive is numb, and she knows enough to know that she is in shock and that she will soon die.

She must die. Because so much of her is gone.

Down.

She's reaching for the ground.

Everything is becoming translucent now. Insubstantial. Her consciousness starts dissipating like fog.

No!

Olive must make a note. Scratch a mark. Leave some imprint. It has to matter that they have come here from another time or place at least.

Someone has to know: this is not France, circa 1912.

The world's first manned time travel mission has failed.

1.

Asleep, awake. Time has passed.

Olive is finally fully awake now and there can be no question that what she's experiencing is real. Despite the logical possibility that one could confuse a dream for reality, she is certain she has not done this. I guess, she thinks, when I'm asleep I do often confuse the two.

"But now I am awake."

She feels quite warm though she doesn't have any blanket over her legs. She wiggles the toes on her left foot and they are there. Right and left – all ten toes.

"How?" she says.

This tickles her in the neck and she makes a spurted sound, like a giggle, and tears come to her eyes. It is not quite completely correct -- there is something not exactly completely right with her nerves, but those *are* her toes. Her feet. Once again fully intact.

She's inside some kind of sleek, ultra-modern medical space. Inside an experimental bed, but it doesn't have the industrial feel of any hospital she's ever seen. Above her, the ceiling vanishes entirely into soft light, and when she looks up into it and squints she hears birds chirping and feels a gentle breeze.

Olive can even *smell* that breeze. It is as if the top of the room -- where the ceiling is, she is sure -- is also a sky over prairie. It is some kind of superior version of VR -- but far better than any retinal projection they have in 2032.

But this can't be 2032.

The materials are all alien here.

I am inside a silvery tower, she thinks. Her body is still very weak and she hears a tinkling sound, like a wind chime on a neighbor's porch, and then suddenly she can't see her legs. The air above her feet -- inside the raised arms of the cradle she is in -- has turned to a beige, or maybe gray, color. It is like not being able to focus her eyes -- and she blinks and shakes her head as her eyes get lost in it. It's like there is a disconnection between eyes and the brain -- it is like an optical illusion that you know cannot be real and yet cannot stop seeing.

"That is quite strange for you? The blurring screen?"

Olive jerks in the bed at the voice -- it is that man again -- the one with the dark eyes and square chin -- the one who wears the tight Victorian suit.

He's wearing a different one today -- a very dark shade of blue -- but the style is the same. He stands in the wall where there's also a vague sort of opaqueness instead of a door.

"Uhm, yes, I suppose it is," she says.

Olive folds her hands on her invisible lap and tries to empty the self-consciousness out of her mind. She is quite obviously a complete wreck on every level.

"I would expect you have many questions," he says.

His eyes avert from hers with something like propriety, and he adjusts his tie and shifts his head a bit.

"If you would like to lower the En-Vision down -- well, perhaps I should demonstrate..." he says.

His expression bunches up, in consideration.

Then he steps closer to her bed and looks at her again. Most of her is underneath the odd sort of insubstance he called a ‘screen’ -- which she realizes has taken the place of a blanket for covering her. It is strange to feel like she’s lying here in just a gown with nothing else but some invisible nothingness covering her. But there is warmth, too, which is also clearly being emanated by the cradle-bed.

“If I am correct, you do not know very much about the things in this office. Such as the HSD En-Vision, which I have just referenced, and your bed, and where we are right now. These things are foreign for you?”

She tries to process this.

“Yes. I do not know where I am,” Olive says.

She speaks slowly, adding the word ‘exactly,’ to the end.

This is a way to cover any potential dishonesty: she does know she embarked on a time travel mission and it has brought her to this place. But best not to discuss such insane things right off. She’ll end up getting herself committed to a mental institution.

“You are inside the J-H-R-S Empire Ring branch headquarters. Does that... mean anything more to you?”

She laughs. “Nope.”

His brow scrunches at the word.

“No. No it is not familiar for me,” she says.

“This is the Joint Homicide Response Services. I am Officer Keene.”

“Homicide? As in murder?” she says.

He considers this with a tip of his head.

“We do, yes, investigate murder. And accidental death, dismemberment and incinerations, of course. We are ostensibly under the jurisdiction of the N-I-C, though we have a rotating corporate overseer, for funding purposes. There is a conflict of interest right now, as the overseer is from H-S-D, and of course they have... well, obtained... your colleagues...”

“My colleagues?” Olive says.

She is suddenly aware that her throat is stitichy-raw with thirst.

He nods.

“They are not here, too? Wherever we are? Margaret?”

Olive forgot to use her historical cover name but what is the point anymore.

“You do not remember?”

“No,” she says. “Please tell me -- are they all alive? Our mission team had four members: myself, Mr. Donan, Roeloff and Dr. Potter...”

“One of them, I am afraid, did perish,” he says. “The both of you came in contact with defense beams. The other female was completely incinerated. Irretrievably so...”

Olive hears the words and feels her heart lobbing aggressively in her ears and she presses her head backwards.

The crib-thing she’s in shifts to receive her. It seems to have swiftly and silently moved into a more upright position.

This startles her, too, and she feels the panic all around her, again. She closes her eyes and just breathes and tries to sort herself out.

“Allow me to present our current model for what we believe transpired. For you and your associates,” the man says.

He seems to be speaking ever more slowly, as if she is some kind of idiot.

With his fingers, he draws something in the air – like a box. Then he stares at her.

“Can you see this?”

Olive looks at the open space and back at him, perplexed.

“Uh, no,” she says.

“No, no, of course not. All right, let us use the En-Vision.”

Officer Keene reaches up into the air above her and grasps at something, as if the air there were a shower curtain, and he drags it out.

“What are you doing?”

Suddenly now she sees a film appear in that space – a projection of some kind, playing in three dimensions, as if inside an invisible box.

“Wow, I can see that,” Olive says.

“Oh, very good. So allow me to present our current understanding of what transpired.

Please feel free to ask me to stop at any moment, or amend the record where it is incorrect?”

The movie – images in the air of the hospital room – shows their mission craft – their capsule – where it came down, on the top of some large, strange structure, half buried in mud. It is dark night.

“Yes,” Olive says.

The capsule opens, and the movie shifts perspective – it changes to an internal point of view – from one of the crew. This is so familiar for Olive she begins to feel light-headed.

“Jesus. How did you get this?”

It is her own perspective. The sensation of déjà vu is smothering her.

“This is from my memory!” Olive says.

It all begins to coalesce for her as the movie plays on: their team, wandering out into the mud, in the dark night. All four dressed in period French clothes, expecting to have traveled in time, back to 1912, but finding they were somewhere else entirely. A different place or time than expected.

Callum Donan, the company CEO and mission’s head, leads them out across the mud, unflinching, towards a distant gathering of more of the strange, Styrofoam-like buildings. They are stacked in places like Legos, like old coolers. All are dirty white, partially submerged in the mud. At the base of these structures, brilliant lights shine up into a smoggy night sky.

“Yes. That is us,” Olive says. She is having trouble swallowing.

The perspective changes back and forth between outside and inside her own viewpoint. Dr. Potter – Margaret – whispers something, jovially, aside, to Olive. Her words aren’t audible – Olive realizes this movie has no sound.

“What is the woman saying right here?” the man asks her.

In the hospital room, Olive can barely swallow.

“Might I have a glass of water?” she asks.

“Absolutely, yes, of course,” he says. The man, Office Keene, crosses the room.

In the movie, their team encounters a local. A man dressed all in filthy white clothes. He is oily, wretchedly thin, covered in red splotches. He looks like he’s not bathed in weeks. His teeth, despite it all, are brilliantly white. In sickly, blackened gums.

“We are aware of this individual. Is it correct to say that he was the first person you encountered here?”

Officer Keene returns and hands a cup to her. It feels like it's been freshly made out of a lukewarm plastic material, but the water inside is cold and wonderful and she drinks it so fast she chokes and starts coughing.

"Went down the wrong pipe," she says.

Officer Keene watches her with concern.

"I'm okay," she says. "Thank you."

In the movie, this wretched man is joined by others. More skinny, sickly, dirty men in white garb. One of them crashes into Roeloff, their security officer from the mission team, like a clumsy pickpocket might, and swipes his papers. Maybe the thief has also taken something else -- some foodstuffs they'd brought along.

"Yes," Olive says. "Yes he was the first man we saw. We tried to speak French to him -- I did -- but of course he didn't act like he understood anything I was saying."

In the movie, the two men on their team -- Roeloff and Callum -- chase off after the thieves.

Margaret and Olive yell after them but are left behind.

"I remember this," Olive says. "This is all correct."

In the movie, the women move to a wall, where they see a machine that's splurting, gurgling. The perspective goes back to Olive's own.

"That machine," Olive says.

It looked like an ATM. A kiosk. It was producing something -- practically shitting it out -- white and oblong. A cake, they realized.

"A bakery box," Officer Keene says.

The machine was broken, apparently, because the cake it produced dropped out, half formed, onto a moldy shelf, and down into a pile of rotting cakes at the base of the machine.

“What were you saying here? Can you recall?”

Olive watches her own mouth move. And Margaret’s.

“We were amazed it was making food. But no one was eating it.”

Those men looked so hungry. The things produced were like Twinkies. Like Betty Crocker. Just being spewed out of a machine in the wall. This clearly wasn’t 1912. They were now absolutely certain they had not traveled backwards in time.

This was some of the rest of their conversation, but Olive doesn’t repeat this part to Officer Keene.

In the movie, beams of light, like searchlights, begin cutting around on the muddy ground. Margaret takes Olive’s arm, suddenly, and yanks them away.

They dart inside a structure, through an open arch.

“Why did you enter that work center?” Officer Keene asks.

In the movie, the women tumble down a step, crashing to the ground in a cellar area lit by floating, overhead lights. People there in masks and the grubby white clothes work at long tables, assembling something. They are all women.

“Margaret – Dr. Potter – was concerned about those beams of light.”

Olive repeats what is being mouthed in the movie: “Margaret said: ‘Christ, is this a sweatshop?’”

The workers were clicking small rubbery pieces together and pressing something in their center.

Margaret tried calling out to them. She was waving her hands over her head. They paid her no mind, as if they were drugged.

“We knew we weren’t in northern France,” Olive said. She feels what is coming and she begins to shudder.

The movie’s point of view – again Olive’s -- examines the table and the workers appear to be assembling small, waxen flowers, taking petals and stem pieces from giant containers for assembly. They work with no passion, and apparently little awareness, like dreary, inconsistent machines. They are dead-eyed, even as some of them finally look up and begin to take Margaret in.

Suddenly they all stop working.

All their faces jerk up and stare at Olive and Margaret.

“Can you stop it please?” Olive says.

The movie’s perspective changes to a viewpoint that’s further away, in a corner like a security camera, and the whole room is visible. Olive is startled again by her own appearance. Her period hair, her costume, the worker women and their obvious fear.

“Please,” Olive says.

In the movie, a light beam emanates suddenly from a far side of the room, spreads and encompasses Margaret.

She holds out her hands under the blue color of it, rolling her fingers and examining herself, as if feeling something on her skin from the beam, as Olive leaps in to take hold of her.

In the movie Olive is shouting at her. Screaming even.

But she’s too late. Margaret’s hair lifts around her head as the strands burn up.

In one moment, Margaret's eyes turn to Olive, startled, stunned. Then all at once, her flesh – all of her – rises away to nothing, like her hair – incinerated right off of her body, followed, in a blink, by the rest of her.

“Jesus Christ,” Olive says, in her bed. “That really happened.”

She closes her eyes and turns away from it.

She can see herself, in her memories now, half inside the light, suddenly scalded – sharply and incredibly.

She stumbled backwards and fell. She tried to scream but no sound came from her mouth.

Olive remembers this all so viscerally now: screaming, meaning to scream, but she was not able to. Her vision went next. She went into shock.

She was certain she was dead.

Officer Keene strikes a hand through the movie, in its box of air, and it vanishes entirely.

It winks out, like it never was.

Olive sits in her bed and breathes. She is light-headed.

“I must apologize,” Officer Keene says. “I understand that this must be quite painful for you. To see it again. I am afraid I must ask, for our recording purposes, if you would find this assembly to accurately reflect the events that night?”

Olive nods.

She nods and nods but she can't speak. It seems as unreal as everything – the mission, her medical care, this very moment.

“Unless I've gone nuts,” she says.

“I am sorry?”

“Yes. Yes it’s very accurate.”

Olive closes her eyes and he stands there.

She is not sure how long they remain like this.

“I will leave you to rest now,” he says.

“Wait! This is all very strange to me, I apologize,” she says. “Can you please tell me more about my friends? What happened to them, do you know? You said something, earlier?”

Officer Keene nods. He must have brought over a chair, too, because he sits beside the bed in a chair that was not there a moment before.

With a look backwards -- it is a suspicious glance -- Officer Keene swings his fingers in a downward motion and the sky descends around them. It is as if they are both on that prairie now -- her in her crib and him in his chair. The breeze is even stronger and it ruffles her oily hair.

“I can feel it,” she says.

He looks startled by this, like he doesn’t know what she might be referring to. But then he continues:

“Your two male comrades are in the possession of H-S-D. They are one of the Big Two. The biggest, currently. And they have made a formal request for your extradition, but I have denied it. I may safely do so, on the grounds of I-C law...”

“You are using so many... uh, abbreviations. Alphabet soup. You said one of my friends was... Margaret couldn’t be... is she dead?”

He nods.

His eyes are empathetic. Dark and intelligent. He looks sincerely concerned.

“She was the female doctor. Dr. Margaret Potter. She was with you in the crafts room.”

Olive turns away from him and her head begins to reel. Don't panic, she thinks.

Don't panic. Some part of her mind asserts that none of this is real, on the grounds that it *cannot* be real, but the physical proximity of this man, Officer Keene, and the continuous, mundane feeling of her body in bed contradicts that.

"We obtained her name from you, as otherwise we had no means of identifying her."

"From me? Of course. And that movie. Those are my memories?"

"Move-ee?"

She demonstrates a box with her fingers. "In that... En-Vision thingee. The projection?"

"Yes, in part. A combination of that and the various gnat feeds. You were both severely burned. It is the HSD Peace Corps -- they provide defensive services for their work sites, and you triggered them, unfortunately. Of course you do not know about any of this, nor could you receive the warnings. They came over what we call *interface* -- it is something you do not have. You were fortunate not to be in the center of the beam, where she was, so we were able to repair your burns. You were recovered just outside of a crafts room in the Croach. It is a district beyond the city layout proper. It is a work place, a manufacture order. I am afraid your group wandered into there without permission and as I have said, could not hear the warnings..."

She has no fucking idea what he's talking about.

Olive is bugging out. She is losing it.

We're losing it, a part of mind is cautioning her.

Officer Keene reaches out and takes her hand, suddenly, and it surprises her. His hand is big, and warm, and it works to smother her mental tailspin.

"I... forgive me if I should not be touching you. In your culture, of course I mean."

“No,” Olive says.

Then tears overcome her and she sobs, leaning forward, just holding his hand out to the side, awkwardly.

He tips his head towards her and she can tell he wants to embrace her but does not.

“It’s okay, I mean,” she says. “I can’t believe Margaret’s really dead. Just like that.”

Her nose is running and she has nothing to wipe it on.

From the side of the crib-bed, he produces some kind of eyeshadow brush or something -- it is a little, plain thing, the size of an emery board, and he passes it under her nose, just barely touching her skin, and her snot is gone. It’s like it has been incinerated or dehydrated or something, instantaneously.

He holds it up in front of her and then carefully presses it into the palm of her hand.

“You are not familiar with these, either, I discern?”

She shakes her head ‘no.’

“How do you...?” he says.

“We use a tissue. Kleenex. We wipe. Wash with water, maybe. You know what a handkerchief is?”

Officer Keene nods and smiles.

“Yes, of course. Just touch this to it, or any sort of bio waste you want to be rid of. It cannot harm you.”

Olive nods and holds the thing in her hand.

“We went to the future, didn’t we?” she says. “Our mission. We planned to go back, to 1912, but we’re actually in the future?”

He looks at her blankly, but she has the sense he is being cagey and knows exactly what she's referring to.

"I still can't believe this."

Officer Keene doesn't seem to follow her use of contractions. Many of her words. She is already picking up some of his style and enunciating more clearly.

Olive shudders again and puts her hands onto her face.

"I think we have discussed enough for right now. I will leave you to rest."

Officer Keene gestures like a composer with both hands and night falls on the prairie, all around them, replacing the room entirely, and she hears a song of cicada and a little warm wind rises up, shushing across the grasses.

"You should rest now. We will speak more later. I will see if I can arrange it so that you may speak with your friends, at HSD. I will do what I can."

"They are there? At this... company?"

"Yes. And HSD exerts the right to maintain them in a kind of quarantine. We will discuss all of this more at a later time..."

He stands and moves his chair away, like it is weightless.

"Please, one more thing before you go," she says.

Olive snatches his hand and he takes hold and kneels there, beside her bed.

She looks him in his face and it is a beautiful face -- compassionate, smart, and very careful. She wonders if he can be real at all.

"Do you understand where we came from? My friends and I? We crashed, as I was saying, in our capsule..."

“It is our understanding that you have arrived from the past,” he says.

She leans back in her bed, nodding and closing her eyes.

“I don’t understand it…” she says.

“We are quite familiar, scientifically, with temporal cycling, though you must understand that now it is strictly illegal. It is one of the IC’s strictest mandates, and they do not have much serious regulation.”

Olive shakes her head side to side.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t understand you,” she says. “Most of what you tell me.”

“Rest now. We will talk more later.”

The crib bed adjusts on its own again, taking her to a prone position.

“Yes,” she says. Sleep sounds wonderful.

“Okay.”

“I promise that you will be safe here,” he says. “I will ensure that is the case personally.”

When she looks in his eyes she believes him, even though she tells herself she shouldn’t so easily. Why does she trust him? Because he is completely gorgeous, in a buttoned up and awkward sort of way?

It is more than that, her mind tells her. A big part of her mind.

He is extremely familiar to her -- frustratingly, like a memory she can’t access -- like something on the tip of her tongue. Maybe he just has that effect on women. Or maybe she is drugged and dreaming.

“Officer Keene,” she says.

“Please, call me Jon.”

“Jon,” she says.

He smiles, awkwardly, and offers her his hand in a formal gesture and they clasp hands and shake.

Looking into his eyes she feels something like a circling feeling, like a circuit connected between them -- it is joint appreciation, or attraction, she is sure -- a very specific form of mutual understanding.

She decides she is going to trust him until he gives her any reason not to.

“My name is Olive. Olive Fehler. I am a historian. A writer and a professor. And I was born in the year 1996.”

2. 1991

Harold Heblich is waiting. He tries to count out three minutes after he hears his father leave the house.

He looks at his alarm clock over and over for verification. It takes a long time. He knows how *subjective* time is. That is his mom's word. Objective, subjective, qualitative, quantitative. Words from college.

His mom barged in and checked on him before she left, as she always does, smirking, always believing that he's faking – he could be missing an arm, spouting blood everywhere, and still she'd give the smirk. But she let him stay home anyway. It's a little private allowance – like maybe she's thinking: I know you're faking, but yes, you can stay home – just go back to school tomorrow. And stay out of trouble.

His father just calls in from the kitchen when he goes.

Now they're both gone and Harry's home alone.

He's come to waiting three minutes by the scientific method: if his father has forgotten something he will be back within two (once he's out in the Venice Beach AM traffic he's not turning around). If Harry waits five -- 1/12th an hour, a block of time where most simple actions can be completed – he's wasting rare, precious time when he's totally alone in the house.

It's been four minutes right now, give or take a couple dozen seconds. This is permissible.

Harry whips off his quilt and slides out of bed. He is hot – he definitely has a fever. Maybe. Maybe, not definitely, but there’s a reasonable chance he does actually have a fever. He’s exaggerated how sick he is, yes, but if he has a fever, he would not be allowed to be in school.

Anyway, there’s nothing to miss there today. Nearly ever. He’s skipped two grades and it’s still a good 58% review, every day. Primary school maths, from what he’s seen, is *always* two-thirds review and just 1/3, the middle chunk of classes and school years both, progression into new material.

Harry pulls on sweat pants from his partially-worn pile. UCLA baby blue. He hates UCLA. There is no good reason to hate UCLA except that his dad’s always touting it. There’s something about it. Bel Air. It’s not Berkley.

Harry lingers by his door. Yes, he’s almost going to cough. He has definite sinus – postnasal drip occupying something like 40% of his breathing passageways.

Could he have gone to school?

“Could I go to school?” Harry says, watching himself in the mirror.

He is painfully thin – all ribs with small channels of flab – no, not a lot of muscle – and his head is way too big for his body. He has a really thick head of great, lion-like hair (except for being dark brown) – but he’s got the definite potential to be handsome. Harry believes this. There is a classically attractive face in there.

But is he handsome now?

“Am I now?” he says. To the reflection.

No. No he is not.

Harry listens to the house and all is quiet on the Hebllich-Donan front. There's the one thumping noise. Schrodinger, aka 'dingBat, their cat, probably just leapt off of something.

The cat knows Harry's coming out and has jumped off the countertop, in all likelihood.

Harry opens his door. He stands in his doorway and coughs.

That is a bit of a performance. But there's no one but 'dingBat around anyway. Whether you see him or not, the cat is always out here somewhere.

"You can't fool me," Harry says. 'dingBat just stares back, nonplussed.

Harry hurries back into his room and grabs his repurposed dopp kit from under the bed. It contains: red notebook for notes, hotel notepad for sketches, two sharpened pencils, eraser, pencil sharpener, and his ID card for the LA County Natural History Museum.

In the kitchen he pauses just to heat the kettle for hot chocolate. This gives him a plausible excuse to be out of his room. Sometimes he forgets when he does this and it nearly steams away to an empty pot so today he remembers to fill it near the brim. He will be using natural gas energy to convert water into gasses for no reason but to use as a cover story, but then, what is the physical universe anyway but matter and energy?

Harry is only eleven: he doesn't pay the gas bill. This is one of his father's favorite sayings: do you pay the bills?

"I don't pay the bills!" Harry says to 'dingBat the cat.

He stands and waits just outside the door to his father's home office.

Their family room is brown stucco, with all his mom and dad's zillion books on mismatched shelves, stacked, piled, wherever they might fit, the array of wax-overrun candles in every shape

of glass bottle and his mother's bronzed menorah, out year round – there's a futon, the broken down red sofa and the giant spider plants. But still no parents.

Schrodinger has leapt into his cardboard box and bats at the limbs of one of plants. He tries to eat them periodically.

“Are we good?” he says to the cat.

Harry peers through the bamboo blinds and out the front window.

All still quiet.

His dad walked today – he left the rebuilt Volkswagen Beetle in the drive.

This, Harry thinks, is potentially dangerous. On the days when his dad walks, he can return home more silently. Still, it has been at least six and a half minutes now, and Harry knows his dad won't come back before lunch if he's gone to the trouble to walk to work.

Nevertheless, it has meaning: Harry will safely only have a half day today, but that's better than nothing.

He only has the days when his dad is in town, and when Harry skips school -- because his father always takes the good stuff away with him when he goes -- so that averages so far, over the year 1991, to something like 10.333_ days per month that Harry can even attempt to have his private peeks.

Harry's heart rate is definitely escalating. That's another one of his mother's words, right? Escalation. Maybe no, that's one of his dad's words. Escalation path. Paradigm shift. Ownership. Takeaways. His dad is working on building computer hardware for businesses and just really loves all the lingo.

“Go time,” Harry says.

He steps to the office door and checks it – he knows it’s going to be locked (he gives that a 97.5% likelihood) and yes it is locked. (One time it wasn’t and he thinks his dad must have just forgotten to, because he was panicked about it, afterwards, checking it over and over, like a paranoid.)

It’s a cheap door, small, particle board innards, unfinished, little gold handle lock, and Harry takes out his Natural History Museum ID card (Junior Scientist, how lame, but functional for this purpose) and works it in the slot, on the top of the tongue mechanism – sliding it between door and frame, door and frame -- until the lock flips.

He always waits a moment here, too. For good measure. Harry verifies Shrodinger’s not leaving his box – then he goes in and closes the door behind him.

Dad’s office interior: a definite, *palpable* heart rate escalation is underway in his chest.

There are cardboard boxes of computer hardware and the green folding table with the soldering kit – it’s ‘organized chaos’ (his mom’s way of describing his dad’s universe) – and there are porno magazines in here, too.

Some days (not today of course) these are enough -- but Harry’s always thought of them as intentional distraction. They’re too easy to find (top drawer, unlocked, under one folder of travel receipts) – likely there to throw people off the scent. Him or his dad’s partners, Harry’s not sure. He doubts his mom would be sidetracked that easily.

Even as an eleven-year-old boy (albeit intellectually five to six years older), Harry knows the pictures of the fake boobies and bubble butts of these naked ladies pretending to play tennis or bake cakes are not the high value target in this room. Rare contraband? Absolutely. But not the holy grail.

The real treasure is under the cabinet in the corner, where the bottom lifts out. This is where his dad's satchel of the really good stuff is.

Harry stops and takes his mental photographs: each part of the room, today, as is. So he can put it exactly back this way when he's done.

There's a paper on the floor. Where the rolling IKEA chair is. Where he's left the stepladder for the bookshelves. Harry memorizes it all, then extracts his red notebook, opens to the page in the rear he's using to keep notes (from the front are fake notes, his own deception in case caught), and takes out one sharpened pencil.

Through the office's thin interior wall he hears the kettle rocking on the burner. But it's not yet boiling.

He opens his father's cabinet, and inside, today, is a stack of motherboards. He takes a mental picture of their position: click.

Harry removes these carefully and, keeping them oriented in exactly the right way, puts them on the floor nearby. Now he can remove the bottom plank of the cabinet.

There, down in the hole, is his father's blue Holidaymaker bag.

Another little wallop goes to Harry's heart.

He extracts the bag.

Inside are the same things as usual, all those old, typed notes, a World War Two spy book covered in brown paper, a random book on Werner Heisenberg, the old glass tube, and the box of stones. There is that folder, filthy and stained, labeled in a very strange typeset and taped shut: 'VOLITION DIRECTIVE: HSD Operations TCFN 3.0.'

Harry's throat's tight – he definitely has a cold, but it is the excitement, too – he can feel his heart thumping. It's so exciting, he's close now. The last time he had this chance, he'd examined the dull red stone, and Harry consults his notes, pushing his glasses back up so the lenses are properly centered for his eyes, and yes: the red stone covers the 15th – 19th centuries, AD, and Harry had just reached the 1800s by his notes.

He reaches into his father's bag and extracts the wood box – it might have been made to hold pool table balls, which are much bigger than the little smooth gemstones sitting in each depression now – and he takes out the red one.

He sets the glass tube up, listens once more to the front of the house: right now he can hear someone's pickup truck with a junk muffler, idling at the stoplight, but no sounds like his father or mother returning home suddenly, unannounced.

And he's good to go.

He drops the stone down into the glass tube.

Once it reaches the bottom, the air of his father's office fills, in a hexagonal shape, with the walls of light. They're covered in pictures and text, like a living history book. Images and sound. Like a museum you can control.

The maitre'd appears next, like magic, created from the tube. He looks like the old man in the Hollywood musicals. He takes a bow, flips off his hat and tips his cane.

Harry laughs at this guy. It's relatively bright in here, but he still can see the dancer, almost like he's real. It's like this man has appeared, suddenly, beside him.

Harry even *feels* the wind from the man's movements, in his hair! He thinks he can even *smell* him.

“Just, amazing,” Harry says.

However his father or his buddies managed to create this thing, it’s just too incredible to believe. No one would believe it if they saw it. It’s like Nintendo but using real life images. Harry can lie awake just thinking what could be done with it. Whole movies playing right around you? Classrooms in your home? Harry can’t figure out why they haven’t released it yet, but when they do, it’s going to change everything. His dad – Morgan Donan -- is going to be a millionaire.

“I am Clarke, your guide to all humankind’s knowledge!” the illusory man says, as always.

“Hiya Clarke!” Harry says.

“Harold Heblich, good day my boy! Will you be resuming from where you left off?” Clarke says.

Harry hears the tea kettle rattling in the kitchen – it’s about to squeal so he holds up a hand first.

“Hold on one second Clarke! Be right back!”

Harry dashes out of the office, making sure to close the door on ‘dingBat the cat, and takes the hot kettle off the stove and turns it off.

Back in the office, Clarke is tapping his shoes and humming while he waits. He takes a peek at a pocket watch, leaning on a cane.

“Clarke,” Harry says. He carefully closes the office’s door and remembers to lower his voice. He has to remember that he yells when he gets excited.

“What’s it like for you?” Harry asks. “Are you just waiting around in there all the time?”

Clarke appears to be thinking about the question with a bemused expression before he answers.

“No sir! There is no illusion of time for me. It is always all the times, and always the best of times, with HSD’s En-Vision technology!”

“Huh,” Harry says. He laughs at this guy’s weirdness. He’s already made a note of ‘HSD En-Vision’ – not that he’s got any idea what this stands for. It’s present all over the place in these historical movie clips.

And it might just be his imagination, but Harry feels like each time he uses this contraption, Clarke talks more like him.

This programming is so deep it cannot be believed. Harry goes back to his notes -- he was last learning about Alfred Krupp – when this German family became the official cannon makers for Prussia.

“Okay, 1859. Prussia. That’s where we were!”

Clarke dances his shiny shoes backwards and twirls his cane and on one of the six walls of information, Harry sees smoke begin rising from a Krupp steelworks.

“Jesus Christ,” his father’s voice says.

Across the room, Harry sees his father, standing there, at the edge of the office, holding his keys in hand.

Harry’s stomach, legs, the rug, the entire floor – falls away. In a panic.

“Dad!” he says. Leaping up. “Oh my God, this is so cool!”

But his dad just stands there.

He is angry. He is going to be very, very pissed. Harry is in deep trouble.

“Uhm,” Harry says.

He’s got to say something, right? Harry’s got to try to explain, but his dad isn’t looking at him. Instead, with his keys still in his hand, he walks in and strikes his hand through Clarke, and then the walls, killing them all at once. He kneels and carefully tips the glass tube over. The red stone gently rolls out.

Being very very careful, his father picks up the red stone and returns it to the box.

He still doesn’t look at Harry, but like a cop on a TV bomb squad, he puts the tube and box back in the blue bag, wrapped in a towel, and returns them to the corner.

“Uhm,” Harry says again. “I know I’m not supposed to be in here...”

He knows he is in such big trouble. Why isn’t his father talking?

Harry’s left all his things out, too, and his notes prove he’s done *a lot* of browsing -- but he’s too panicked to make a move for that now. He just stands there.

“Dad, I’m... uhm...” Harry is saying.

His father goes quietly to the door, waits there for a moment, and then goes out of the office.

Oh thank God, Harry thinks. Is that it?

Super super weird.

While he’s got a second, Harry jumps over and grabs up his pencil and his notebook and stuffs them into the dopp kit and zips it up.

Suddenly his dad is back in the room.

He closes the office door behind him and he locks it.

“Harry, we need to have a talk,” his father says.

Harry stands there with his little kit. Why did his dad just lock the door?

His father is a big, strong man. He is very handsome. He has a chin like Batman and light green eyes and short red hair, with a little red-gold stubble on his face. He was never maybe as much of an outcast as Harry is at school, but he's smart, he's an engineer -- he's been both a nerd and a popular guy. Harry assumes he'll be like his father when he matures -- that he can be anyway -- he'll grow into his body like his father.

But right now his father is impossibly big, strong, and adult. And he's acting like someone else.

"The thing is, Harry, you know full well that you are not allowed to come in here," his dad says. "You have been completely devious. This is not some innocent mistake."

He is beyond pissed off. This is going to be bad.

"I know uhm... I know... but... you've made the neatest thing I've ever seen... I've never seen anything like that... and... I'm sorry that..."

All Harry's excitement starts running now, he's getting blubbery and he's going to cry, he thinks.

Suddenly, his dad leaps over and has hold of him.

"Don't you fucking cry," his father says. "Do you hear me? Your mother spoils you! If you can break in here and go through all my things, then you can take your medicine like a grownup, too. We are going to talk about this in a way you will understand. Do you understand me? This is serious, Harry."

"I'm... really sorry..."

His father cursed. He doesn't curse too often so this is very very bad.

His father's got hold of him by his shirt. He's got him and it's pinching his skin, too.

“Dad... that hurts...”

His dad gives him a shake, suddenly. Side to side. He’s towering over him.

“It does? Really?”

He looks at Harry like he hates him. Like a kid at school who resents everything about him.

“Dad I’m really sorry!”

“Sometimes that’s not good enough. When you are devious and old enough to know better.

You need listen to me, Harry. Because I’m going to say this just one time and you need to hear me. Are you listening?”

Harry nods.

His father is looking at him. There is still no pity there.

“Are you listening? Answer me.”

“Yes! Yes I am listening!”

“If you ever -- I mean, ever, for even one second – come into this room again without my express permission – without me standing in here, inviting you to please come in – I will...”

His father thinks about this and Harry tries to get his breath to not cry. But the more he tries, the more he’s crashing down into tears.

He’s shaking his head and chewing at his cheek to not cry.

“You will stop crying right now, do you hear me? You stop crying or I will tell your mother what sort of devious shit you’re up to in here. Do you hear me?”

Harry doesn’t talk, he just nods.

His dad is looking at him so weirdly. With the door locked.

Harry feels like he's got to urinate but he holds it. His stomach is sick but he tries to hold himself still and rigid.

"You know very well that have no right to go through my things. These are *my* things. What do you think you've seen here, anyway? Tell me what you think you've been playing around with. Forget everything else: you could have broken it, and it is irreplaceable. Do you understand that?"

Harry has never seen his father like this – calm and pale, with this weird expression, he looks almost completely evil. He's moody, yes. Harry knows when not to talk to him, when to stay in his room rather than come out, or linger in the bathroom until he's gone. His mother intervenes for him sometimes. But even then, at the worst, when his dad has that look like he wants to pick on someone, it's never like this.

Now it's like he hates his own son.

"I'm really sorry, Dad" Harry says. And he starts sobbing.

His father jerks him to the side, again, suddenly.

"You need to understand that whining and crying and acting like a baby is not an escape for what you've done. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I want you to tell me what you think you've seen in here."

"I... it's..."

"Do you think I like being this way? Having to discipline you like this? You knew very clearly not to come in here. The door is locked. The things were hidden. Have you searched this entire room? What made you do that? Did someone tell you to do that?"

“I said I’m sorry...! No, I just... I know...”

His father lets go of his shirt and stands and breathes. He goes over and peers through the blinds on the front window.

“Okay. Let’s be calm. Harry, tell me what you saw.”

His father comes back and very carefully, again like it’s got a baby in it, adjusts his blue bag under the floor and puts the panel back over it.

“I saw... uh, that encyclopedia,” Harry says.

“What kinds of things did you look at? In the encyclopedia?”

His father looks at the dopp kit that Harry’s holding in his hands. He must know there are notes in there, somehow.

“Uhm, 1800s... I looked at... uh, industrial Europe stuff...”

“Yes. Good. What color stones did you use?”

“Red,” Harry says.

He’s holding a record of what all he’s done so he knows he’d better be honest.

“Yellow and red sir,” Harry says.

“That’s all? Those are the only ones?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes! Only those two! I was going to do primary colors first.”

His father’s looking at him like he doesn’t believe him.

“I promise! Just those two stones!”

His father reaches for him again and Harry flinches.

His father's hand takes hold of his arm, firmly, but more gently this time, and his other hand touches Harry's forehead. His father's hand is so cold it jolts Harry.

"Christ, you do have a fever. You had better get back into bed."

"Okay!"

His father squats near him and talks very quietly.

"Harry. I need you to understand: if you ever tell anyone about this – about this device, or anything you saw, or this conversation – you will make an enemy of me. Do you understand? I mean you can't tell even your mother. I am going to achieve some things in this life, believe me. And you could, too. You're a bright kid. Things are not always going to be like this, in this shitty little house. Demonstrating out of the car. We can be a team – we can work together. Or we can be enemies. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"But... it's so cool..." Harry says.

His father stares at him with a little smirk. Like he's an idiot. Harry hates that look.

"I am sorry I lost my temper but I mean what I said. I need you to know that you've heard me."

"I understand."

"Good boy."

His father lets go and stands up. He does meditation and martial arts and yoga and he has that weird robotic tone he gets right now. Harry can even hear his dad taking long, forced breaths.

"What you saw – it is... we are working on it. It is the biggest secret of my life. Of our life. If you tell anyone, terrible things can happen. For you. For me, too. For your mom. Okay? I

am just protecting the business and the future. I am not being cruel for no reason. I hope you understand that.”

“Yes sir,” Harry says.

“You just saw a little projected encyclopedia, and that’s all. Like Britannica for TV. That’s all you saw. But you can never tell anyone. It is a secret. That’s how business works. If it gets out, the competition beats you to it, and you enter a whole new paradigm.”

“I won’t tell anyone. Ever.”

His father nods. He guides Harry over to the door, which he unlocks, and pushes him out, and he closes the door behind them and examines the lock.

Then he scoffs to himself.

“You picked the lock?”

Harry nods. His dad shakes his head.

“You’d better get back in bed. You’re burning up.”

Harry goes right back into his bedroom and climbs right into bed. He has to pee very badly but he doesn’t. He stays under the blanket and breathes. He hears his father’s footsteps moving heavily, slowly, around the house, and then they stop outside his door.

There’s a faint rapping, then the door opens.

“I want you to take these for your fever, Harry,” his dad says.

He’s got three nighttime Tylenol and a glass with some water and Harry gulps them down. His father looks around his room and he sees the doppel kit, where Harry left it on his chair, and his dad takes it with him as he leaves the room.

“The main thing you need is rest. I know it’s hard, as often as you get sick. But that’s the only way to get better. You need to go to school to advance in this life. Right? To get into UCLA you need to finish school first.”

His dad closes the door and Harry stays in the bed as long as he can.

His father is in the kitchen, it sounds like, probably going through his things.

Harry has to pee so badly he feels like he might accidentally piss himself, so finally he climbs out of bed but when he does it, he hears movement, in the kitchen maybe, and it is probably his dad -- so Harry looks around the room and finds the glass on his nightstand. He drinks the rest of the water in it and holds the glass down and tries to pee into that, as slowly as he can, so he doesn’t spray all over. Luckily it all fits in the glass.

When he’s done he puts it on the floor and climbs back into bed and shivers with relief under the quilt.

He tries very hard to just forget everything that’s happened.

3. 2019

Twenty-eight years later it's Tuesday, March 19th, 2019, and it's taking Harry Hebllich and his wife Deborah three hours and counting to navigate the eighty miles from Berkley to Sonoma County.

She angrily snaps off the radio and returns to her tirade against Facebook. Harold nods, maybe too soon, because he's trying to focus on the directions. He's drained his large Starbucks and had an espresso earlier this morning but he's still feeling languid. Morose. Is that the right word? Melancholy?

"These fucking people," Deborah says.

Now it's about these multi-million dollar ranches.

"I have a headache," Harry says.

"Did you take something?"

She throws this back right away. The clear subtext is: stop complaining.

Harold's aware that yes, he is incredibly irritable right now – he's not seen his father in over five years (research conference on machine learning in the Presidio, early 2014), and this invitation and the nature of it came from seemingly nothing.

There is an 87% chance, plus, that his father wants something from his eldest son. Something business-related.

"Yes, before we left," Harold says.

Am I really hoping for the other 13%, he thinks? No. No, because that's probably worse.

Then it would have to be someone's sick? Dying?

Well maybe that *would* be better, Harry thinks.

"You think that's funny?" Deborah says.

He realizes he's grinning.

"Is it not funny?" he says.

She shakes her head. "Look at these places. It's nauseating and it just gets worse. How much space does one family need? They have horses. And they pay people to take care of the horses because they're never there themselves. You know, to ride them...?"

"Here," Harold says.

He's never been up to this ranch, but according to the app they're arrived.

"We should have brought Marigold with us," she says.

"For a four hour drive each way?"

"It's eighty miles."

The sign is carved from wood and mounted in stones – like something from the Rockies. A giant gate parts in front of them.

The driveway runs down among the pines.

They drive a winding road, and the property is almost entirely wooded, but finally they pass the first of several structures -- a massive gatehouse. It looks like it could have been moved stone by stone from Aspen Colorado.

"Chalet style," Deborah says.

"What?"

“What that house is.”

They drive in further.

“You sure that wasn’t the main house?”

“That’s not their house.”

“How would you know?”

Harry takes his Starbucks cup and tilts it all the way up, against the roof of the car, but there’s nothing left.

“How much coffee have you had today, anyway?” she says.

“These people wear me out.”

They finally see the place as they come around the bend – two giant boulders flank the roadway before an enormous fortress, with numerous brick chimneys and a spectacular, gunmetal-blue roof. There are dozens of gables, windows and decks everywhere, old stones in the foundation. Floral landscaping intermixed with ancient trees.

“Not quite as gaudy as I expected,” Harold says.

Deborah laughs: “Are you kidding?”

“I mean, it’s kind of tasteful. Sort of – what, fairytale style?”

“Christ,” she says.

They pull around and slow down on the circle drive’s flagstones, as two men in dark suits bound towards them.

“Who are these, the SS?”

One of them gestures where to park and Harold does as instructed and turns off the engine.

The other man opens Deborah’s door.

“Thank you,” she says.

“Dr. Hebllich?” one of them says to him. The men are both built like linebackers.

“Yes.”

Harold gets out and surveys the grounds in case he has to make a quick escape: there are numerous other buildings dotting the woods, very tall hills in the middle, and some kind of big woodland pond or lake, ringed with old stones.

“Mr. Donan will see you in his study. Will you be staying the night?”

Harry laughs. “Nope.”

A German shepherd observes them from the elevated landscaping, near open French doors.

“He’s got his eyes on me,” Harold says.

“You sure you don’t want to stay over?” Deborah asks him.

He laughs. “Dr. Duncan here may be staying, but I am not. What about Marigold? We have a one-year-old at home,” he explains.

“She’s with my mother, she’ll be fine.”

A pretty young woman in a sweater, skirt and nylons comes down the path to greet them.

“Please follow Ingrid, Doctor,” one of the guards says. He amends himself: “Doctors.”

“Thanks.”

They follow the girl towards one of the side entrances.

“The Donans are thrilled that you have been able to visit today.”

Her rear sashets as she walks, side to side – it must be the length or cut of her black skirt that makes it snap like a hula, to and fro, as she talks over her shoulder at them.

Deborah takes hold of Harold’s arm.

“Is this your first trip to Bevelmere?” the girl – Ingrid -- asks.

“Excuse me, where?” Harry says. He looks at his wife with wide eyes.

“You sure you don’t want to stay over? I’m just saying,” Deborah says. “Why not enjoy this place? We could use some time away from the city to think, right? I have my grading with me.”

“Bevelmere Ranch,” Ingrid says. She’s blonde and by accent probably Scandinavian. Her face is dominated by giant, slow moving blue eyes.

“Yes. It is our first visit,” Deborah says.

“Ah, excellent. You will know that this home’s energy is almost entirely green and sustainable, powered largely by solar, with the home’s hot water system also being used to heat the various structures!”

She gestures to something – across from a second pool camouflaged as a lake – as she leads them up a sundeck to a wall of high glass doors.

“All the landscaping is native to California, and be cautioned that it is also a working ranch: on the far side of the property you will find longhorn steer and horses. Please exercise caution if you hike much past the yoga/dance studio...”

Ingrid stops and leans close to him. “That is the structure on the hilltop.”

She winks, conspiratorially.

“I doubt we’re going to be doing any hiking,” Harold says. “But if so, we’ll look out for the steer.”

Deborah thanks her and follows her inside.

Sabrina ‘Sabie’ Teffren, the stepmother, waits here, leaning on one leg, arms folded, with an expression of strained patience. She is maybe fifty by now, but still looks like a working model.

She surveys the two of them, Harold thinks, critically, before smiling and stepping up and giving them each two French cheek kisses with leaned, patted hugs.

Her body, somehow, still looks perfect. Marketing, no doubt – what she’s showing and how. She stands as tall as Harold in her wedges.

“Doctor Heblich,” she says to her stepson. “And Doctor Duncan.”

“Deborah, please,” Harry’s wife says.

It sounds like genuine warmth. Deborah surprises him, moreover, by launching into a jovial description of the traffic they had getting out of the Oakland area, and just how charming this area is.

“Isn’t it dreadful these days?” Sabie says. “Have you been up recently? Can I give you the tour? Harold, your father asked to see you right away. He is in his office...”

It’s all so casual – as if they were here just last week.

“I’ve no idea where that is,” Harold says.

She smiles and points across a sunken parlor, abutting a glassed-in spa. There are two opened doors on the far side.

93.5% this invitation is work related, Harold thinks. The old man is waiting in his office. He’s not even going to come out and pretend it’s a fond family reunion.

“Don’t get lost,” Harold says to Deborah, who smirks back.

His wife knows him, she can see his irritation, and she reaches out and tries to catch and squeeze his arm or hand as they part ways.

Harold crosses down the steps and back up in his walk across the open space, approaching the office alone. He knocks on one of the open doors.

Inside, there's a giant picture window facing the woods, two televisions on, muted, rolling stock numbers and news, and there he sits, behind his gigantic desk, in silk shirt and chinos. The father.

"You look good," Harry says.

His dad is now in his early seventies, still fit, maybe even more muscular in a streamlined way, though his red hair is cropped tight and has gone white around the ears. He wears glasses with thick, white frames. He looks like a celebrity.

"Harry. Great to see you."

His father gets up and approaches and then they stand across from each other.

He offers a hand. They do a shake-and-lean-hug.

"Did you bring Darcey?"

"Deborah. Sabie's giving her the tour of the Bevelmore Castle."

His father's green eyes are graying, too, it looks like. But he processes this quickly enough and smirks.

"Bevelmere. We didn't name it."

Harold realizes he's inherited his dad's tendency to move his eyes while he thinks. In Harold's case, maybe it's an affectation. He's copied that like God knows what else.

"How's the research coming?" his father says.

The old man's attention has gone back to a giant monitor on his desk.

"Solidly, I'd say," Harold says.

This is about quantum computing, he decides. Harold's area of research. Of course. What else would it be?

“You have me here to discuss quantum supremacy?” Harold asks.

Might as well cut to it. Maybe he’s hoping to get some free contracting out of his academic son.

“No. Well, not exactly.”

“Did you get the pics I sent?” Harry asks him. It’s been a week since he emailed them, and of course there’s been no response.

“Pics?”

“Your granddaughter. Marigold Hebllich. She turns two in a couple months.”

“Did you bring her? The baby?”

“Nope.”

His father looks back at him, as if surprised. Startled, maybe. It is the first time Harold’s seen him actually look old. Maybe there’s just something more interesting on the TV.

“How are you?” Harold asks him.

“Hmm?”

“How are you? How’s life?”

Harold looks around and finds a craftsman style chair by the door and he goes and sits in it. It’s so rigid, so upright, he feels like he is about to be interrogated.

“How’s life? Life... it *is*, right?” his father says. “Until it isn’t.”

Hah. That’s rich. Still, Harold’s adjusting on the fly: maybe it’s more like 79% he’s here for some business use. He’s increasingly suspecting health or some other calamity could be at play.

“You got a new dog?” Harold says.

“So, Harry.”

Ah, at last.

“Yes. Morgan.”

He loves the reaction he gets when he calls his father by his given name.

“I...”

Before going any further, his father’s eyes search outside the office doors and he pauses.

“Good,” he says. “Here he is.”

The eldest of his father’s three kids with Sabie, Callum Donan, steps up and lingers at the doorway.

“You remember Cal?”

Yep, Harold sure does. Callum’s wearing a jacket over a too-small black t shirt with pricey jeans.

“How are you, Cal?” Harold asks. “How’s life?”

“Harold, so awesome to see you man!” Callum says.

Harold reluctantly stands as his half-brother comes in for the full body hug. Cal’s hair’s a little too long, curling in the back, swept back, and he’s unshaved, smirking with his big green eyes. He’s short and utterly fit. He never stops grinning.

“I think,” Morgan says. He pauses and picks up his desk phone, which didn’t ring, and listens into it. “Harry, I’m going to let Callum take the lead on this. Okay?”

Harold grins. “The lead on what? You kicking me out?”

“He’s got a call to be on with Beijing in a bit,” Cal says, stepping back out of the office.

“Ah, sure,” Harold says.

He follows Cal, turning his gaze away from the old man who doesn't bother to look back anyway. Callum leads them on outside the house, along a flag walkway and down to a pond.

It is perfectly blue in the sky, above the trees, and sunny.

"So how are you man?" Cal asks.

"Great. How old are you now, twenty-five?" Harold asks.

Callum gestures to a table under a cabana, enclosed in trees.

"Twenty-four. Back in January." His smile's huge. "You want something to drink?"

Harold is going to say no but he's feeling so tired suddenly, smothered, weighted down as by an increased run of gravity. "I'd take black coffee," he says.

"Sure! Sure."

Callum picks up a phone in the cabana and orders a coffee and an Arnold Palmer.

"You hungry?"

"Why am I here?"

98.9% Harold knows now, this is about business. Callum Donan has been brought in at SEA, his father's tech monstrosity, and is probably working in a quantum division or something of that kind. Maybe they have some things they want Harold to run for them, at the labs. There is almost no doubt now – just barely more than 1% -- that this will be couched as some kind of 'mutually beneficial' opportunity.

And? Is he interested?

"I am not interested in contracting," Harold goes ahead and says. "Really really busy with research."

He has next to no free time anyway. His project is enjoying a fantastic stretch run.

Callum watches him with those green eyes, still smiling and smiling.

“Let’s just wait one sec, till Ingrid goes.”

The blonde Swede (or Norwegian or Dane) brings out their drinks and Harold watches her closely – her eyes as they move around Callum and him – because for some reason he’s certain these two are fucking. Maybe they’re not. Harold’s mind considers all this, and why he would care either way, as she leaves the drinks and there are some polite things said and she click clacks away in her black shoes and her swishy short skirt.

Callum and Harold both watch her go.

There, Harold thinks. She gives Cal a last, over-the-shoulder look. He seems to pick it up. Then looks away too quickly.

“You’re wondering why you’re here.”

“I know why I’m here.”

Callum’s eyebrows shoot up. “You do?”

“You want something.”

Now comes his half-brother’s big, open, self-deprecating smile. Callum even nods. “I bet you get that a lot!”

“Always, from my – our – father.”

“Ah, well. Harold, you’re a genius. Obviously, you don’t need me telling you that.”

This kid has got to improve his salesmanship.

“You can, if you like.”

Harold has the coffee and it’s very good, of course. Someone just ground some Ethiopian beans for him – it’s probably a pourover.

“You’re the family genius. I know it, my sister knows it, our dad knows it...” Callum says.

Harold notes that he didn’t include Sabie, the stepmother.

He digs out his phone and checks it. It’s been a while. He has emails, but they’re all junk.

Nothing from the lab but he wishes there was something. He could manufacture something. But they drove all this fucking way.

Callum continues and picks up the pace: “I want to work with you. I’m sure that’s no surprise to you, you’re the one with so much to offer. The goods. What do I have? Financial support, yes, of course. I do have that.”

“Of course.”

“But more than that – I have something that I think you’re going to want to be a part of. I know you’re going to want to be a part of. It might sound strange, but I know you *will* be a part of!”

Callum takes one, parched gulp from his Arnold Palmer then moves the glass to the side, discarded. He’s sitting forward, animated like a speed freak. Harold’s waiting for him to slap him on the knee. 58% chance, he thinks, he slaps me on the knee in the next few minutes.

“There are things I have access to, now that I’ve come into the fold, so to speak, at SEA. Of certain divisions.”

“Say, for example, the quantum computing division?” Harold says.

Callum shakes his head and laughs. “Damn, you are distrustful. I get it, bro, I do – you probably got all of Silicon Valley hitting you up, given how well it’s going. Hell, you’re being bankrolled by half of it, am I right?”

Suddenly he swats Harold’s knee.

Harold drinks his coffee and it's already getting cold. He didn't even want another coffee.

"Sadly, I think I need to be getting back. My partner is having some difficulties," Harold lies, standing up. He doesn't have to bother to make up some bullshit, who cares anyway.

"What would you say if I told you that I know, with 100% certainty, that you will win the Nobel Prize?" Callum says. He suddenly leaps up, too.

Harold laughs. This little son of a bitch.

"Well, that's very kind, but..."

"In 2021. You've already done the work for it, so maybe it's not a huge surprise. You and your partner at Berkley."

Harold drinks the rest of the coffee out of habit and turns and looks down into the pond. The water is completely clear there, too. Unlike any real pond he's ever seen.

"I know you will. Do you want to know how?" Callum continues.

"If you've got it rigged, Cal, no – don't tell me. I don't believe that's possible, and anyway, I..."

"My division at SEA: the focus is on time travel."

Harold is staring in the pond and suddenly his mind goes empty.

What did he just say?

He turns and looks at this little goofball, his brilliant white teeth, his white jacket, standing there, pushing his sleeves up. Energy bursting out of him.

"Ex-squeeze me?" Harold says.

"My division. I'm focused on time travel."

"Sure you are. Well, I'm very happy for you," Harold says.

He turns and begins to walk out now – there are four paths that cross here, so he takes the one where the blonde whatever-she-is walked most recently.

Callum, of course, is following right behind him.

“Harold, we should really just discuss this out at the cabana, where it’s safe...”

“Safe from? Little Green Men, listening in? The...”

Harold stops and leans towards his half-brother. He lowers his voice to a whisper:

“The CIA mind control division? The gnomes from Zurich?”

“Safe from everyone. I get that this sounds totally insane to you. I get that! It sounded totally insane to me, too! Not very long ago in fact. I laughed when I got this dropped on me. I laughed and laughed, and then I got pissed off, if I’m being totally honest...”

“Back when you were a kid? When you were 18? Come on, Cal. Really? Are you honestly talking to me about time travel? Are you really serious or is this all a joke?”

A joke, yes. That would normally be the most likely explanation except that Callum is so sincerely optimistic in his salesmanship Harold doubts he’s even got that layer of humor to him. Fart jokes are probably more his deal.

“What if I told you,” Callum says, dropping his own voice very low.

He puts his hand on Harold’s arm.

“You’re holding my arm,” Harold says.

“What if I told you I KNOW, with complete certainty, that people have traveled in time. Before. Other people. That time travel has already happened. That we have actual, concrete proof of it. Isn’t that one thing Stephen Hawking used to argue as proof that it’s not possible? Well, it is possible. We know, because we know it’s happened already!”

Harold knows his father acquired a number of companies out of bankruptcy and some were from fringe sectors – including a German tea company, Sauber Industrial, that made drugs and used slave labor in World War Two. He knows his father also funded a sudden, directed effort at astronomy, and, in particular, that he believes there's some kind of mysterious astral body in the Milky Way that's never been properly classified before. Maybe they've all lost their minds. Everyone here, in their fairytale ranch, drinking Kool Aid laced with local mushrooms.

“What sort of proof?” Harold asks.

He's just stalling as he texts Deborah that it's time to go.

“We have records. Specific accounts. They include details of events, with locations and dates, that have happened exactly as predicted.”

“Ah! Interesting. Well, Cal, it's been good to see you.”

“Harold, we know – I know – that you and your partner will win the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2021. I am absolutely positive.”

“Hmm. Nice!”

Harold nods and extricates his arm from Callum's grip.

Deborah's text buzzes back: *What? Right now?*

I am driving out of this driveway, Harold texts, *in 5 minutes*

She had to anticipate this. It is heavily discussed between them that he believes his father is substantively insane, and probably always has been.

“You're going now?” Callum says.

“I am going. Can I get around front to my car this way? I don't want to get lost and wander into the steer, by mistake.”

“That’s way out on the back side of the property,” Cal says. “Past the hills.”

“Oh, good. Cal!”

Harold opens his arms and gives the little prick a bear hug.

“Harold, I thought you might react like this,” Cal says.

“Sure you did. Because you know the future!”

This takes a full second, but Callum breaks into a chuckle and nods. “Right. No, because you know, time travel is just a pseudoscience to you...”

“...and to everyone else, too!” Harold says.

He begins walking now on the path that he’s 80% sure leads around the front of the house to his car. Callum follows him, still yapping away.

“We know that people have traveled. We know it. I was made a believer by what I’ve seen. And I think you could be, too. I think you will be.”

There is the car – their filthy red Accord. It looks impossibly shabby sitting on the drive in front of this mansion, but Harold is still genuinely ecstatic to see it.

He stops now, because he has to wait for Deborah.

“So Cal, what is it you need me for?”

“We need a logic you haven’t developed yet, but that you will.”

“A logic?”

“We use it. To calculate things we need to know about the Anomaly.”

Ah yes, so this does relate to his father’s sidebar space crap.

Where the f r u? he texts to Deborah.

“Callum, let me ask you this.”

“Okay, great. Shoot.”

Christ! Coming! Deborah replies.

Callum is standing right there so he can probably read the texts but of course Harold doesn't give a shit.

“If you know the future.”

“Well, we just know a handful of things that were passed down, specifically, and...” Callum drops his voice here. “...with great care, to us, to me, really...”

“Then why do you feel the need to do all of this? I mean, you know it happens, yes?”

“The need to do what? I love this, by the way!” Callum says, grinning like an idiot.

“Love what?”

“This discourse! Speculation. Us, like this!”

There is no ‘us,’ Harold thinks, but he doesn't say it. Someday Callum will run the SEA empire with all its patents and Harold will probably have no choice but to come to him for something.

“Why do you need to try to convince me of anything? You know what's going to happen. Presumably it will happen no matter what you do.”

Deborah is finally coming, in a hot stride, her face flushed and furious.

“Dear!” Harold says.

She just shakes her head. Harold unlocks the doors and goes and stands at the driver's side as she climbs in the far side.

“Sorry about this!” Deborah says to Callum, but he barely gives her an acknowledging wave. He's too busy following Harold right along, as if he might climb in their car, too.

“Knowing doesn’t take the place of anything,” Cal says.

“So you believe time can change. You don’t subscribe to the Block Universe concept – time is like space, it’s fixed. This interests me, given that you’ve seen things predicted actually coming true you say? Have any *not* come true?”

Callum looks so thrilled – he believes he finally has Harold, like a fish – on his line.

“I believe – I know,” Callum says, still talking in his ridiculous whisper, with no one around visibly but Deborah, down in the passenger seat, oblivious to their discourse. “That we have to be proactive. Still. We have to work to achieve our destiny. So it is possible that things do not follow a set course.”

Harold nods. “Ah. Okay. So: if we could change things, then time travel would be absolutely, impossibly dangerous. It would be utterly irresponsible. Therefore, I politely, but firmly, decline your invitation and wish you the most luck!”

Harold sticks out his hand. Bemused, Callum stares at it, but then takes it for a shake.

“And thanks for the coffee. Tell Dad I’ll see him sometime in the next five years.”

Callum is going to respond to this, but maybe he’s not sure how, because he just laughs, and gestures, shaking a finger at his zany half-brother, who gets into the driver’s seat, closes the door, and drives away as fast as he can.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Deborah says. “Jesus Christ why did we drive all this way? For that?”

“I think my father has finally, completely, lost his mind.”