Bunker 17

Day 468

Latest is, the moths are jabbering. Not all species, not everywhere, but once it starts it's just a matter of time. As usual it's a Landmass thing, though Southern's reporting unprofiled jabber, theory was, termites. Obviously things are different there, with the size of some of their creepies. Yet it starts among the little ones, as ever.

Trowbash has sent some new cannisters, we haven't tried it yet. It's difficult to be sure of the secrecy, and, if it works, we'd have to follow up fast. We don't know if there's more than just the samples they've sent. Sealed lab was compromised when flies hatched in that bottle. That was a stupid mistake, if it'd have been anybody but Portman himself he'd have flipped. We have to regard it as ineffective, the lab, for a time.

Firefence is holding, though we're on orange till we get more carfine stuff. Yates will be back today or tomorrow with that. My suit's ready to go the minute she arrives, to feed the fire. I relieve Kisugi after this break, another three hours of radio jabber. After a while you think you can tell what they're saying, I've experienced it myself, it's weird. Apparently it's a form of fatigue, an hallucination. Though some people think it's real, that listening till you're drowsy acclimatises you, there's a unit working on it. But Portman goes with fatigue.

Day 469

Southern think it is moths, their new jabber, after all, even though it doesn't profile identical with Landmass. I got some of it on my monitoring stint, low pitched drone, fits exactly. Several miles outside firefence, in the direction of the depot. Kisugi's log showed some too, moving then ceasing, presumably the same bunch.

Yates isn't back. End of today we worry, if she's still not back. I've already started, unofficially. I know what Portman will say, he always does. Wasn't cut out for it, should never have been assigned here, why am I given such people, he says. She's not the best courier but she's good. What he doesn't realise is you can't be as good at everything. She is our best disencrypter. That's why she shouldn't have been sent, we shouldn't be risking people like that. But everybody has to do several jobs.

In Snowzone she was tipped for unit chief, but told me she didn't want it. Whether it was offered I don't know, she's in a lower rank here. I never worked out what they've got against her. Portman certainly doesn't like her, though he doesn't much like anybody. He was there too, in Snowzone, but not with us. Word was his unit recommended him for promotion to get rid of him. I have to

soundproof the lab now, they're recommissioning it to try another antijabber.

Day 470

Yates isn't back. End of yesterday was the worry deadline, end of today is her lifesupport deadline. Unless she's used the depot's, which we can't know. She does have a radio, but of course if we call her she's dead. If she called us it'd either be from the depot, which she should have left days ago, or to tell us something with her last breath. She'd do that, she's that sort.

I need to concentrate on my soundproofing, worrying about something else is the way to miss a chink. Two-thirds finished, so one more stint. They've already brought the captures in their lead boxes, and the jam, they'll do the experiment as soon as I'm finished. They could have got Murelli to work with me, or start the other way and meet me, we'd have done it in half the time. That's Portman for you, there's no use suggesting it.

New mapping from Visual, creepies hold Landmass, entire. Main fighting is with rodents, there's tremendous jabber coming out. Offshore believe some of theirs can hear it, whether they can make out what it's saying's another matter. Like here, theirs is a kind of tense standoff. Sea-firefence is holding, so far. I don't know if their moths are jabbering yet.

Day 471

Experiment failed. They don't say failed of course, boffins don't use the word, anyway Portman would have them shot. It was a useful opportunity to assess levels of jamming necessary to brainwhisk them, and observe their responses, is what they say. They jabbered to one another about it, that's how brainwhisked they were, and the third one tried to send a report. But the lab was well soundproofed.

Just did my stint, monitoring. We're sure something about the experiment went out. Some of the telltale distant responses kept jabbering out of the background. Obviously this was after they went back to the cooler, implying they can make themselves heard through the fridge walls.

Yates is listed as lost now, a day on from her lifesupport deadline. Portman's wondering who to send next. In spite of his low opinion of her, he hadn't planned for her not returning. He hasn't said anything bad about her, yet, I suppose he realises most of us liked her. I don't mean he's sensitive, he just can't afford a mutiny. Best person to send apart from Kawashima would be me. I'm not volunteering, Kawashima's the most skilled outdoor operative here, he ought to have gone anyway.

Day 472

I'm being sent for the carfine stuff. Portman says, think of it as rescuing Yates. Cunning bastard. She might be holed up in the depot, she might be alive, he says. She just might. He's not bothered about Yates, he's worried I'll refuse. I'm entitled to refuse risk assignments not requiring technical skill, it's a seniority perk. I wouldn't refuse, but I don't get why he won't send Kawashima.

Wasn't excused my monitoring stint. Jabber fairly still this evening, you assume they're backing off, losing heart. But Visual say numbers are the same, they've been stable for weeks now. Some thinning by spreading, but that barely affects the jabber. Other units report similar lulls. Whether something's brewing we don't know.

Southern say their moths have reached profile. They speak of it as a learning process. Once they can jabber, they practice till they're all speaking exactly the same language, sort of thing. There've been a few more skirmishes with Southern creepies, mainly roaches. No one knows why it's a story of isolated hostility there, instead of wholesale swarming like Landmass.

Day 473

I'm at halfway point. Got through firefence and just walked across them with my smoke, very quietly. You can hear their anger. I monitored it when Yates went out, couldn't tell if she was hearing it on the ground. Near enough shakes the ground. Brave girl. Ten minutes, that's about quarter of a mile, the groundcover you have to wade through. After that there's nothing, not a single creepy, not a sound. I'm resting the night, though I doubt if I can sleep.

There are ants here. One of the great mysteries, why the ants haven't joined the jabber. When it started, expectation was that ants were behind it, it was a long time before the boffins convinced themselves ants weren't jabbering. Or directing the jabber. Everybody knows if any blighter's going to organise something like this it's going to be ants. But they seem to be minding their own business.

Portman's brainwashing's worked. Thinking of Yates, the possibility that she's alive, that I could rescue her, dominates my thoughts. Though there are seven thousand people in the bunker whose survival may well depend on me bringing back the carfine. As I was writing I thought I heard jabber, but when I pause everywhere's silent. I'm conscious the moths we monitored were this way. Probably just a stray cranefly.

Day 474

Yates is at the depot. She's on the floor, her dead body. But nothing's been at her, she's not got a mark on her. I half expected to find her colonised, or covered with moths, but I've been over her entire body, there isn't a mark. She's some way from her suit. The cans of carfine are here, she's found them and put them ready. Best explanation I can

think of, she unsuited once she was safe in the depot, noticed nothing odd or there'd have been time to get back in it, and died as a result of something imperceptible, something missing from or added to the lifesupport.

I've laid her in a more comfortable position on a bunk. Stupid I know, a corpse is a corpse. I wasn't going to, but after a while I couldn't stand her lying there so awkward. She wasn't asfixiated, I mean there's nothing about her face to say breathing trauma. It's as though she just slumped down and died. All I can think is, some undetectable poison in the mix. I don't know if that's something creepies are capable of.

I've stayed in my suit. I'm stopping the night, but I'm not unsuiting, I can't risk unsuiting. My basic operational assumption has to be, what she did I mustn't do, because she ended up dead. So whether it's a poison in the airmix or something else, I stay in my suit. I badly need sleep, but with Yates lying there I doubt if I will.

Day 475

I did sleep eventually, a little. When I woke up and remembered about Yates I got emotional, it hit me. I liked her. We've been shipmates at several postings, with gaps between. You always catch up with me in the end, she joked, when we found ourselves at 17 together. Coincidence, that time anyway. And here we are again my girl. You always catch up with me in the end.

People thought we were old lovers. There was bit of a spark, I'm certain there was. I really liked her. If I'd set out sooner she might've been alive, or if I hadn't overnighted at halfway. I'm no medic, I can't tell how long she's been dead, she's in perfect condition. Of course she'll decay slowly in a sanitised environment with no livestock.

I had to get up and examine her again. Came into my head that I was mistaken, she was merely catatonic. That could be induced by certain gases, or a tiny bite. I can't risk taking off my suit though, so that means I can't feel her body temperature. Yes, she seems totally dead, no vital signs whatever. But no decay, no stiffening. There's no thermometer in the first aid box. I can't tell if she's actually cold unless I take my suit off.

Day 476

Lost a deal of time at the depot. Not being able to give my lifesupport a rest I'm on the strictest deadline, the one I set out with. Yates wasn't wrong to take her suit off, it's correct procedure, utilise the depot's lifesupport and conserve your suit's. I haven't done that.

I faffed around, crying about Yates, double checking she was dead. Going over her body for creepy marks. I sat with her feeling sorry for myself, and dozed off again. I'm half a day behind. Whether my suit had the extra day's deadline in it I don't know, I stupidly didn't check before I set out. The suit was ready, I was waiting to feed firefence. Though for that you need hours not days. I didn't think, I just assumed

it was OK. But if it conks out ten minutes before I get back, I'm eight minutes dead.

I'm taking a short break, recording this, it keeps my brain alert. The cans are heavy, I have to take a break. But I'll go straight past halfway, I can't risk staying the night. Apart from a few ants I've seen nothing, and heard less. Except, I was surprised to see a pair of birds. There was talk about revival, wishful thinking I thought. Breeding programmes were started, of course, but it seemed hopeless, that they'd impact in time to help us I mean. Haven't been birds here for generations.

Day 477

Fifteen minutes from the unit. Plus five I'm going to sit here resting, I absolutely can't wade into them without taking a last break. The cans are heavy, I walked all night, except for ten minutes at halfway. At least it was cool. I've walked too fast though, worrying how short of time I was. I should know better, I've tired myself out, I'm breathing heavier. Yates was fitter than me, I'd forgotten how she works out, her body was tremendously wiry.

I'll be OK in a few minutes. There's nothing I can do about my suit, it's either got the deadline in it or it hasn't, I shan't know till it conks. I'm pretty sure I'll make it, I'm not all that late in fact. But I wish I'd not stayed so long with Yates. Foolish to give yourself an extra thing to be stressed about, getting through creepies and firefence is enough.

Ants are everywhere, I didn't spot them on the way out, not till halfway. They're not bothering me, they're going about their business. I can see the ring of fire and smoke, and the seething black carpet. There've been a few craneflies, faintly jabbering, patrolling the edges I suppose. Right. Smoke ready for the walkthrough, and an old Trowbash cannister for last resort. Another couple of birds just flew over, or the same couple. Right, let's go then. Ten or fifteen minutes is all I need from you, old crumply.

o()o

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The Burp of Doom

Have you been counting?

Pardon me, I said.

Have you been counting your burps?

Oh dear, have I done a lot?

No I mean, since you were born.

That'll be quite a lot.

Let me see how many you were allocated.

Allocated?

At birth, you're all allocated a certain number of burps – he was saying it just to fill the gap as he rifled through his folder – a finite number allowed, before you – ah, here we are ... Mmm.

Mmm what?

Yours wasn't a very large allocation, comparatively. And if you haven't been counting ...

It's an amusing idea, I said, but you couldn't really carry it through. I mean, babies couldn't count them; so you'd have to postulate some point at which people start.

Oh your mother should count them for you till you're six. Then pass the total to you.

You wouldn't remember, even if she did.

Yes that's the biggest problem, we find. Mothers sometimes know they must count; but even then, you forget.

And lose count.

He laughed. Unfortunately humanity's plagued with amnesia. Most mothers aren't even aware they should be counting burps at all; pretty soon, the entire population has forgotten.

But you have records there?

Only of the original allocations. There's an averaging process we do, since so many people forget to count. I'm afraid your allocation was rather small.

So I'll run out of burps will I? Have to get bloated and put up with it.

What? He seemed not to understand me.

I'll soon not be able to burp anymore, you're saying.

Oh no, he said, frowning sympathetically, I'm afraid you've misunderstood. It determines your time here.

Time?

After your allocation of burps runs out, you die.

I laughed, but he kept quite a serious expression.

I can do an averaging on you if you like. How old are you?

Thirty-seven.

And would you say you're a frequent burper, normal, or burp very seldom?

Normal I suppose.

Ninety-one point seven per cent of people say that, funnily enough. It means the averaging process is well tried and accurate for normal, but less reliable for the other categories. So I can give you a plus-or-minus eleven.

Eleven?

That's what we call the margin of error for normal. It's hundreds for frequent. He was scribbling some calculations as he spoke.

Eleven burps.

It's just the margin, don't ... I was going to say don't worry about it. But of course, if your averaging result is very close, it's a slightly different matter.

Very close to what?

Zero.

I raised my eyebrows and gave him a quizzing expression.

Let me just run through it again and check, my arithmetic's always a bit suspect.

You're going to tell me I've run out of burps.

He was silent some moments while he checked his figures, and seemed to re-do one of the calculations.

Mmm, no, it's right, he said ... I'm not here to taunt you or anything, the figure I've come up with is minus eight, not to beat around the bush. Both times, look. He flashed the calculations before me, but they'd have meant nothing to me even if I'd had my reading glasses on.

Minus eight?

He nodded, and closed his folder. It's just an average you understand, averages are averages, individual cases factored into them can vary wildly, both ways.

Minus eight, plus or minus eleven.

Even the margin of error, it's a check on the accuracy of the calculated average, a sort of hedge on perfection, it means nothing in individual cases really.

So I've burped eight burps more than I was allocated at birth, and should have died eight burps ago.

I'm not here as a prophet of doom or anything. It's not hard and fast.

You said ninety per cent or something came within the normal category and that made your average for that category very accurate.

Well you might have misjudged yourself and be in the seldom category.

You said the plus-or-minus eleven was very low.

We're dealing with tens of thousands. It's statistically an amazingly small margin.

Meaning your calculations are amazingly accurate.

On average ... But the average may contain someone who apparently passed away thousands of burps short of their allocation; which means another chap could apparently survive thousands over, by the averaging figures. Such small figures as eight and eleven have no precise meaning really.

Oh I see, you mean death may in fact occur below the allocation or way past it?

Oh no, I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. We're talking about people who haven't counted. The averaging process merely replaces their count. The allocation's not affected, that's hard and fast I'm afraid. The allocation is absolute.

Absolute?

You die after you've burped the allocated number of times. But everyone's allocation differs, and, well, if you haven't counted you only have the average to go by.

And my allocation was quite low.

I'm afraid it was, yes.

So even by the full margin of error I only have three burps left before I die.

I just shouldn't worry about it if I was you, he said. I only mentioned it in passing. Why don't we get back to the real reason for my visit, and finish filling in the fart form?

o()o

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World End Week

The world is due to end on Saturday.

All the radio stations are playing What a swell party this is. I like Debbie Harry's version.

Monday was a complete bore. I started off doing housework, but kept sitting down and saying what the hell. Then after I'd sat till I was bored I'd say what the hell, and do housework.

Phone rang a couple of times, but it wasn't anybody.

Went to visit the folks on Tuesday. That was fun. They were watching the religious channel, hardly took their eyes off it. I didn't stay as long as I'd planned, I invented some excuse about expecting a call from Zenda.

OK sugar, see you again, dad said, not taking his eyes off the ranting reverend.

Several phone messages, all spam.

Michelle shopped all day Wednesday. What's the point, I said.

Well Saturday's out isn't it, she said. Anyway, never need to pay the cards.

I phoned Bevan. *She* answered, his 'personal assistant'. Still got your PA then, I said, when she put him on.

You rang to slag us off then did you, he said, one last time.

I said, I rang cause the world ending makes you think of the people in life you really love, big mistake, stupid of me. I hung up. Obviously it rang back after a few seconds. I unplugged it ...

I wish I'd asked him where Zenda is.

I watched Oklahoma. It's not my favourite, but I don't have South Pacific. I washed my hair. I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair, I sang to myself. I lay on my bed and cried.

Thursday *I* went shopping. I bought a disc of South Pacific, but I haven't watched it. And a very pretty summery dress that buttons up the front. That's all. Paid cash.

Michelle made me a pie, an apple pie. We stuffed ourselves with apple pie and custard. I said I phoned Bev and we instantly bickered.

She told me I was well rid of him. Men, who needs em, she said. Then she looked at her watch and said she'd have to dash, Craig was finishing work early that day.

Why's he still going, I said.

You don't think advertising stops just cause the world ends Saturday.

I hope you've got some apple pie for him, I said. She smiled.

Phone didn't ring at all today.

So, Friday already. Usual night out with the girls was off. We had a good time last week though, good memories.

It was a sunny day. I combed my hair and put my new dress on and went for a walk. When I got back I felt no different. There were no phone messages. I thought Zenda might ring, today of all days.

I finished the apple pie – let's call it lunch, I told myself – then I went for a drive. Stopped near some rocks where there was a path to the beach. The sign said No Parking.

Took my shoes off and walked on the beach. I felt my legs were beautiful, and my hair was beautiful. I knew my dress was beautiful. I had nothing on underneath it.

I thought of just walking straight into the waves, it seemed so easy. I let the ocean kiss my feet. The water was very cold.

I lay on the sand ...

A beautiful naked man crouched over me, carefully unbuttoned my dress, ran his hands over my breasts and my belly, parted my legs, nuzzled his penis between them, lowered his golden chest on to my pale chest and gently fucked me, caressing my hair with one hand, kissing my forehead occasionally.

I just let him. I was entirely relaxed and passive. I just lay there and let him.

Something stroking my legs woke me. It was the tide. I got up and went back to the car, my dress in my hand.

I drove back naked. I thought, that's what Michelle would do. She'd say, never need to pay the fine. I didn't get stopped.

I picked up a take-away on the way. I put my dress on, obviously, I'm not that brave. Anyway, it had gone a little chilly.

There weren't any phone messages. Perhaps advertising's stopped after all.

I went to bed trying to think of my naked golden man, but I kept thinking of Zenda. Wondering where she is. Wondering if she'll forgive me for – how did she put it ...

What sort of mother are you if you don't want to live with us any more.

Fourteen's a difficult age to be abandoned. I know she didn't mean it, I know she didn't mean it to cut into me the way it did. I bet she's forgotten saying it by now. But she hasn't called.

Up bright and early again. It's going to be a long morning. I think I'll sit by the phone and look through photos. Photos of Zenda.

Later today, the world is due to end.

o()o

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Brave New

It’s hard being human in a world full of machines: especially when it’s so difficult to tell the difference.

You feel very isolated at first: for so long human beings were in the majority, it’s not easy to adjust.

The humans here are born to it, of course, but I come from a different time: it feels stranger to me.

They’re integrated, they laugh off the difference: they no longer comprehend its enormity.

They have a game in school, that ends with putting your head on someone’s chest: heartbeat or whirr?

You laugh with surprise or delight, or you claim you knew all along, or don’t care: it’s just a game.

In fact the native humans think the whirr is beautiful: they consider it superior, they grow up thinking it.

It *is* beautiful, soft and continuous, a nearly mute purr, a sewing-machine: it’s tremendously sexy.

I no longer believe it’s indoctrinated, the attraction, I think it’s deeper: I think it’s instinctive.

The game in school, and out of school, is a mating game: humans here prefer the cool tight flesh and the whirr.

I’m not immune: unnatural as it felt to me at first, it’s my rational side that shrinks from it, not my feelings.

And I’ve given in to them, I’ve assimilated: I’ve exchanged my transmission voucher and decided to stay.

Except in contact, except for the whirr, you really can’t tell: you can only speculate, you can play the game.

For what’s natural to machines is the fashion among humans: machine physique is universally emulated.

The taut muscularity, the complete hairlessness: by sixteen most humans have been baptised in Depiline.

You'd think the thrill would be to find someone, hairless and muscular, and discover: her skin is warm, her heart beats.

But the magic of the whirr captivates: even for me it did, I can't be untrue to my heart.

When Tollameera opened her shirt and I laid my head on her chest, the whirr won me: it was so beautiful I wept.

Machines love humans, there's no uncertainty there: they're attuned to the heartbeat, and attracted to it.

They don't even mind hairyness, they don't demand perfect physique: which is a good thing for me.

Coming here through time, fully grown, I couldn't face the Depiline: it's not a pleasant experience.

And although I had to get fit for transmission, I was never the lean athletic type: I haven't kept it up.

She doesn't mind: machines have one special quality that's rare in humans, they're absolutely loyal.

They choose once, so if they accept you, you need never doubt again: there's no divorce here.

We're making a baby, Tollameera and I: we've got the workshop fitted out, and all the tools.

It's very much down to her of course, that hasn't changed: I provide only the lubricant.

But we do all the assembling and procuring together: we visit the procreational superstore monthly.

And we make love in our workshop: I have to conquer my squeamishness, as I open her up and reach in.

For the vital components come from her own body, to be integrated slowly: it takes years to make a new machine.

It’s a passionate commitment, parenthood, as ever: not only to each other and our child, but to the future of the species.

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Future II

With the dreadful catastrophe over, we crawled out. We crawled out and everything was grey. The song of a crippled man on the corner was all that told us how silent the world was. We crawled into the road.

It was a coincidence we had been trapped together. I had chosen that afternoon, of all afternoons, of all afternoons in eternity, to lean on the garage. I had chosen that afternoon to lean on the garage and wait.

But no sooner had he come from work and put down his plumber's bag, no sooner had he put down his plumber's bag and gazed at my chest, no sooner had he begun to speak – we both began speaking, we began speaking together – than the dreadful catastrophe occurred.

The dreadful catastrophe occurred at that very instant. The yard opened. The whole house fell on us, the house and the garage.

It was very cramped, wedged between the rubble of the house and the broken sewer. Instead of killing me, instead of opening my chest, he made love to me, he gave me children. I gave birth seven times, and breast-fed the man. We made love seven times, and ate the babies.

Only the last survived, to crawl out with us. Back into the silent singing world.

You did not tell me it would be so grey, mother, the child said.

It is time you learned, I replied.

■

I had forgotten how white I was.

It was dark in our hole, while we were buried. Only at a certain time, a certain time once a decade or once a century, did a blurr of accidental light come through. We did everything by feel.

We did everything by feel, among the rubble and the sewage. The making love, the giving birth, the breast feeding.

I had forgotten how beautiful I was.

My skin was shocking white, my hair black. It had grown very long in the hole. It trailed behind us as we crawled.

You did not tell me how beautiful you were, mother, the child said.

I had forgotten, I replied, but now I see myself through your eyes. I see myself through your eyes and remember. And I remember how white I am.

I am going to look at you for ever, the child said.

■

Nallonis – I decided to name the child after myself – crawled with me.

Nallonis crawled with me and was unaware of his baldness. We crawled for many years, along many roads.

The man did not come, he did not come with us. He crawled away, he went in another direction, and took with him the knife.

If I build a shippon, mother, if I build a shippon, you can live in it, and I can come and drink from you as a cow.

I began to speak but was halted by an impression.

I was going to say I am not averse to you milking me for a thousand years, and then you must find someone else, someone whiter. But he misunderstood, he misunderstood what I did not say.

I have spoken, said Nallonis. I will not be thwarted. I will drink from you, I will drink from you and knead your breasts. I will look at you for ever. I will have my shippon.

And immediately he began building.

■

Nallonis grew hairy on the milk of my breast. I lived in the shippon until he grew, until he grew old enough to design aeroplanes.

When he flew, he saw that the greyness was everywhere, even after a thousand years. Even after eight thousand years the greyness was everywhere. All the earth was grey beneath us, wherever we flew.

When he flew, he searched, he searched for someone white. When he flew, I flew with him. We searched and searched for someone whiter.

We flew far enough to look back and see the whole grey earth in one look.

He did not find someone whiter.

We stayed together through long millennia, we flew and searched. We flew intermittently, and searched. There seemed to be no beautiful daughter-in-law, nowhere to be found. There was no one whiter.

There was no one whiter than his mother.

There is no one whiter than you, mother, he said.

■

Levi, who had seen us off the Machine – I am going back now, to how it began, though still in the future.

Levi, who had seen us off the Machine, was tonsured in that meaningful way that signifies a man of twenty-three.

I am going to lean on the garage, I told him. I am going to lean on the garage and wait. I am going to wait for the man to come home from work.

He will come home from work, and he will find me.

A dreadful catastrophe is coming, Levi said, looking at the sky.

He will find me leaning on the garage. I will lean on the garage and wait. I will wait for the man. I will show him my chest, and hand him the knife.

A dreadful catastrophe is coming, Levi said.

I am going to lean on the garage, I said.

■

My sisters and I were identical. We divided the world between us.

We divided the world between us, each thinking she was the most beautiful. Each thinking she was the whitest. Each sister thought she was whiter.

But I was whiter, I was the whitest. I was the whitest and the most beautiful. I was the most beautiful.

I am going to lean on the garage, I said, as my sisters receded. I am going to lean on the garage and wait. I am going to show my chest to the man.

My sisters were complacent, they did not heed my words, they were not interested. They were not interested in the future.

A dreadful catastrophe is coming, said Levi.

I am going to lean on the garage.

A dreadful catastrophe is coming.

■

It was eons after the dreadful catastrophe before stalks of green began budding through the grey.

That spring, the spring of a million snowdrops, was the spring I moved from my shippon into a palace. A palace Nallonis had built for me, once he concluded there was no one whiter. Once he realised.

Once he realised there was no one more beautiful than his mother, no one milkier. Once he realised there was no one whiter.

I moved into the palace he had built for me and became his maid.

Nallonis was satisfied.

I was content to be his maid. I was content to subordinate myself, to expose myself to him, to let him explore me and enter me. I allowed him to return to the part of me he came from.

I allowed him to open me and enter me. I allowed him to reach into me, to reach in and feel me. He penetrated deeply into me.

I satisfied him seven million times. I bore him thousands of children. The milk of my breast was unceasing. My milk was ample for us all.

■

Around the edges of the palace he was constantly building extensions. Every million years he built an extension.

He built an extension that was like my old shippon, but fourteen thousand times larger. He built a replica of the hole where I bore him, the rubble and the broken sewer. Instead of sewage, a river of offal.

All the cattle of the world came to our abattoir.

He built an extension that was a vast picture gallery, in which every picture was white. Every picture was me. A picture of his mother, his maid. He built a sculpture gallery. All the statues were white.

All the gypsum in the universe was brought to his workshop.

He built a model so huge that only from another galaxy could you see what it was. And at its centre, another, life-size and precise in every detail. An exact replica.

Beyond, within it, if you were to push through, if it were possible, if it were possible to push through and enter, was an entire universe, inaccessible.

What it looked like from the other side we would never know.

■

Eventually he built an extension that he said expressed his unabated awe at my beauty.

It was four-hundred thousand times larger than the entire rest of the palace, yet it had only one room. The floor was made of polished pewter, the walls were sheet-waterfalls of milk.

Threads of the finest nylon from the cantilevered ceiling served to spread and suspend me. I was suspended and spread with my arms and legs fully stretched, I floated in the middle of the room. I looked down at my distant reflection in the silvery floor. It was all so beautiful.

It was all so beautiful I allowed him to shave me. I allowed him to remove all the hair from me, and make me bald.

It was so beautiful I allowed him to remove the skin from me. He removed the skin from me and made me red.

You did not tell me how red you were, mother, he said.

You Nallonis have made me so, I replied.

The most beautiful ecorchée woman in the universe was reflected in our pewter floor.

■

I allowed him at length to remove the offal from me, the innerds and entrails and organs. I revealed a new architecture to him, a moist circuitry. None of me was secret to my son my employer my curator.

He uncoiled my sinews, distended my arteries, fanned out the tendrils of my anatomy. He gave me wings of filigree that tickled the two ends of the Milky Way. He exhibited me like a peacock, a crochet of ivory, a string umbrella. Hanging in the extension of my palace.

My swaying made the whole earth move in space. The room was so tall that stars passed below my mirrored image. I became a Foucault's pendulum.

I forgot about the dreadful catastrophe and the plague of snowdrops. He forgot about buildings and aeroplanes. We forgot about the search for a milky-white daughter-in-law.

We thought of nothing, nothing, nothing but how beautiful I was.

How beautiful, swaying in the universe of our extension. How white and how red I was, suspended and flayed. How transparent, extended and displayed, like lace. How delicate, how beautiful.

How beautiful, with and without skin, within and without. How eternal, with and without offal. With and without breath.

For seven-hundred thousand million years we were thus. Nallonis and I.

■

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Silver People

Once it became possible to move between the epicosms we opted to go. We had nothing to live for here, all our plans had failed, all our dreams had come false. We were superfluous, even to ourselves, my twin and I. We had nothing to lose by going.

They undressed us and shaved us and painted us silver. We had expressed no preference, so they evaluated us and assigned us to the fourteenth epicosm. Everyone there is silver.

Once we were painted we felt calm, and content with our new colour. The hair does not grow back, the paint contains an inhibitor. It is permanent. Even the neverending rain will not wash it off. We are part of the silver people now.

You dream your way into it. That is the phrase they use. We felt it was like a mild delirium, a half-waking dream. You cannot be asleep, but you have to be submissive. They expect you to be afraid, but my twin and I were not afraid. We were looking forward to ridding ourselves of this existence.

The silver people float, and drift. It requires no effort, once you become accustomed to it. Suspended in the semi-darkness you move slowly, constantly through the gentle unfalling rain.

❄

Our best friend was the milkman. He came each evening and fed us, sufficient for the day. The language of the fourteenth epicosm is of gentle touch, and slight suggestions of smiling. The milkman taught us what we needed to know as we drank.

We forgot words gladly, and began thinking in the language of touch. We began to have slight impressions of almost smiling. It was as though we were about to speak of love, but realised it was unnecessary.

We feel it came naturally to us. Our evaluators probably knew, when they assigned us to this epicosm, when they made us silver people. Being twins we had always had little need of language, and loving each other as we did we already, unknowingly, spoke some of the words of our new tongue. We already smiled some of the inward, imminent smiles of the silver people.

Having drank our milk and waved our friend farewell, and watched until his silver body merged with the hanging drizzle and the other silver people, floating suspended, we turned to our night’s work. We were content to have work to do in our new world. Our work was to

spend the hours of night in light embrace, touching each other as we floated, and silently singing.

In the morning we went out into the world, unashamed of what we were or what we had done. For it was our job now, our place in the world. The silver people saw us and knew, and we think they almost smiled.

We drifted among them, my twin and I, sharing thoughts of touch through our enwrapped fingers. Sharing the imminence of smiling. We were very content to have exchanged our lives in the false unhappy world.

In the afternoons of course we slept, in firm embrace, dreaming of each other and of the coming of the milkman. We woke each evening to his friendly song.

❄

After sixty-two years we heard of the painwoman. The milkman told us she had conquered our universe. Everyone was now enslaved, she was not interested in milk, all silver people must pay their debt of pain. We waited each morning for the morning she would come.

Suggestions of smiling ceased, except inwardly. Out in the world, the silver people hung suspended in the soft rain, and drifted, fearing the morning the painwoman would reach them. No one understood us any more. Being twins, we were friendless.

One evening the milkman did not sing. We woke in silence and looked out into the rain, our hands clasped as usual. The entire epicosm seemed cool, without the milkman. We shivered at the thought of what would come.

We began to become thin. We did not know where to find milk, except in each other. Being twins we did not mind, we exchanged gladly. But each lived for the other, both gained and lost in equal measure. We longed for the milkman’s return, or the painwoman’s arrival.

She came at last. After four years of waiting the painwoman came. She came in the middle of the afternoon. She was like the milkman, she had room for us both in her silver arms. But she did not sing. And when we welcomed her, in our weakness, she almost smiled. Then she took from us our debt of pain.

❄

When she left, we do not remember. The time was so long and the pain so great, we ceased to be aware of days or years, or anything but each

other's pain. Being twins, we experienced twice the pain of the other silver people. To each of us, the other's pain was worse.

Whenever it was that she left, she has gone. She has taken our pain. We feel nothing now. Not even the need of milk. And we are so weak and so grateful we can almost smile again. We almost smile inwardly as we lie in embrace. In intense painless embrace. We lie suspended, revolving in the tender rain.

❄

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Report 76·84019

A fat old man and a skinny little girl entered the parish at access 9.

They were intercepted on route 21 subsidiary 3 and taken to building 76. Protocol 46 was invoked. Under amendment 17 they were offered a random friend but declined. Folder 76·84019 was activated. Operatives repairing the waiting facility waterbutt contravened local regulation 308.

The fat old man and the skinny little girl were questioned in section 3·12 desk 4. Partitions were omitted as the section was otherwise void.

Questioning was inconclusive. After a further period in the waiting facility protocol 221 was reached and they were placed in interim cubicles on level 4. The fat old man was placed in interim cubicle 42 and the skinny little girl was placed in interim cubicle 43.

Remote surveillance was maintained under local regulation 10. File 76·84019·1 was opened. Defects were reported in optical feed 603.

The fat old man was questioned in section 3·12 desk 4. Partitions were employed due to an ambient temperature anomaly connected with faulty readings in the temperature regulation modulator. Fault report 76·3·12·00462 was re-sent.

Questioning of the fat old man was inconclusive. He was advised under protocol 793 that his arrangement may not be suitable. He was advised under protocol 793 that he may not be suitable for a reassignment programme. His formal response was recorded at 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·01·1.

A programmed regress occurred prior to questioning the skinny little girl.

The skinny little girl was questioned in section 3·12 desk 4. Partitions were employed due to an ambient temperature anomaly connected with faulty readings in the temperature regulation modulator.

Questioning of the skinny little girl was inconclusive. She was advised under protocol 793 that her arrangement may not be suitable. Her formal response was recorded at 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·02·1.

The skinny little girl made three verbal complaints. Her second verbal complaint was noted under protocol 79 amendment 2. Her first and third verbal complaints were recorded under local regulation 5 in file 76·84019·2.

Time programme guidelines having been exceeded stage 3 questioning was rescheduled and protocol 221 extended under local regulation 43. The fat old man and the skinny little girl remained in their interim cubicles. Remote surveillance was maintained under local regulation 10.

Under the rescheduled time programme the fat old man and the skinny little girl were questioned in section 3·12 desk 4. Partitions were omitted as the section was otherwise void. Operatives repairing the sectional trunking contravened local regulations 26, 27, and 308. Questioning was suspended but was resumed with partitions.

Questioning was inconclusive.

After a period in the waiting facility protocol 221 was reached and the fat old man and the skinny little girl were brought to section 3·12 desk 1 for mandatory interim adjudication. Partitions were omitted as the section was otherwise void.

Mandatory interim adjudication was recorded in file 76·84019·3. Their formal responses were recorded at 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·01·2 and 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·02·2.

The fat old man and the skinny little girl were advised of the time programme respecting appeal and reassignment. They were advised under protocol 793 that within the time programme mandatory interim adjudication may be rescinded and that if mandatory interim adjudication were rescinded they would be evicted from the parish at access 9. Their formal responses were recorded at 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·01·3 and 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·02·3.

The fat old man was advised under protocol 793 that he may not be suitable for a reassignment programme. His formal response was recorded at 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·01·4.

The fat old man and the skinny little girl were assigned to sector 37702 district 6 zone 16 enclave 883 block 21 building 41B level 8 cubicle 604. An assignment and movement notification was invoked and copied in file 76·84019·4 and at 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·01·5 and 60692%53071%11094%76·84019·1·02·4. Defects were reported in movement mapping response display 285.

The fat old man and the skinny little girl were removed from building 76 and placed in transportation bubble 7303 programmed for sector 37702 district 6 zone 16 enclave 883. Operatives subject to a

mandatory interim regress at the transportation ingress portal contravened local regulation 308.

Report 76·84019 was recorded in file 76·84019·5. Under protocol 14 and local regulation 5 file 76·84019·2 was deleted. Folder 76·84019 was set for automatic deactivation on expiry of the time programme respecting appeal and reassignment.

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