

William GIBSON  
Hinterlands  
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When Hiro hit the switch, I was dreaming of Paris, dreaming of wet, dark streets in winter. The pain came oscillating up from the floor of my skull, exploding behind my eyes in a wall of blue neon; I jackknifed up out of the mesh hammock, screaming. I always scream; I make a point of it. Feedback raged in my skull. The pain switch is an auxiliary circuit in the bonephone implant, patched directly into the pain centers, just the thing for cutting through a surrogate's barbiturate fog. It took a few seconds for my life to fall together, icebergs of biography looming through the fog: who I was, where I was, what I was doing there, who was waking me.

Hiro's voice came crackling into my head through the bone-conduction implant.- "Damn, Toby. Know what it does to my ears, you scream like that?"

"Know how much I care about your ears, Dr. Nagashima? I care about them as much as "

"No time for the litany of love, boy. We've got business. But what is it with these fifty-millivolt spike waves off your temporals, hey? Mixing something with the downers to give it a little color?"

"Your EEG's screwed, Hiro. You're crazy. I just want my sleep.

. . ." I collapsed into the hammock and tried to pull the darkness over me, but his voice was still there.

"Sorry, my man, but you're working today. We got a ship back, an hour ago. Air-lock gang are out there right now, sawing the reaction engine off so she'll just about fit through the door."

"Who is it?" "Leni Hofmannstahl, Toby, physical chemist, citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany." He waited until I quit groaning. "It's a confirmed meatshot."

Lovely workaday terminology we've developed out here. He meant a returning ship with active medical telemetry, contents one (1) body, warm, psychological status as yet unconfirmed. I shut my eyes and swung there in the dark.

"Looks like you're her surrogate, Toby. Her profile syncs with Taylor's, but he's on leave."

I knew all about Taylor's "leave." He was out in the agricultural canisters, ripped on amitriptyline, doing aerobic exercises to counter his latest bout with clinical depression. One of the occupational hazards of being a surrogate. Taylor and I don't get along. Funny how you usually don't, if the guy's psychosexual profile is too much like your own.

"Hey, Toby, where are you getting all that dope?" The question was ritual. "From Charmian?"

"From your mom, Hiro." He knows it's Charmian as well as I do.

"Thanks, Toby. Get up here to the Heavenside elevator in five minutes or I'll send those Russian nurses down to help you. The male ones."

I just swung there in my hammock and played the game called Toby Halpert's Place in the Universe. No egotist, I put the sun in the center, the luminary, the orb of day. Around it I swung tidy planets, our cozy home system. But just here, at a fixed point about an eighth of the way out toward the orbit of Mars, I hung a fat alloy cylinder, like a quarter-scale model of Tsiolkovsky 1, the Worker's Paradise back at L-5. Tsiolkovsky 1 is fixed at the liberation point between Earth's gravity and the moon's, but we need a lightsail to hold us here, twenty tons of aluminum spun into a hexagon, ten kilometers from side to side. That sail towed us out from Earth orbit, and now it's our anchor. We use it to tack against the photon stream, hanging here beside the thing the point, the singularity we call the Highway.

The French call it le metro, the subway, and the Russians call it the river, but subway won't carry the distance, and river, for Americans, can't carry quite the same loneliness. Call it the

Tovyevski Anomaly Coordinates if you don't mind bringing Olga into it. Olga Tovyevski, Our Lady of Singularities, Patron Saint of the Highway.

Hiro didn't trust me to get up on my own. Just before the Russian orderlies came in, he turned the lights on in my cubicle, by remote control, and let them strobe and stutter for a few seconds before they fell as a steady glare across the pictures of Saint Olga that Charmian had taped up on the bulkhead. Dozens of them, her face repeated in newsprint, in magazine glossy. Our Lady of the Highway.

Lieutenant Colonel Olga Tovyevski, youngest woman of her rank in the Soviet space effort, was en route to Mars, solo, in a modified Alyut 6. The modifications allowed her to carry the prototype of a new airscrubber that was to be tested in the USSR's four-man Martian orbital lab. They could just as easily have handled the Alyut by remote, from Tsiolkovsky, but Olga wanted to log mission time. They made sure she kept busy, though; they stuck her with a series of routine hydrogen-band radio-flare experiments, the tail end of a lowpriority Soviet-Australian scientific exchange. Olga knew that her role in the experiments could have been handled by a standard household timer. But she was a diligent officer; she'd press the buttons at precisely the correct intervals.

With her brown hair drawn back and caught in a net, she must have looked like some idealized Pravda cameo of the Worker in Space, easily the most photogenic cosmonaut of either gender. She checked the Alyut's chronometer again and poised her hand above the buttons that would trigger the first of her flares. Colonel Tovyevski had no way of knowing that she was nearing the point in space that would eventually be known as the Highway.

As she punched the six-button triggering sequence, the Alyut crossed those final kilometers and emitted the flare, a sustained burst of radio energy at 1420 megahertz, broadcast frequency of the hydrogen atom. Tsiolkovsky's radio telescope was tracking, relaying the signal to geosynchronous comsats that bounced it down to stations in the southern Urals and New South Wales. For 3.8 seconds the Alyut's radio-image was obscured by the afterimage of the flare.

When the afterimage faded from Earth's monitor screens, the Alyut was gone.

In the Urals a middle-aged Georgian technician bit through the stem of his favorite meerschaum. In New South Wales a young physicist began to slam the side of his monitor, like an enraged pinball finalist protesting TILT.

The elevator that waited to take me up to Heaven looked like Hollywood's best shot at a Bauhaus mummy case a narrow, upright sarcophagus with a clear acrylic lid. Behind it, rows of identical consoles receded like a textbook illustration of vanishing perspective. The usual crowd of technicians in yellow paper clown suits were milling purposefully around. I spotted Hiro in blue denim, his pearl-buttoned cowboy shirt open over a faded UCLA sweat shirt. Engrossed in the figures cascading down the face of a monitor screen, he didn't notice me. Neither did anyone else.

So I just stood there and stared up at the ceiling, at the bottom of the floor of Heaven. It didn't look like much. Our fat cylinder is actually two cylinders, one inside the other. Down here in the outer one we make our own "down" with axial rotation are all the more mundane aspects of our operation: dormitories, cafeterias, the air-lock deck, where we haul in returning - boats, Communications and Wards, where I'm careful never to go.

Heaven, the inner cylinder, the unlikely green heart of this place, is the ripe Disney dream of homecoming, the ravenous ear of an information-hungry global economy. A constant stream of raw data goes pulsing home to Earth, a flood of rumors, whispers, hints of transgalactic traffic. I used to lie rigid in my hammock and feel the pressure of all those data, feel them snaking through the lines I imagined behind the bulkhead, lines like sinews, strapped and bulging, ready to spasm, ready to crush me. Then Charmian moved in with me, and after I told her about the fear, she made magic against it and put up her icons of Saint Olga. And the pressure receded, fell away.

"Patching you in with a translator, Toby. You may need German this morning." His voice was sand in my skull, a dry modulation of static. "Hillary "

"On line, Dr. Nagashima," said a BBC voice, clear as ice crystal. "You do have French, do you, Toby? Hofmannstahl has French and English."

"You stay the hell out of my hair, Hillary. Speak when you're bloody spoken to, got it?" Her silence became another layer in the complex, continual sizzle of static. Hiro shot me a dirty look across two dozen consoles. I grinned.

It was starting to happen: the elation, the adrenaline rush. I could feel it through the last wisps of barbiturate. A kid with a surfer's smooth, blond face was helping me into a jump suit. It smelled; it was newold, carefully battered, soaked with synthetic sweat and customized pheromones. Both sleeves were plastered from wrist to shoulder with embroidered patches, mostly corporate logos, subsidiary backers of an imaginary Highway expedition, with the main backer's much larger trademark stitched across my shoulders the firm that was supposed to have sent HALPERT, TOBY out to his rendezvous with the stars. At least my name was real, embroidered in scarlet nylon capitals just above my heart.

The surfer boy had the kind of standard-issue good looks I associate with junior partners in the CIA, but his name tape said NEVSKY and repeated itself in Cyrillic. KGB, then. He was no tsiolnik; he didn't have that loose-jointed style conferred by twenty years in the L-5 habitat. The kid was pure Moscow, a polite clipboard ticker who probably knew eight ways to kill with a rolled newspaper. Now we began the ritual of drugs and pockets; he tucked a microsyringe; loaded with one of the new euphorohallucinogens, into the pocket on my left wrist, took a step back, then ticked it off on his clipboard. The printed outline of a jump-suited surrogate on his special pad looked like a handgun target. He took a five-gram vial of opium from the case he wore chained to his waist and found the pocket for that. Tick. Fourteen pockets. The cocaine was last.

Hiro came over just as the Russian was finishing. "Maybe she has some hard data, Toby; she's a physical chemist, remember." It was strange to hear him acoustically, not as bone vibration from the implant.

"Everything's hard up there, Hiro." "Don't I know it?" He was feeling it, too, that special buzz. We couldn't quite seem to make eye contact. Before the awkwardness could deepen, he turned and gave one of the yellow clowns the thumbs up.

Two of them helped me into the Bauhaus coffin and stepped back as the lid hissed down like a giant's faceplate. I began my ascent to Heaven and the homecoming of a stranger named Leni Hofmannstahl. A short trip, but it seems to take forever.

\* \* \*

Olga, who was our first hitchhiker, the first one to stick out her thumb on the wavelength of hydrogen, made it home in two years. At Tyuratam, in Kazakhstan, one gray winter morning, they recorded her return on eighteen centimeters of magnetic tape.

If a religious man one with a background in film technology had been watching the point in space where her Alyut had vanished two years before, it might have seemed to him that God had butt-spliced footage of empty space with footage of Olga's ship. She blipped back into our space-time like some amateur's atrocious special effect. A week later and they might never have reached her in time; Earth would have spun on its way and left her drifting toward the sun. Fifty-three hours after her return, a nervous volunteer named Kurtz, wearing an armored work suit, climbed through the Alyut's hatch. He was an East German specialist in space medicine, and American cigarettes were his secret vice; he wanted one very badly as he negotiated the air lock, wedged his way past a rectangular mass of airscrubber core, and chinned his helmet lights. The Alyut, even after two years, seemed to be full of breathable air. In the twin beams from the massive helmet, he saw tiny globules of blood and vomit swinging slowly past, swirling in his wake, as he edged the bulky suit out of the crawlway and entered the command module. Then he found her.

She was drifting above the navigational display, naked, cramped in a rigid fetal knot. Her eyes were open, but fixed on something Kurtz would never see. Her fists were bloody, clenched like stone, and her brown hair, loose now, drifted around her face like seaweed. Very slowly, very carefully, he swung himself across the white keyboards of the command console and secured his suit to the navigational display. She'd gone after the ship's communications-gear with her bare hands, he decided. He deactivated the work suit's right claw; it unfolded automatically, like two pairs of vicegrip pliers pretending they were a flower. He extended his hand, still sealed in a

pressurized gray surgical glove.

Then, as gently as he could, he pried open the fingers of her left hand. Nothing.

But when he opened her right fist, something spun free and tumbled in slow motion a few centimeters from the synthetic quartz of his faceplate. It looked like a seashell.

Olga came home, but she never came back to life behind those blue eyes. They tried, of course, but the more they tried, the more tenuous she became, and, in their hunger to know, they spread her thinner and thinner until she came, in her martyrdom, to fill whole libraries with frozen aisles of precious relics. No saint was ever pared so fine; at the Plesetsk laboratories alone, she was represented by more than two million tissue slides, racked and numbered in the subbasement of a bomb-proof biological complex.

They had better luck with the seashell. Exobiology suddenly found itself standing on unnervingly solid ground: one and seven-tenths grams of highly organized biological information, definitely extraterrestrial. Olga's seashell generated an entire subbranch of the science, devoted exclusively to the study of . . . Olga's seashell.

The initial findings on the shell made two things clear. It was the product of no known terrestrial biosphere, and as there were no other known biospheres in the solar system, it had come from another star. Olga had either visited the place of its origin or come into contact, however distantly, with something that was, or had once been, capable of making the trip.

They sent a Major Grosz out to the Tovyevski Coordinates in a specially fitted Alyut 9. Another ship followed him. He was on the last of his twenty hydrogen flares when his ship vanished. They recorded his departure and waited. Two hundred thirty-four days later he returned. In the meantime they had probed the area constantly, desperate for anything that might become the specific anomaly, the irritant around which a theory might grow. There was nothing: only Grosz's ship, tumbling out of control. He committed suicide before they could reach him, the Highway's second victim.

When they towed the Alyut back to Tsiolkovsky, they found that the elaborate recording gear was blank. All of it was in perfect working order; none of it had functioned. Grosz was flash-frozen and put on the first shuttle down to Plesetsk, where bulldozers were already excavating for a new subbasement.

Three years later, the morning after they lost their seventh cosmonaut, a telephone rang in Moscow. The caller introduced himself. He was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America. He was authorized, he said, to make a certain offer. Under certain very specific conditions, the Soviet Union might avail itself of the best minds in Western psychiatry. It was the understanding of his agency, he continued, that such help might currently be very welcome.

His Russian was excellent.

The bonephone static was a subliminal sandstorm. The elevator slid up into its narrow shaft through the floor of Heaven. I counted blue lights at two-meter intervals. After the fifth light, darkness and cessation.

Hidden in the hollow command console of the dummy Highway boat, I waited in the elevator like the secret behind the gimmicked bookcase in a children's mystery story. The boat was a prop, a set piece, like the Bavarian cottage glued to the plaster alp in some amusement park a nice touch, but one that wasn't quite necessary. If the returnees accept us at all, they take us for granted; our cover stories and props don't seem to make much difference.

"All clear," Hiro said. "No customers hanging around." I reflexively massaged the scar behind my left ear, where they'd gone in to plant the bonephone. The side of the dummy console swung open and let in the gray dawn light of Heaven. The fake boat's interior was familiar and strange at the same time, like your own apartment when you haven't seen it for a week. One of those new Brazilian vines had snaked its way across the left viewport since my last time up, but that seemed to be the only change in the whole scene.

Big fights over those vines at the biotecture meetings, American ecologists screaming about possible nitrogen shortfalls. The Russians have been touchy about biodesign ever since they had to borrow Americans to help them with the biotic program back at Tsiolkovsky 1. Nasty problem with the rot eating the hydroponic wheat; all that superfine Soviet engineering and they still couldn't establish a functional ecosystem. Doesn't help that that initial debacle paved the way for us to be out here with them now. It irritates them; so they insist on the Brazilian vines, whatever anything that gives them a chance to argue. But I like those vines: The leaves are heart-shaped, and if you rub one between your hands, it smells like cinnamon.

I stood at the port and watched the clearing take shape, as reflected sunlight entered Heaven. Heaven runs Off Greenwich Standard; big Mylar mirrors were swiveling somewhere, out in bright vacuum, on schedule of a Greenwich Standard dawn. The recorded birdsongs began back in the trees. Birds have a very hard time in the absence of true gravity. We can't have real ones, because they go crazy trying to make do with centrifugal force.

The first time you see it, Heaven lives up to its name, lush and cool and bright, the long grass dappled with wildflowers. It helps if you don't know that most of the trees are artificial, or the amount of care required to maintain something like the optimal balance between blue-green algae and diatom algae in the ponds. Charmian says she expects Bambi to come gamboling out of the woods, and Hiro claims he knows exactly how many Disney engineers were sworn to secrecy under the National Security Act.

"We're getting fragments from Hofmannstahl," Hiro said. He might almost have been talking to himself; the handler-surrogate gestalt was going into effect, and soon we'd cease to be aware of each other. The adrenaline edge was tapering off. "Nothing very coherent. `Schone Maschine,' something . . . `Beautiful machine' . . . Hillary thinks she sounds pretty calm, but right out of it."

"Don't tell me about it. No expectations, right? Let's go in loose." I opened the hatch and took a breath of Heaven's air; it was like cool white wine. "Where's Charmian?"

He sighed, a soft gust of static. "Charmian should be in Clearing Five, taking care of a Chilean who's three days home, but she's not, because she heard you were coming. So she's waiting for you by the carp pond. Stubborn bitch," he added.

Charmian was flicking pebbles at the Chinese bighead carp. She had a cluster of white flowers tucked behind one ear, a wilted Marlboro behind the other. Her feet were bare and muddy, and she'd hacked the legs off her jump suit at midhigh. Her black hair was drawn back in a ponytail.

We'd met for the first time at a party out in one of the welding shops, drunken voices clanging in the hollow of the alloy sphere, homemade vodka in zero gravity. Someone had a bag of water for a chaser, squeezed out a double handful, and flipped it expertly into a rolling, floppy ball of surface tension. Old jokes about passing water. But I'm graceless in zero g. I put my hand through it when it came my way. Shook a thousand silvery little balls from my hair, batting at them, tumbling, and the woman beside me was laughing, turning slow somersaults, long, thin girl with black hair. She wore those baggy drawstring pants that tourists take home from Tsiolkovsky and a faded NASA T-shirt three sizes too big. A minute later she was telling me about hang-gliding with the teen tsiolniki and about how proud they'd been of the weak pot they grew in one of the corn canisters. I didn't realize she was another surrogate until Hiro clicked in to tell us the party was over. She moved in with me a week later.

"A minute, okay?" Hiro gritted his teeth, a horrible sound. "One. Uno." Then he was gone, off the circuit entirely, maybe not even listening.

"How's tricks in Clearing Five?" I squatted beside her and found some pebbles of my own.

"Not so hot. I had to get away from him for a while, shot him up with hypnotics. My translator told me you were on your way up." - She has the kind of Texas accent that makes ice sound like ass.

"Thought you spoke Spanish. Guy's Chilean, isn't he?" I tossed one of my pebbles into the pond.

"I speak Mexican. The culture vultures said he wouldn't like my accent. Good thing, too. I can't follow him when he talks fast." One of her pebbles followed mine, rings spreading on the surface as it sank. "Which is constantly," she added. A bighead swam over to see whether her pebble was good to eat. "He isn't going to make it." She wasn't looking at me. Her tone was perfectly neutral. "Little Jorge is definitely not making it."

I chose the flattest of my pebbles and tried to skip it across the pond, but it sank. The less I knew about Chilean Jorge, the better. I knew he was a live one, one of the ten percent. Our DOA count runs at twenty percent. Suicide. Seventy percent of the meatshots are automatic candidates for Wards: the diaper cases, mumblers, totally gone. Charmian and I are surrogates for that final ten percent.

If the first ones to come back had only returned with seashells, I doubt that Heaven would be out here.

Heaven was built after a dead Frenchman returned with a twelve-centimeter ring of magnetically coded steel locked in his cold hand, black parody of the lucky kid who wins the free ride on the merry-go-round. We may never find out where or how he got it, but that ring was the Rosetta stone for cancer. So now it's cargo cult time for the human race. We can pick things up out there that we might not stumble across in research in a thousand years. Charmian says we're like those poor suckers on their island, who spend all their time building landing strips to make the big silver birds come back. Charmian says that contact with "superior" civilizations is something you don't wish on your worst enemy.

"Ever wonder how they thought this scam up, Toby?" She was squinting into the sunlight, east, down the length of our cylindrical country, horizonless and green. "They must've had all the heavies in, the shrink elite, scattered down a long slab of genuine imitation rosewood, standard Pentagon issue. Each one got a clean notepad and a brand-new pencil, specially sharpened for the occasion. Everybody was there: Freudians, Jungians, Adlerians, Skinner rat men, you name it. And every one of those bastards knew in his heart that it was time to play his best hand. As a profession, not just as representatives of a given faction. There they are, Western psychiatry incarnate. And nothing's happening! People are popping back off the Highway dead, or else they come back drooling, singing nursery rhymes. The live ones last about three days, won't say a goddamned thing, then shoot themselves or go catatonic." She took a small flashlight from her belt and casually cracked its plastic shell, extracting the parabolic reflector. "Kremlin's screaming. CIA's going nuts. And worst of all, the multinationals who want to back the show are getting cold feet. 'Dead spacemen? No data? No deal, friends.' So they're getting nervous, all those supershrinks, until some flake, some grinning weirdo from Berkeley maybe, he says," and her drawl sank to parody stoned mellowness, " `Like, hey, why don't we just put these people into a real nice place with a lotta good dope and somebody they can really relate to, hey?' " She laughed, shook her head. She was using the reflector to light her cigarette, concentrating the sunlight. They don't give us matches; fires screw up the oxygen carbon dioxide balance. A tiny curl of gray smoke twisted away from the white-hot focal point.

"Okay," Hiro said, "that's your minute." I checked my watch; it was more like three minutes.

"Good luck, baby," she said softly, pretending to be intent on her cigarette. "Godspeed."

The promise of pain. It's there each time. You know what will happen, but you don't know when, or exactly how. You try to hold on to them; you rock them in the dark. But if you brace for the pain, you can't function. That poem Hiro quotes, Teach us to care and not to care.

We're like intelligent houseflies wandering through an international airport; some of us actually manage to blunder onto flights to London or Rio, maybe even survive the trip and make it back. "Hey," say the other flies, "what's happening on the other side of that door? What do they know that we don't?" At the edge of the Highway every human language unravels in your hands except, perhaps, the language of the shaman, of the cabalist, the language of the mystic intent on mapping hierarchies of demons, angels, saints.

But the Highway is governed by rules, and we've learned a few of them. That gives us something to

cling to.

Rule One: One entity per ride; no teams, no couples.

Rule Two: No artificial intelligences; whatever's Out there won't stop for a smart machine, at least not the kind we know how to build.

Rule Three: Recording instruments are a waste of space; they always come back blank.

Dozens of new schools of physics have sprung up in Saint Olga's wake, ever more bizarre and more elegant heresies, each one hoping to shoulder its way to the inside track. One by one, they all fall down. In the whispering quiet of Heaven's nights, you imagine you can hear the paradigms shatter, shards of theory tinkling into brilliant dust as the lifework of some corporate think tank is reduced to the tersest historical footnote, and all in the time it takes your damaged traveler to mutter some fragment in the dark. not Flies in an airport, hitching rides. Flies are advised to ask too many questions; flies are advised not to try for the Big Picture. Repeated attempts in that direction invariably lead to the slow, relentless flowering of paranoia, your mind projecting huge, dark patterns on the walls of night, patterns that have a way of solidifying, becoming madness, becoming religion. Smart flies stick with Black Box theory; Black Box is the sanctioned metaphor, the Highway remaining  $x$  in every sane equation. We aren't supposed to worry about what the Highway is, or who put it there. Instead, we concentrate on what we put into the Box and what we get back out of it. There are things we send down the Highway (a woman named Olga, her ship, so many more who've followed) and things that come to us (a madwoman, a seashell, artifacts, fragments of alien technologies). The Black Box theorists assure us that our primary concern is to optimize this exchange. We're out here to see that our species gets its money's worth. Still, certain things become increasingly evident; one of them is that we aren't the only flies who've found their way into an airport. We've collected artifacts from at least half a dozen wildly divergent cultures. "More hicks," Charmian calls them. We're like pack rats in the hold of a freighter, trading little pretties with rats from other ports. Dreaming of the bright lights, the big city.

Keep it simple, a matter of In and Out. Leni Hofmannstahl: Out.

We staged the homecoming of Leni Hofmannstahl in Clearing Three, also known as Elysium. I crouched in a stand of meticulous reproductions of young vine maples and studied her ship. It had originally looked like a wingless dragonfly, a slender, ten-meter abdomen housing the reaction engine. Now, with the engine removed, it looked like a matte-white pupa, larval eye bulges stuffed with the traditional useless array of sensors and probes. It lay on a gentle rise in the center of the clearing, a specially designed hillock sculpted to support a variety of vessel formats. The newer boats are smaller, like Grand Prix washing machines, minimalist pods with no pretense to being exploratory vessels. Modules for meatshots.

"I don't like it," Hiro said. "I don't like this one. It doesn't feel right. . . ." He might have been talking to himself; he might almost have been me talking to myself, which meant the handler-surrogate gestalt was almost operational. Locked into my role, I'm no longer the point man for Heaven's hungry ear, a specialized probe radio-linked with an even more specialized psychiatrist; when the gestalt clicks, Hiro and I meld into something else, something we can never admit to each other, not when it isn't happening. Our relationship would give a classical Freudian nightmares. But I knew that he was right; something felt terribly wrong this time.

The clearing was roughly circular. It had to be; it was actually a fifteen-meter round cut through the floor of Heaven, a circular elevator disguised as an Alpine minimeadow. They'd sawed Leni's engine off, hauled her boat into the outer cylinder, lowered the clearing to the air-lock deck, then lifted her to Heaven on a giant pie plate landscaped with grass and wildflowers. They'd blanked her sensors with broadcast overrides and sealed her ports and hatch; Heaven is supposed to be a surprise to the newly arrived.

I found myself wondering whether Charmian was back with Jorge yet. Maybe she'd be cooking something for him, one of the fish we "catch" as they're released into our hands from cages on the

pool bottoms. I imagined the smell of frying fish, closed my eyes, and imagined Charmian wading in the shallow water, bright drops beading on her thighs, long-legged girl in a fishpond in Heaven.

"Move, Toby! In now!" My skull rang with the volume; training and the gestalt reflex already had me halfway across the clearing. "Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn. . . ." Hiro's mantra, and I knew it had managed to go all wrong, then. Hillary the translator was a shrill undertone, BBC ice cracking as she rattled something out at top speed, something about anatomical charts. Hiro must have used the remotes to unseal the hatch, but he didn't wait for it to unscrew itself. He triggered six explosive bolts built into the hull and blew the whole hatch mechanism out intact. It barely missed me. I had instinctively swerved out of its way. Then I was scrambling up the boat's smooth side, grabbing for the honeycomb struts just inside the entranceway; the hatch mechanism had taken the alloy ladder with it.

And I froze there, crouching in the smell of plastique from the bolts, because that was when the Fear found me, really found me, for the first time.

I'd felt it before, the Fear, but only the fringes, the least edge. Now it was vast, the very hollow of night, an emptiness cold and implacable. It was last words, deep space, every long goodbye in the history of our species. It made me cringe, whining. I was shaking, groveling, crying. They lecture us on it, warn us, try to explain it away as a kind of temporary agoraphobia endemic to our work. But we know what it is; surrogates know and handlers can't. No explanation has ever even come close.

It's the Fear. It's the long finger of Big Night, the darkness that feeds the muttering damned to the gentle white maw of Wards. Olga knew it first, Saint Olga. She tried to hide us from it, clawing at her radio gear, bloodying her hands to destroy her ship's broadcast capacity, praying Earth would lose her, let her die....

Hiro was frantic, but he must have understood, and he knew what to do.

He hit me with the pain switch. Hard. Over and over, like a cattle prod. He drove me into the boat. He drove me through the Fear.

Beyond the Fear, there was ~ room. Silence, and a stranger's smell, a woman's.

The cramped module was worn, almost homelike, the tired plastic of the acceleration couch patched with peeling strips of silver tape. But it all seemed to mold itself around an absence. She wasn't there. Then I saw the insane frieze of ballpoint scratchings, crabbed symbols, thousands of tiny, crooked oblongs locking and overlapping. Thumb-smudged, pathetic, it covered most of the rear bulkhead. Hiro was static, whispering, pleading. Find her, Toby, now, please, Toby, find her, find her, find I found her in the surgical bay, a narrow alcove off the crawlway. Above her, the Schone Maschine, the surgical manipulator, glittering, its bright, thin arms neatly folded, chromed limbs of a spider crab, tipped with hemostats, forceps, laser scalpel. Hillary was hysterical, half-lost on some faint channel, something about the anatomy of the human arm, the tendons, the arteries, basic taxonomy. Hillary was screaming.

There was no blood at all. The manipulator is a clean machine, able to do a no-mess job in zero g, vacuuming the blood away. She'd died just before Hiro had blown the hatch, her right arm spread out across the white plastic work surface like a medieval drawing, flayed, muscles and other tissues tacked out in a neat symmetrical display, held with a dozen stainless-steel dissecting pins. She bled to death. A surgical manipulator is carefully programmed against suicides, but it can double as a robot dissector, preparing biologicals for storage.

She'd found a way to fool it. You usually can, with machines, given time. She'd had eight years.

She lay there in a collapsible framework, a thing like the fossil skeleton of a dentist's chair; through it, I could see the faded embroidery across the back of her jump suit, the trademark of a West German electronics conglomerate. I tried to tell her. I said, "Please, you're dead. Forgive us, we came to try to help, Hiro and I. Understand? He knows you, see, Hiro, he's here in my head. He's read your dossier, your sexual profile, your favorite colors; he knows your childhood fears, first lover, name of a teacher you liked. And I've got just the right pheromones and I'm a walking arsenal of drugs, something here you're bound to like. And we can lie, Hiro and I; we're ace



liars. Please. You've got to see. Perfect strangers, but Hiro and I, for you, we make up the perfect stranger, Leni."

She was a small woman, blond, her smooth, straight hair streaked with premature gray. I touched her hair, once, and went out into the clearing. As I stood there, the long grass shuddered, the wildflowers began to shake, and we began our descent, the boat centered on its landscaped round of elevator. The clearing slid down out of Heaven, and the sunlight was lost in the glare of huge vapor arcs that threw hard shadows across the broad deck of the air lock. Figures in red suits, running. A red Dinky Toy did a U-turn on fat rubber wheels, getting out of our way. Nevsky, the KGB surfer, was waiting at the foot of the gangway that they wheeled to the edge of the clearing. I didn't see him until I reached the bottom.

"I must take the drugs now, Mr. Halpert." I stood there, swaying, blinking tears from my eyes. He reached out to steady me. I wondered whether he even knew why he was down here in the lock deck, a yellow suit in red territory. But he probably didn't mind; he didn't seem to mind anything very much; he had his clipboard ready.

"I must take them, Mr. Halpert." I stripped out of the suit, bundled it, and handed it to him. He stuffed it into a plastic Ziploc, put the Ziploc in a case manacled to his left wrist, and spun the combination.

"Don't take them all at once, kid," I said. Then I fainted.

Late that night Charmian brought a special kind of darkness down to my cubicle, individual doses sealed in heavy foil. It was nothing like the darkness of Big Night, that sentient, hunting dark that waits to drag the hitchhikers down to Wards, that dark that incubates the Fear. It was a darkness like the shadows moving in the back seat of your parents' car, on a rainy night when you're five years old, warm and secure. Charmian's a lot slicker than I am when it comes to getting past the clipboard tickers, the ones like Nevsky. I didn't ask her why she was back from Heaven, or what had happened to Jorge. She didn't ask me anything about Leni.

Hiro was gone, off the air entirely. I'd seen him at the debriefing that afternoon; as usual, our eyes didn't meet. It didn't matter. I knew he'd be back. It had been business as usual, really. A bad day in Heaven, but it's never easy. It's hard when you feel the Fear for the first time, but I've always known it was there, waiting. They talked about Leni's diagrams and about her ballpoint sketches of molecular chains that shift on command. Molecules that can function as switches, logic elements, even a kind of wiring, built up in layers into a single very large molecule, a very small computer. We'll probably never know what she met out there; we'll probably never know the details of the transaction. We might be sorry if we ever found out. We aren't the only hinterland tribe, the only ones looking for scraps.

Damn Leni, damn that Frenchman, damn all the ones who bring things home, who bring cancer cures, seashells, things without names who keep us here waiting, who fill Wards, who bring us the Fear. But cling to this dark, warm and close, to Charmian's slow breathing, to the rhythm of the sea. You get high enough out here; you'll hear the sea, deep down behind the constant conch-shell static of the bonephone. It's something we carry with us, no matter how far from home.

Charmian stirred beside me, muttered a stranger's name, the name of some broken traveler long gone down to Wards. She holds the current record; she kept a man alive for two weeks, until he put his eyes out with his thumbs. She screamed all the way down, broke her nails on the elevator's plastic lid. Then they sedated her.

We both have the drive, though, that special need, that freak dynamic that lets us keep going back to Heaven. We both got it the same way, lay out there in our little boats for weeks, waiting for the Highway to take us. And when our last flare was gone, we were hauled back here by tugs. Some people just aren't taken, and nobody knows why. And you'll never get a second chance. They say it's too expensive, but what they really mean, as they eye the bandages on your wrists, is that now you're too valuable, too much use to them as a potential surrogate. Don't worry about the suicide attempt, they'll tell you; happens all the time. Perfectly understandable: feeling of profound rejection. But I'd wanted to go, wanted it so bad. Charmian, too. She tried with pills.

But they worked on us, twisted us a little, aligned our drives, planted the bonephones, paired us with handlers.

Olga must have known, must have seen it all, somehow she was trying to keep us from finding our way out there, where she'd been. She knew that if we found her, we'd have to go. Even now, knowing what I know, I still want to go. I never will. But we can swing here in this dark that towers way above us, Charmian's hand in mind. Between our palms the drug's torn foil wrapper. And Saint Olga smiles out at us from the walls; you can feel her, all those prints from the same publicity shot, torn and taped across the walls of night, her white smile, forever.