

Last One Close the Door

by Richard Chwedyk

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"Where is Thompson?" asked the tall, bald, square-jawed agent.

Since he didn't specify which Thompson he meant, I answered, "He's here. And he's not here."

A perceptive interrogator would have taken this remark more seriously. The four men in Thompson's office simply grew impatient.

"Miss Travis, we've been all through this theater," said the other agent, a fellow with short, dark hair, no more than bristle, and a nail-thin face that hardly came to a chin at all; rather, it disappeared into his neck with only something like a dimple to mark the border. "Should we dig up the floor and see if he's buried there?"

Men in dark suits rarely appreciate laughter. Beside the remark's not being funny, I was restrained by the thought that the gate would open in half an hour.

There were five of us crammed into the tiny office under the stairs: the agents, who never told me their names (if they did I've forgotten them) or precisely which government office they worked for (DOD? DOE? Do Re Mi? DUM? They acted as if they represented *all* of them); Russell and Quentin, the physicists, sitting like two boys who'd been called down to the principal's office; I sat in a folding chair, in my school uniform, legs crossed, hands folded on my knee, and facing these interrogators gathered around Mr. Thompson's desk.

This was Mr. Thompson's private sanctuary, the heart of the Alma Theater, and I wondered what he would have made of this scene. I imagined his tall frame crumpled comfortably behind his desk, leaning back in his rickety, squeaking chair. Every wall of Mr. Thompson's office was covered with posters and lobby cards. He made no discriminations between old and new, epic and modest, tasteless and sublime. All posters are invitations, he once told me. To the right of Swamp Women and *She Goats of Shark Reef* was *Citizen Kane*; above that was *The Searchers* and below it *Things to Come*. *The Rules of the Game* balanced *The Evil of Frankenstein* and between them were the scantily attired *Young Graduate*. Whenever I interrupted him with some theater business, he would stare at me from out of his abstractions and ask, "So, Margaret, are you still grieving over goldengrove unleaving?" And I would reply, "That is all ye know on earth, *mon vieux*; and all ye need to know."

"Why are you looking at your watch?" The agent (who was rather handsome beneath his baldness, with his fair neatly trimmed moustache) put all the menace he could muster into his voice.

"The show lets out in ten minutes. Someone will have to lock up."

A scream, from the film showing in the auditorium, filtered in through the office walls, followed by what seemed an unnaturally loud thump.

Yes, I thought, I'd miss this place, a little. Mostly, I would miss the walks with Mr. Thompson. Every night, after we closed up the theater and exited through the fire door (the one with Mr. Thompson's neatly printed sign, "Make sure this door shuts tightly behind you when you leave. Thank you."), we walked down Main Street on our way to the diner, past all the empty stores. Sometimes we spoke about poetry, particles and probability. Sometimes we spoke of his legendary grandmother, who almost made it as a movie actress. Sometimes we didn't speak at all; we simply inhaled the sadness that hung in the air of Burden Park the way grimy soot once had before the steel plant shut down. And at the end of the walk, Mother would be waiting behind the counter, pouring us coffee and asking her perpetual question: "So

when are you going to take me away from all this?"

"We'll be closing the theater tonight," the bald agent said, giving the notebook he confiscated from me a gentle slap.

I would have asked the agents if they had looked for Mr. Thompson at the diner, but I was sure these cunning gentlemen had stationed someone over there already.

The ugly thought that I could become stranded here started to sink in. Without a plan, I simply had to wait for an exploitable opportunity.

Once upon a time, I told myself, there was a gifted physicist who gave up his job at a huge government accelerator laboratory. Brilliant though he was, he had the misfortune to live in that brief age of brilliant physicists. Like many of his colleagues, he indulged in metaphors, but his metaphors were never quite the ones in fashion. He had too much of the poet in him, that impulse to be a synthesist as well as a biographer of the particular: Coleridge's notion that a poet should look for the similarities in the dissimilar and the dissimilarities in the similar. He and his research-- especially the personal work he conducted in the lab's graveyard hours-- were lost in the crowd. With a small inheritance, he bought a little theater in the exhausted, run-down industrial suburb of Burden Park.

The Alma was no palace, not even in its heyday. The terra cotta face was modest when compared to the Byzantine and Aragonese fervors of the big-city theaters; no fountains; no stained glass; the balcony was hardly large enough to deserve the name. But in the thirties the Alma had just enough panache to soothe the wounded psyches of the Great Depression. Today, with the rest of downtown Burden Park turning into so many empty storefronts, and all the big-city movie palaces knocked down, the Alma deserved, if not an award, at least a little respect.

Almost instinctively, the physicist knew all this. And he knew something more: the best place to hide a great truth is in a metaphor, where no one will recognize it. The theater is a constant. Its essential design is replicated thousands of times-- seats, walls, screen, projection room-- but the process follows for all of them. It doesn't matter if a theater's run-down or tiny, as long as it's a theater. Marble birdbaths and Deco mosaics belong to *this* world. The screen is a window into *another*.

He worked and he waited, for he knew that as the fashions of thought changed, some brilliant colleague would take a second look at his notes and see in them something more than a few theoretical eccentricities.

I looked at the two physicists. Russell, dark-haired, with a thick, untrimmed moustache, seemed pleasantly distracted by the Young Graduates poster. However, Quentin-- with taffy-colored hair and pale, putty skin-- wrested my notebook from the bald agent, who was more interested in the contents of my purse.

It had been a slow evening before they showed up. Our final showing of Slaughterority House attracted about eight customers. It had shown at the mall the month before, and now only the latecomers and true believers were interested. Mrs. Kennelly sat in the box office, reading a Barbara Pym novel. She was a woman who had never lived in Technicolor, her features stark against her frosted complexion and her bob arranged in flat black brushstrokes across her head. Roy, our ostensible usher, leaned against a wall, working with a wooden coffee stirrer to extract a wad of gum from his expensive running shoe. His head was the same shape as a cinder block, and beyond its advantage of having hair and a sort of physiognomy, there was little difference between the two. He had just finished relating to me the high points of our current attraction: the trash compactor, the strangulation with a sausage and what he thought a novel turn at the end where the killer walks triumphantly into the sunrise. He was honestly surprised at my lack of interest.

"I thought you liked movies," he said.

I had cleaned out the popcorn machine and rearranged the candy in the counter: lemon drops to the right, cherry to the left, peanut butter cups on the top shelf and Raisinets on the bottom. With all that done, I went back to my notes on probability conservation, kept in a deliberately innocuous pink notebook.

The two men standing outside couldn't help looking conspicuous, pretending to stare at the poster under the marquee. The only other businesses open in downtown Burden Park were Paradise Video next

door (which we'd renamed Parasite Video) and the Rexall. Mr. Thompson had told me that the physicists would be in sports jackets. The ones I had to worry about would be in suits.

They bought tickets and entered. Mrs. Kennelly was her usual uncommunicative self when they spoke to her. Roy shrugged at their queries and returned to his sabotaged shoe. I closed my notebook as they approached the candy counter.

"We're looking for your boss," said Quentin.

"Do you know where we can find him?" Russell asked. They both wore the same kind of eyeglass frames. I wondered if they shared the same prescription, too.

"Here, if you can wait."

They glanced around nervously. A grinding noise from the auditorium invaded the lobby: the trash compactor, followed by a chorus of squealing screams.

"I don't think we have much time," Russell said. I could hardly hear him over the noise.

"Roy," I called out, "would you please close that door?"

Roy, standing in the doorway, pointed into the dark theater, smiling.

"Watch it *inside*." I made a sweeping gesture with one hand and Roy disappeared behind the closing door.

"Is there somewhere in here where we can wait?" Quentin said in a gentle, almost patronizing voice.

"You could go in and watch the rest of our feature. I've been told it has a powerful ending." As I spoke, Mrs. Kennelly was selling tickets to two men in charcoal-colored suits.

"No, no." Quentin twisted his upturned hand as if he were correcting my French. "You don't understand. We're his friends. We used to work with him before he came here."

"I do understand. Mr. Thompson's been expecting you. But he never referred to you as 'friends'."

"Really?" Quentin took a step back and looked me over as if my knee socks disqualified me from any knowledge not related to the sale of Ju-jubes. "How *did* he refer to us?"

"I think the phrase he used was 'strays from the herd'."

"Come on," Russell said, unable to disguise a certain bright urgency in his eyes as he peeked through the door where Roy had been standing. "Let's just watch the film until he shows up."

Quentin sneered at me, but the two men in dark suits left him no time to reply to his colleague. I smiled in spite of my imminent peril.

The agents performed with grim efficiency, waving their IDs (so swiftly that no one could read them) and searching the physicists.

The chinless one kept an eye on us while the bald one discovered that Roy and Mrs. Kennelly were good for one-liners (Mrs. K.: "Drug agents? I always figured he was on them, but I didn't think he'd sell them." Roy: "I don't know shit, Mister.") but little else.

"Try this one," Quentin called to the agent as he pointed his thumb at me. "She thinks she knows quite a bit."

The bald agent scrutinized me. "You know where he is."

Since he wasn't asking, I didn't reply.

"What's this?" He pointed to my notebook. In the commotion, I hadn't found a discreet way to slip it under the counter. His cold blue eyes almost crossed when he flipped it open and saw the equations.

"Calculus," I explained.

He looked me over, from loafers to white blouse.

"That's not calculus." Quentin peered over the agent's shoulder. "Not any *she* could do."

The bald agent looked at me as if mathematical expressions were a telltale sign of my degeneracy. "Where is he?"

"At this moment, it would be hard to say."

For the space of an inhalation, his face bulged in exasperation. But he was a professional, whatever else he was, and instantly regained his composure.

The agents searched the theater, with the physicists and me in tow. I made it more of a tour, showing them places, like the supply rooms behind the screen, where I said they wouldn't find anything and where they carefully looked anyway. As we walked down the aisle of the theater proper, the agents checked

every face in the audience, which obviously didn't take them very long. Russell stumbled as he tried to catch a glimpse of the famous sausage scene. The bathrooms, the balconies-- no stone or fossilized cherry drop went unturned, and though the journey may have added a little something to our historical and cultural perspectives, there was no sign of Mr. Thompson.

Upstairs, the projectionist lay asleep on his cot. The agents, understandably curious, turned him over to see if he matched Mr. Thompson's description. They couldn't awaken him, however, which didn't surprise me. In my time at the Alma, I had never seen him awake, or off the cot for that matter. He certainly looked nothing like Mr. Thompson.

The bald agent soured with this disappointment. "What's that?" He made a gesture of accusation toward a metal box with several cables from the projectors jacked into it.

"A timer box. Mr. Thompson built it to run the machines."

"Then what's *he* here for?" The chinless agent pointed to the man on the cot.

"The union requires that we employ a projectionist. It doesn't require that he work."

"What's this?" the bald agent surveyed the small sixteen-millimeter projector threaded up and ready to roll.

"Mr. Thompson runs a lot of movies after hours. The one on there now is a collection of clips of his grandmother's movie appearances."

"Why doesn't he just use a VCR?" the chinless one asked.

It was my turn to look disappointed. "A man who lives on the Queen Mary isn't impressed by a tugboat ride."

The bald agent pressed us on. We pulled Russell away from the projector window and went up to the roof. It was apparent that unless someone could make himself look like a sheet of tar paper, it was impossible to hide up there.

Once more I was subjected to the cool scrutiny of the bald agent, who was perhaps considering where on my person I may have hidden Mr. Thompson.

"Let's talk," he said.

We went down to Thompson's office, where I now sat with a placid smile and wondered how in hell I could undo this mess before the gate opened.

I watched the bald agent poke through my purse. "Don't you need a warrant to do that?"

"Do you object?"

"I don't know. Am I under arrest?"

"Margaret Travis," he read the name off my school ID. "Seventeen... a student at St. Julian's... live with your mother at 1138 Stafford... employed by the Alma Theater."

"I hope I haven't strained your deductive powers."

He flashed me a look meant to curdle my supper, then dug out my Explorers pin from the bottom of my purse. Holding it up to the glare of the overhead light, he read the inscription.

"Hyperballistic Explorers League?"

"A club," I explained

Russell was temporarily diverted from his investigation of the Young Graduates. "Sounds like Mensa with an agenda."

"Only hyperbole." I held out my hand to the agent. He hesitated, then placed the pin in my palm.

The last thing he took out was a pair of glasses cardboard frames, really, holding a couple of pieces of polarized film-- the kind used for watching 3-D movies. A little *tchh* he made with tongue against palate was his only comment before he dropped them back in my purse.

"Miss Travis, you're not under arrest, but you may be in big trouble if you try to hide anything from us to protect your boss. All the work he did at the accelerator is considered government property"

"All he took were his ideas," I said as I stuck the pin on my blouse for safekeeping. "Ideas aren't property."

"They are if they were developed with government money on government property." The bald agent looked around the office, not hiding his disdain for the place. "If he's continuing his research for some company or some other government, he's in big trouble."

"The only government he cares about is that of his conscience."

"Oh. Then it's his conscience that made him change his name from Owen to Thompson and hide out in this shabby little theater." Quentin beamed proudly, apparently pleased with his rhetorical flourish. He pointed out something in my notebook to Russell and passed it over to him.

"You have no idea, do you?" I should have done a better job of hiding my disappointment, but where I came from physicists were made of sharper stuff. "You really can't see the object and what it represents?"

Quentin shook his head. Russell looked up from the notebook, twisting at an end of his moustache. "Object?"

"The *theater*. Don't you see?"

What *I* saw was the answer shoot through their heads like water through a sieve.

"What do you expect to do with Thompson's work?" I asked.

"Do?" Quentin shrugged. "We'll study it. See what we can learn from it."

"You know what you can do with it, or you wouldn't have tracked Thompson down here. And *they* know what you can do with it"-- I turned to the agent "-- or they wouldn't have tracked *you* down."

Russell and Quentin both searched for posters to which they could affix their attention, staring in every direction but toward the agents. In this world, it's not considered good form to point at one's shackles.

"And what do *you* know about his work?" the bald agent intoned: fittingly, like a bell, a metal shell vibrating through its hollow center.

"What can she know?" Quentin shot at him. "A kid."

"And a girl at that, let's not forget," I added.

"Let her answer," the agent commanded. His eyes darted back to me.

"What do I know? Not much. Certainly not as much as these fine representatives of good solid science, empiricism and literalism."

"How's that?" Russell pried his eyes from a Young Graduate in hot pants and a painted-on halter top. He looked me over as if he might be making a comparison.

"There is poetry in equations and equations in poetry. If you don't see the dualities-- multiplicities, even-- in one world, you won't really understand the dualities in many worlds."

I crossed my legs and smoothed the cuffs of my socks. Russell blushed and shifted his attention to the Truck Stop Women.

Out in the theater, a final scream ended in a gurgle, followed by another gratuitous thump, and an electronic keyboard instrument played what can only be described as an upbeat funeral march. The film was over. I could hear the stalwarts shuffling out. Soon, Roy would be grunting his usual inarticulate good-night to Mrs. Kennelly. Mrs. Kennelly would record the receipts and lock up the ledger in the drawer under the cash register. It was rumored that even the projectionist sometimes stirred himself and went home to bed. They would all leave through the back fire exit. I couldn't help glancing at my watch again.

"Expecting someone?" asked the bald agent.

There were worse places to be stranded, I thought. For example, once upon a time, Mr. Thompson and I took a walk in another Burden Park, with a Main Street aglow in the neon of raunchy nightclubs, adult bookstores, peepshows and even shadier places lurking behind them. There was a red glow coming from the steel mill; every building in town wore a coat of its soot. As we walked we saw drunks colliding with each other; bikers looked for fights; hookers, tired of standing, crouched on curbs under the streetlights that still worked; there was a fire going in a garbage can in the vacant lot at Greenleaf and Anderson, with a circle of ragged men gathered around it, cackling like witches at their cauldron.

"In some cases, then," Thompson muttered, "my grandmother really did make it in the movies."

"Nothing big. A chorister in a Marx Brothers picture. A few things like that," I told him. "New travelers always think the changes will be dramatic. In one place you're Owen. In another you're Thompson. There's no way to measure the magnitude of change. The smallest changes are often the biggest."

We found the diner filled with several species of the damned, emaciated victims and victimizers all nursing their cups of coffee. And when my mother said, "So when are you going to take me away from all

this?" she spoke as if only to herself. After all, it hadn't been long since her only daughter died in a not-so-pretty way, and she was still getting used to seeing her ghost show up just as the graveyard shift went on.

Outside, I heard the laconic thump of Roy's footsteps past the office door, the squeal of the fire door followed by the clack of its shutting.

"About this notebook." Quentin held it up. "Thompson made you copy these equations out, didn't he? So they'd be in your hand, and he could hide them with you, right?"

"Those are my equations."

"Sure." He rolled out the word like a long carpet. "So you're a genius, then?"

"You didn't think *Thompson* was a genius when he worked with you." I heard the high, steady clip-clip of Mrs. Kennelly's footsteps hesitate outside the office door, then continue to the fire exit. "You thought him out of step, even a bit dense. A genius, in the original sense, is more a spirit than a person." The door squealed... and that was all I heard. Thank you, Mrs. Kennelly. "A muse. A genie. An angel. You wouldn't mistake me for *that*; would you?"

Quentin's mouth became flat and lipless. No, he wouldn't. "You're not capable of producing these equations."

I reached out for the notebook. "May I show you?"

Quentin reluctantly gave it up. I opened it to the first two pages, where the expressions were rather colorful and dramatic, done in several colors of marker.

"You recognize this. Thompson's model of a sequence of universes, called probabilities for our purposes. In some ways it's an extension of string theory and it raises the ante on current field theories by presuming those theories comprise a mere two-dimensional slice cut from a sphere. He began it as a way to explain the anomalous behavior of certain particles that seemed to follow a non-random sequence." I turned a page. "Impossible, right? How can quantum behavior be non-random unless something else is acting upon the quanta, the way you do at the accelerator? Eventually, he arrived at the insanely presumptuous conclusion that something was batting these particles into your slice of the sphere from another slice of the sphere, perhaps just to see if something here would notice the anomaly."

I turned another page. "So, he noticed it. The next step for any self-respecting physicist would be to show whatever batted these particles into your probability that you *did* notice. How do you do that? Perhaps by batting some of your more stable particles into *its* probability. It took several years on the graveyard shift for him to come up with *this*." I turned another page and held it out for them.

"Nonsense!" Quentin made a gesture as if he were pushing away a plate of Brussels sprouts. "Absurd! First of all, the configuration may be okay, but you've got the quark masses all mixed up."

"Blah!" I shook the notebook at him. "You have to make the same leap Thompson did, or you're never going to see it. He worked for months on the quark relationships."

Russell shook his colleague by the elbow. "It's mathematically plausible, but experimentally impossible."

"If you really believe all of this is a mathematical anomaly, why bother coming here?" I looked at the agents. "Why bother to claim government property when the property is worthless?"

The agents turned to the physicists. The physicists looked at the agents. I recrossed my legs, watching the quartet of doubt take shape.

Quentin, pensive, rubbed a finger against his upper lip. "And the next page? How do you interpret that?"

I took a deep breath and turned to the next page. "See? This is the grand model, into which all the probabilities fit. Look at it carefully. What does it look like? What does it remind you of?"

Quentin and Russell stared, hummed, and shrugged. The agents looked on, flat-faced, barely able to disguise their boredom.

I put the notebook down on Mr. Thompson's desk and clapped my hands upon my knees. "I'll show you. The theater should be empty by now." I stood up and pointed to the door. "Shall we? Or do you think I'll make a break for it?"

"You wouldn't get very far," the bald agent assured me. No way would he be outsmarted by a

schoolgirl in her little plaid skirt.

Eight minutes to go.

I took the notebook and asked the bald agent, "Are you finished with my purse now?"

He picked up the purse, taking one last look inside before pressing the clasp and handing it back.

"Remember, you won't get far."

I smiled, all teeth, as if he were complimenting me. I could feel his gaze stay on me as I walked to the candy counter to get my blazer, then dig into the cabinet under the popcorn machine until I pulled out a box. I took out a handful of cardboard 3-D glasses and offered them to the four men.

"Here, you might need these."

The agents regarded me suspiciously. Quentin was good for a derisive snort. Russell reached out and took one.

"I haven't seen a pair of these in years."

"Take more. One might not be enough."

The others persisted in their refusal, so as I slipped on my blazer I led them into the auditorium.

The house lights were left on. I took them about ten rows down, bidding them to sit while I leaned against the back of a chair another row up and faced them, holding up the page of equations I showed them in the office.

"Look around here for a minute, and then consider these expressions again. With one exception, that the probability universes are simultaneous, this is the model."

Quentin gestured upward. "The *theater*?"

"Not quite to scale, but yes, exactly. This probability-- what you'd like to think of as *the* universe-- is really no more than that one-twenty-fourth of a second of light hitting the screen, as are all the other probabilities, simultaneously." I gestured out toward the grayish, half-luminous rectangle at the end of the auditorium.

"You have to understand this very carefully," I continued. "If not, you'll never understand the bigger part, which is this: it's not the screen I'm talking about; not the piece of film through which the light passes, but the *light itself*, the light that reaches the screen in that one fraction of a second. That's us, from Big Bang to entropy. The whole thing. We are shadows staring at shadows, at least whenever we go to the movies. So it turns out, in a strange way, that life *is* the movies."

The scientists were shifting in their seats, not knowing where to look, stifling groans. The two agents sat with arms folded, much as they would if I had just shown them a driver safety film.

"Multiple-universe hypotheses are unnecessary." Russell looked like he was shaking away a bad dream. "Why should we accept such a complex model? It's ultimately unprovable."

"That's a lot to extrapolate from a few nights batting particles around on the graveyard shift," Quentin said.

I chuckled. "Do you think Thompson worked all this out himself?"

"Then who did? You?" Russell smirked.

"Physics isn't even my specialty. But someone had to show him."

Russell laughed, folding his arms in a kind of mockery of me. "I see. Now they teach theoretical physics at St. Julian's."

I shut the notebook and gripped it tightly. "Theoretical, my ass." I slipped on my 3-D glasses.

It was too close to zero hour. There had been a chance that, disappointed with Thompson's model, they would throw up their hands, leave the eccentric physicist to his broken-down theater and forget that they ever took his research seriously. Even if they decided to leave this second, I couldn't get them out before the gate opened. I could make a run for it or resign myself to selling candy at the Alma for a long time... No. Once they saw the gate in action, it wouldn't be business as usual for me.

The house lights dimmed.

The agents popped out of their seats like a pair of jack-in-the-box toys, reaching inside their jackets. (For guns? After all this, were they planning to *shoot* Thompson?) A familiar beam of light from the projection booth illuminated the screen behind me with the image of a chorus line. The speakers crackled on and filled the auditorium with the wild syncopation of a trumpet-heavy band. The chorus girls, in their

brief bellhop outfits, kicked out in time.

"Up there!" the bald agent shouted, pointing at the booth. They took off up the aisle, out of the auditorium.

"What *is* all this?" Russell asked, staring at the dancers.

"The third one from the right"-- I pointed out the dark-bobbed, long-nosed dancer-- "is Mr. Thompson's grandmother. Not a great face, but killer legs, don't you think?"

Russell, the sort of man I'd have thought capable of providing an authoritative response to something like this, didn't have time to answer before the gate opened.

The deafening roar and blinding light nearly knocked the two physicists back over their seats. The noise is like the bark of static from some leviathan stereo speaker, except that the bark just keeps going. The intense light of the open gate is like a prism ablaze. If you need an appropriate comparison, think of staring straight into a projector bulb at point-blank range. It is the bent light of a whole other universe peeping in at this one, through the gate. Even with my glasses, which were a great deal more polarized than the ones I offered to the agents and physicists, it is difficult to see much. I had been standing with my back to the screen, so I avoided the full force of the opening. After all, only Mr. Thompson and I knew what to expect.

So where *was* Mr. Thompson?

Gate openings, unless otherwise arranged, last about thirty seconds. There was no time to ruminate. I leapt into the aisle and broke into a run, shouting "*Sauve qui peut!*" for no one's benefit but my own, with the full intention of aiming myself at the light and keeping on until I was through it.

I couldn't tell if the physicists had recovered yet and were pursuing me. I ran wildly, purse and notebook gripped to my chest, until I smashed into something coming from the approximate direction of the storage room behind the screen. Like particles in a collider, we met and scattered, and I could only hope that what I hit was Mr. Thompson.

For a second, I was in a senseless daze. In the next, I was feeling for my notebook and purse. The purse had come open, and I swept up what I could with my arm against the floor. The notebook was stuck to a gummy patch of something. I yanked at it until the hated pink cover ripped away to become another permanent piece of the theater floor.

My fellow particle helped me up. I could hear a sort of squeal, which was all that I could make of Mr. Thompson shouting something over the din of the open gate. He pointed out into the auditorium, and it was just possible from that vantage point to discern the four blurry wraiths heading straight for us.

We had seconds left. Thompson went first, jumping the four-foot stage on which the screen rested with the sort of athletic prowess only fear can inspire. He disappeared into the dazzle. I boosted myself up onto the stage just in time to be knocked down by a something/someone flying out.

An object of that weight, hurtling at that velocity, should have insured me of at least a brief stay in the local hospital, but there were enough agents and/or physicists below me to cushion my fall. We were all sent sprawling. Again I grabbed for the notebook. The purse stayed shut this time. Someone stepped on my hair just as I tried to raise myself ripping out a healthy tuft. I stepped on someone's arm. My left shoulder and forearm were tapping out wild Morse-code throbs of pain. In the uncontrasting glare, I could make out the four pursuers holding someone down (Mr. Thompson? And *which* Mr. Thompson?)-- motionless, perhaps unconscious on the floor. There was nothing I could do for him, and all he could do for me was provide a necessary distraction. With a contortion associated more with a snake than a person, I managed to get up on the stage with the notebook in one hand, purse clutched in the other, and I performed what may be a first in the annals of the Hyperballistic Explorers League by *rolling* myself through the gate.

The gate closed. One Alma Theater was behind me, in another probability. I felt the upward-surg-ing feeling, the sense of polar reversals-- north becoming south and south becoming north-- and saw the fast-approaching black square (in perfect 1.33:1 aspect ratio) that accompanies a transit. The square enveloped me, and the carnival ride came to a halt.

My eyes adjusted slowly and I struggled for breath. For the first time in what felt like years, I could hear sounds other than the echoes of the gate: voices, to be exact, familiar voices.

"Dammit, Margaret!" came Antonia's melodious roar. "What the hell *happened*? You two were supposed to be the first ones through!"

Beyond the haze sent up by my seared retinas I could see the auditorium of the Alma Theater, with all its splendid murals intact, the floor carpeted-- and clean-- and all the seats brightly upholstered. Ten rows back Antonia and Colette, in their blazers and neatly pressed skirts, pulled off their black goggles and ran to me.

"Thompson's friends," I gasped, "paid us a visit."

Antonia gave a curt, efficient "Shit!" as she hopped up onto the stage.

"She's hurt!" Colette's blonde curls bounced as she performed a similar maneuver. Antonia stood over me, tall and imperious as she brushed back her long, straight brown hair. Colette bent down on one knee and tried to pry my hurt arm from my chest. I yelped in pain.

"No need for torture. I'll talk."

"Margaret." She gave me a sympathetic smile and tried again, a little more gently.

"Something hit me just as I was going through." I jerked back and partly raised myself. "Where's Mr. Thompson?"

"I'm here, I think."

He was crouched a few feet to my left, breathing heavily but looking undamaged. His forehead and the bald patches above his temples were beaded in sweat. This was the Thompson whose name had really been Owen: the physicist. The person with whom I collided the second time must have been our Mr. Thompson, who had agreed to cross over and play gatekeeper when Mr. Thompson/Owen and I returned to this probability.

For a moment, I forgot about the pain in my arm and my stinging scalp. "Oh, God," I groaned. "They've got him!"

Our Mr. Thompson really was a theater owner, had been one for years. He could fill volumes with what he knew about films, but he was completely unschooled in physics. Add to that the fact that the films he knew were from our probability, where Orson Welles managed to film *Heart of Darkness* and Lee Tracy starred in *It Happened One Night*. You could imagine what his interrogation by my agent friends was going to be like.

"It was a stupid idea." Two long lines formed on Antonia's smooth forehead. "No one who's not in one of the leagues should be allowed through the gates." She pouted angrily. Her huge, gloomy eyes and delicate features always clashed with her preferred role of Amazon.

"This'll need a sling," Colette said after checking my arm. "It's no more than a sprain." She parted my hair and experimentally touched the still-stinging spot of my scalp. "What the hell happened here?"

"Don't ask."

"No laceration. Just needs a little disinfectant." She stood up. "There's a first aid kit in the office."

"I'll get it." Mrs. Kennelly stood in the front row, her arms folded, face set in its usual expression of annoyance. In manner, she differed little from her counterpart in the probability I'd just left, but our Mrs. Kennelly could have given that woman a few tips on wardrobe and makeup.

"We have to get Mr. Thompson out," I said.

"What else is back there?" Antonia clenched her small hands into tight fists.

"Some things fell out of my purse. I swept them back in, but something may still be on the theater floor."

She hissed another curse.

"The agent who traced Thompson had been through it already. You know how we work. Just about everything in that purse originated in that probability."

She took a step closer. If those little hands weren't capable of strangling me, they looked like their owner was ready to give it a try. "The point is," she said with exaggerated deliberation, "you don't *know* what may have been left behind."

"There was no time." I sighed. "You'd rather they had gotten me?"

Antonia shook her head, rubbing the spot between her eyebrows. "Only if they promised not to give you back."

"Easy," Colette cautioned. "I'd like to see what you'd have done in her place."

"The movie," Thompson/Owen muttered. "The one with my grandmother. They've got that."

"Oh!" My hand went up to my mouth. "I'm sorry, Mr. Thompson. I know you wanted that film, but it *did* provide us a distraction."

"Forget that." Antonia's voice rose to near-shouting range. "We can get more copies of the film. The problem is that they may notice a chorus girl in there who isn't in any other print of that film in their whole universe."

"They saw the gate open," Thompson/Owen said. "They'll be looking through everything. Margaret"-- he pointed at me-- "nearly told them everything. I could hear you while I was hiding in the theater."

"Those without eyes cannot be blinded," I said, quoting one of our poets who had no counterpart in his probability. "They had the notebook. They had us. I had to keep them busy while you got yourself back into the theater. And I had to come up with a way to get the notebook back. Part of my job is to monitor how much they know. I told them what I had to about probability conservation to see how they reacted to it. Russell is the only one who may have a clue so far. The others will invent marvelous explanations for everything they saw. Stage lighting. Computer enhancements and alterations. And even if they took your work seriously, who is going to fund the construction of an efficient accelerator? Your government?" With my good arm I held up the notebook. "They think you reversed the quark relationships in the third set of expressions. That alone should keep them busy for years."

Mrs. Kennelly returned with the first aid kit. Colette wrapped an elastic bandage around my forearm and tied a sling for me. Getting me to sit still for the disinfectant was harder. Once she was finished, she brushed the hair from her face and helped me down from the stage.

"Save it for your report." Antonia glared at me, lower lip protruding, but her anger was mostly spent. "We have to call the Commission and have this gate closed, perhaps permanently."

"You won't be able to go back for a while. Perhaps not for a long time," Colette said to Thompson/Owen as we made our way up the aisle. "I suppose you'll miss it," she added, less with sympathy than with a certain healthy scientific curiosity.

"There's not much of my world back there to miss." He dropped his hands into the pockets of his cardigan. "'World' doesn't seem to be a very useful term anymore. This is as much my world as the other one... with a few notable differences."

In the lobby, Mrs. Kennelly had already returned to counting receipts, the ledger spread out atop the candy counter. I asked her what was playing.

"Fortier's Rally", she said, not looking up. From the ledger, The Alma seemed to have had a pretty good evening.

I couldn't resist checking the contents of the candy counter: lemon drops to the left, cherry to the right; peanut butter cups on the bottom shelf and Raisinets on the top.

"Mrs. Kennelly?"

She finished her counting and looked up. Even with eye makeup and fiery lipstick, it was the essential Kennelly face, efficient and private. I wondered if by studying it I could learn something about that icy, silent woman a universe away who left that back door unlocked-- for some reason I couldn't doubt it on purpose.

"I'll make sure the theater is locked up," I told her. "Good night. Thanks for everything."

She stared at me suspiciously, as if I spoke with double meanings. Perhaps I did. She put the ledger into the I drawer under the cash register, picked up her jacket from the wooden stool behind the counter, and left through the front doors.

Right behind her was the usher, a tall young man with deep-set eyes. He tucked a copy of *The Custom of the Country* under his arm. He had a Friends of Truth pin on his jacket: *tres elite*. As he passed, I couldn't tell if he was smiling at me or at my sling.

Antonia called the Commission from the office. There on the walls were all the invitations: to the right of Cleo from 5 to 7 was *Heart of Darkness*; above that was *The Last Hurrah* and below it *War of the Worlds*; *The Rules of Frankenstein* balanced *The Evil Game* and between them the girls from *The World of Henry Orient* leapt blissfully into the air.

"Tate says they'll aim a gate at Brighton, about fifteen kilometers north of Burden Park."

"Tate?" I asked.

"He's just been appointed Supervisor. You remember Tate. Moustache. Light brown hair. Cold, iron blue eyes. A Friends of Truth team will go through to get Thompson, if they can I told them you'll start on a full report in the morning."

"I could go with them," I said, a vivid picture of the usher still in my mind.

Antonia pressed her lips into a hard pink line. "Don't be stupid. They'll recognize you."

"You're right. They didn't think I was much of a genius over there, either."

"As if they would know." Colette patted me in mock sympathy. "Even their best scientists get a little too smug in assuming their expectations are confirmed in mere appearance."

"They seem very specialized." I felt myself cringing at the memory of my interrogation. "They wouldn't know a line of poetry to save their lives."

"That's our strength." Antonia brushed back a strand of her luxuriant hair. "Who would suspect us over there? But I'm afraid your little episode may wise them up a little."

"I wouldn't count on it," I answered, tugging up my socks with some difficulty. "My experience there is limited, but they seem exceptionally adept at rationalization."

For some reason, my remark stirred Mr. Thompson/ Owen from his poster-spawned reverie:

* * *

"I went to blow the fire aflame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and
ran
And faded through the brightening air."

* * *

"That's our job, *mon vieux*. You wouldn't be here otherwise."

"Let's call it a night," Colette said. "We'll all be getting up early tomorrow."

"Anyone else left here?" I asked.

"The projectionist is still upstairs," Colette said. "sleeping."

"Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe than ours." I laughed. "And someday he will rise, like Lazarus. But that is a miracle for another world."

I kept my word to Mrs. Kennelly and made sure every door was locked. Outside, Mr. Thompson/Owen and I set out for the diner. Antonia and Colette said good night and took off in the other direction. Most of downtown Burton Park was closed or closing up as we walked down Main Street, past the ice cream shop next door, the drugstore, the news agency and Georgina's Fashions. We stopped for a while to watch the Lionel train trudging around the intricate layout in the window of Harvey's Toy and Hobby.

"There's a probability somewhere where you didn't make it through the gate," he mumbled, half question and half declaration. "Where they're interrogating you this very moment."

"And there is one where *you* didn't make it, and *you* are being interrogated this moment. And one where you and I may have never been born, and one where the Alma was torn down years ago, or destroyed in a fire that started in an overloaded fuse box during a Saturday afternoon matinee. I showed you once how little and how great the differences can be. It's in the throbbing spins of the quarks and the evanescent spread of galaxies on the thin membrane of timespace."

"How do you live with that knowledge?" He shut his eyes, as if imagining a world where the Lionel train jumped the track just at that moment.

"It takes some work. Sometimes I think of all the probabilities as drafts of the same story. It's exciting, in a way. Every moment is a turning point. But that's true even if you never leave your home probability. There's more than one world where a playwright noted the providence in the fall of a sparrow."

"Was it always Shakespeare?"

"He wasn't always called that, but yes, it was always Shakespeare. And he always swiped the image from Matthew, though he's not always called Matthew. That's one of the things you'll learn."

"Will I learn how I can be essentially the same in other probabilities even if in one world my father's name was Owen and in another his name was Thompson?"

"Because your father was *neither* Owen nor Thompson. Even *you* can figure that out."

In the park on the corner of Greenleaf and Anderson, boys and girls were huddled in pairs on benches. In the distance, the bells of a motorcycle-driven hot dog wagon sounded, conjuring up for me the steam-soaked smell of pickles and tamales.

"What did you mean," I asked, "back in the Alma, about 'notable differences'?"

"I suppose I meant your officially unofficial Commission or Instrumentality or whatever you call it, sending youth clubs with crazy names on perilous journeys to other worlds, like something from a Tom Swift book. It will be a long time before I get used to it."

"More Dean Swift than Tom Swift to me, but I admit it seems awfully crazy. Yours isn't the only probability where rationalization is the better part of reason. But tell me: didn't you ever wish, when you were young, that you were Tom Swift, or at least his best friend? Didn't you want to join the Hyperballistic Explorers League or some such thing? Will we grow up any slower for having some responsibilities other than throwing bake sales and paper drives?"

"Still, something about it seems... well, fascistic."

"I've heard that one before. Honestly, I don't know if we are or not. But don't get caught up with superficialities. That's where Quentin and Russell make their mistakes."

He stared at the couples in the park, thinking, or listening to the putt-putt of the hot dog wagon drawing closer. "Will you do me a favor? From now on will you call me by my first name?"

"Alex?" I chuckled. "Very well, *mon vieux*. Whatever you wish."

"You *are* a genius, aren't you?" He looked out at the lights of the Burton Park Industries building, erected on the site of the old, dark, satanic mills.

"Geniuses are attendant *daemons*. You wouldn't mistake me for *that*; would you? Besides, we're all shadows, all of us, in every probability." I gave that statement an appropriate pause. "Too bad you don't know what's *casting* those shadows, isn't it?"

Mr. Thompson/Owen-- Alex-- came to a full halt, staring at me, waiting.

"The sleeping projectionist. He's the Red king. And when he awakes we're all gone with a blink."

He crumpled his lips until they were set in a half-frown and half-smile, waiting for a "serious" answer.

"Come on." I tugged at his elbow with my free hand. "There's plenty of time for that, and Mom's waiting."

The diner was crowded when we entered. Some men from BPI, straight off the second shift, were heartily debating matters of great importance, as similar men were in an indefinite number of other probabilities. Mom was already pouring two cups of coffee for us.

Alex looked at me and smiled, as we waited for her inevitable greeting.

"So when are you going to take me away from all this?"

In an indefinite number of probabilities, the question remained the same, and in another indefinite number of probabilities, Alex had a different answer. In the immediately observable one, he picked up his cup. "Tomorrow is Friday. There's a brand new feature at the Alma."

That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

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