

SECOND CONTACT

By Gary Couzens

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WEDNESDAY 11TH AUGUST 1999. It is not Judgment Day. As the train pulls into Penzance, Mary Beth yawns and stretches. She hasn't slept well in the hard narrow seat. Her clothes — UCLA sweatshirt over T-shirt, jeans — are gritty and grimy from dried perspiration and two days' wear. She reaches up for her backpack. Dizziness as she stands: breakfast and coffee will cure it. She undoes the rubber band holding her hair back, shakes her hair out, then ties it again in a ponytail. She strides down the platform, her ticket ready for inspection. It's still cool at this time, 8:30. Salt is in the air; seagulls squall. She visits the rest room to wash under her arms, clean her teeth, freshen up.

Tonight she'll sleep better: she's booked ahead at the Youth Hostel here in Penzance. It'll be hot today, few if any clouds. She won't be disappointed. No clouds will hide the sun, not today of all days. Britain's notoriously unpredictable weather won't spoil everything.

She goes into the small station buffet and on impulse buys a newspaper. She's made a point of disregarding the news during her two months in Europe, especially what's been happening back home — strife and race riots. Too depressing — she'll bone up on all that when she returns to California in September. She sits down at the corner of a table with a Brunch Muffin and a plastic cup of coffee almost too hot to touch. Traveling on a budget: it appeals to her ascetic side, and keeps her slim.

Mary Beth left Amy, the college friend she was traveling with, behind in London. Amy hadn't wanted to come with her to Cornwall: London was much more interesting to her. "I can see it on TV," she said. "You'll get a better view that way."

"It's not the same;" said Mary Beth.

So Amy went with her to Paddington, saw her off on the overnight train. They kissed, embraced, promised to meet up again at the end of the week. Mary Beth waved at Amy as the train pulled out; just as Amy slipped out of sight, Mary Beth saw her turn and walk away down the platform. It's all or nothing now, she thought. This was why she'd insisted on being in England in August, rather than anywhere else in Europe. Mary Beth's obsession, as the much more sanguine Amy put it.

In the newsstand, the local paper has a large headline: ECLIPSE DAY!

As she sits at the table — alone now except for a late-thirties man with thinning hair sitting opposite — an elderly man strides past and slaps something onto the table. Both Mary Beth and the other man look at it simultaneously, catch each other's gaze; smile.

The elderly man has left a crudely printed flier on the table: REPENT FOR JUDGMENT DAY IS AT HAND, it says.

Mary Beth glances about her. It's a weekday morning in Penzance; men and women are traveling to work. Children are out of school for the summer. She is just one amongst many to pass through this station. There is nothing unusual about today. Except for one thing, there will be nothing unusual. It is not Judgment Day.

Clive sips his coffee and idly watches the young American woman. A student, obviously: he got her nationality from her accent when she spoke to the woman behind the counter. She must be about twenty, he guesses; five foot ten tall, tanned, honey-blond hair tied back with a robber band.

Their eyes meet. "Hi," she says.

"Hello. You were on the train, weren't you?"

She nods. "It was so uncomfortable. Jeez."

"Wasn't it just. And I had a sleeper. So much for British Rail."

"So you come from London?"

"Well, the Home Counties, actually. Surrey. How about yourself?"

"L.A. I'm on vacation. In Europe for three months."

There's a pause, then Clive says: "You're here for the eclipse?"

She nods, her mouth full of Branch Muffin.

"Me too. I'm going to take the bus to St. Just. You'll get a better view of it from there. The path of totality goes through it. It's a church town, twenty-five minutes away."

"Sounds like a neat place."

"It's quite pretty, I'm told. It's been developed a bit in the past few years, though."

And so they tacitly agree to travel together. Clive guesses she senses he's no threat to her. She's intelligent, and her intuition is sharp. He radiates no sexual interest in her.

He said good-bye to his lover Mark at Paddington. They'd spent the evening

watching Nashville, as ever one of Clive's favorite films, in an all-but-empty London cinema club. The print was faded and scratched, and jumped in places, but the film is an old friend; Clive's memory filled in the blank spots, resonated with familiar scenes, settled into the characters' interlocking stories as if into a comfortable, well-worn chair. It had been several years since he'd seen it, but it's a film that he's marked stages in his personal development by, in the way it changes at each viewing. His only regret is that he wasn't old enough to see it on its first release, in a virgin print.

They kissed good-bye on Paddington platform. Mark would be visiting a dying friend in the North, while Clive made his pilgrimage to Cornwall.

Clive's parents woke him one night in July 1969, just short of his fifth birthday, to watch live coverage of Nell Armstrong making one small step for a man. To his chagrin he doesn't remember that, although he remembers watching later Apollos on TV. And all the space missions after that: Apollo-Soyuz, Skylab, the Space Shuttle. This total eclipse will be the only one visible in Britain during his lifetime, and he's made a pact with his younger self to witness it. He's taken time off work to do just that.

He and the American leave the station buffet, walk outside into the car park. It's a quarter to nine, and the sky is brightening. He points out to her St. Michael's Mount, still wreathed in morning mist. He is the host, she the guest in his country; he feels obliged to show her the more famous sights. The sun is still full: first contact, when the Moon's disc clips the Sun's, is an hour and three quarters away. Perhaps he'll show her around Penzance first before they take the St. Just bus in time for second contact, when the eclipse becomes total, at 11:10.

"I'm Clive, by the way." He extends his hand.

She takes it. "Mary Beth."

"Ready," says Tom the director, and the red light on top of the camera turns on.

Diana imperceptibly breathes in and says: "Thanks, Michael. It's ten o'clock here in Penzance. The eclipse isn't due to start until 10:30, but already crowds have gathered for this rare astronomical event." She steps to one side and turns her head. The camera follows her gaze and looks over the railings to the narrow beach—if beach isn't too grandiose a word: Nearly five hundred people are standing on the pebbles, looking up at the sun, holding up squares of smoked glass to test them, or projecting through telescopes onto white card. The tide laps about the ankles of the furthest out, but they're oblivious to it. Some are sitting on the sand, others in swimsuits squatting in the water. At the far end, a small group of women are sunbathing topless.

“This is Diana Mathis, BBC News in Penzance.”

The red light goes out, and Diana sighs audibly. “Shit! I’ve got a fucking ladder!” She bends forward, picks at her tights with her fingers.

“It didn’t show,” says Tom.

Diana looks up. “Good.” She straightens. “I haven’t got a spare pair on me. There’s no way we’ve got time to buy one.” She glances down ruefully at the ladder, tugs half-heartedly at the hem of her skirt in an effort to cover it. “Oh fuck it.”

“You were good, Di,” says Tom.

“I should fucking well hope so,” says Diana. “I’ve done it long enough.” She glances up at Tom; their eyes meet briefly. A flicker of a smile. Professional to a fault while at work; she prides herself on that. Even though every member of the crew knows she and Tom are lovers.

Diana straightens, lights a cigarette. She never smokes on screen; she remembers the furor when a children’s TV presenter was filmed unawares doing it. But there’s a few minutes that can be snatched before they have to film again, when she has to readopt her public face. Fortunately no one stares at them, or tries to get in the way of the camera. And no one questions the presence of a black woman amongst three older white men.

TV crews will be numerous today. The BBC itself has two at the ready: one at St. Just to film the eclipse itself, plus Diana’s to get the human interest angles.

“Don’t all relax at once, guys,” she says. “We’ve got that village to do next. Got some locals to talk to. Eleven-fifteen and it’ll all be over, and we can get a drink. Or several.”

ADRIAN PUSHES the last newspaper through the last front door on his round and cycles down Trezillan’s narrow high street to the corner shop. He secures his bicycle and goes in.

He sees Morwenna talking to someone so he lingers at the door. The man is tall and about Morwenna’s age. You can tell from the way she’s laughing, from the way she’s leaning forward intently that she fancies him. She’s wearing a flimsy summer dress and you can see the top of her cleavage. Adrian looks down and uncomfortably shuffles his feet.

Morwenna looks up and sees him standing there. She waves at him. “Hi, Adrian!”

The man straightens. “Well, I’ll see you this evening, Morwenna.”

“Sure.”

Adrian expects them to kiss, but they don't. The man walks past him without saying a word. The doorbell tings as he goes out.

“Well, that was quick,” says Morwenna. “You've finished your round already. Good boy. Give you a kiss.”

She comes out from behind the counter and stands next to him. She's still taller than him, but he's growing fast. She's much too old for him of course, but he knows he's in love with her. She shakes out her long frizzy red hair. “It's going to be a wonderful day.” She's standing by the window where the sun comes in: it makes her dress translucent and you can see her knickers. She's not wearing abra.

Morwenna Hughes was her father's last child, late and unexpected. From what Adrian can gather, she lived for a while in Truro with a married man. But that didn't work out, so she came back to Trezillan and runs the corner shop now that her father has retired.

She stretches her arms out behind her head, her back arching slightly. She reminds Adrian of a cat luxuriating in the sun. He wonders what she looks like naked.

“What are you doing this morning, Adrian?” she asks.

“I want to watch the eclipse,” he says.

“Mmmm, so do I. Should be good.” There will be a fete in the village hall and grounds this morning. Mrs. Weldon, the local councilor, has used one of her contacts; the BBC are sending a crew to film the eclipse from Trezillan. “Tell you what, is your Mum going?”

“No, she's at work.”

“Oh, that's a pity. I'll run you up there if you like.”

“Yes, please.”

“Just help me shut up shop. I need a wee.” She leans forward, touching his upper lip with her forefinger. For a moment he thinks she's wiping a smudge off his cheek, just like his mother used to do. “Coo, look,” she says. “You're growing a mustache.”

As he waits for her, he feels in his pocket for the scraps of old photographic negative the papers and TV said he should use to view the eclipse. He glances at the

rack of cards. It's Morwenna's birthday next week; she'll be twenty. five. He must buy her a card, but how can he do that without her knowing? There's no other place in the village to buy them. And would she pay more attention to him? She's twelve years older than he is. No chance.

At 10:30 the eclipse becomes partial. Through most of Britain it will be no more than that. But in Cornwall it continues its advance, a semicircular bite widening, black spreading over fire yellow. People look up at the sun, then take it for granted as they continue their tasks. But more and more abandon them as totality nears. The beach at Penzance is filled with watchers; it's too crowded to move. Some swim out and tread water to get a better view, squares of photographic negative on chains about their necks. A teenage girl faints in the heat and an ambulance man forces his way through the press of people and carries her out. They sit her on the steps leading down from the pavement, her head resting on her knees.

When Clive and Mary Beth leave the bus at St. Just, the eclipse is only just partial, a black mouse-nibble at the top. They walk toward the town center, across the green with its gray stone war memorial, into the square. The pub is open, earlier than usual, and the outside chairs and tables are already full.

They go into the corner shop and buy packets of crisps to munch. Mary Beth buys a bottle of mineral water, Clive cider. At the edge of the square a portly middle-aged man has parked an ice-cream van. They buy a comet each. Clive hasn't eaten ice cream in years; it's the traditional Cornish variety. The cold shocks the inside of his mouth; he eats the ice cream in quick gulping bites before it melts.

"You ever been here before?" asks Mary Beth.

"No, never. I've been to Penzance, years ago, when I was a child." He rubs his chin, the prickly stubble. Different from the picture of professional respectability his work colleagues see. He'll spend a day unshaven, just for once.

"I've never been to Europe before," says Mary Beth. "And when I heard there was going to be this eclipse, I just had to come along. I'd never seen one."

"It'll be quite a spectacle."

"Sure." She touches him lightly on the elbow. So self-confident. That is what he likes about her but wonders most at. Perhaps it comes with being American, he thinks: a self. confident race. It took him years to gather any sort of poise: he had shyness to overcome, and had to accustom himself to being gay.

They walk past the pub and down a side street toward a small church. Just before it is a graveyard. Already there's a crowd, some of them sitting on the headstones. People of all ages from babes-in-arms to a ninety-something woman in a wheelchair. Most of them have smoked glass or photographic negatives, some of

them have telescopes set up to project the sun's light onto cards. They've passed several TV crews on the way here, but many other people have their own cameras, still or cine, or camcorders. Others are sitting on the ground with instruments Clive can only guess the function of. There are journalists here, too, who'll send their copy through by cellfax when it's all over. He instinctively feds inside his grip for his own camera, to check it's still there. They sit down on the grass verge. She pulls her sweatshirt off over her head, drapes it over her shoulder. Clive notes the beads of perspiration on her upper lip, the damp dark circles under the arms of her T-shirt.

"Is that your lunch?" he asks, looking at the bag of crisps, the bread rolls and cheese.

She grins. "I don't eat much."

"Traveling on a budget. I used to do that. A good way to crash-diet."

She nods, grins. Then she asks: "Where did you go?"

"Oh, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland..."

"I've been there, too. There's some neat places there. I'd like to see Eastern Europe ill have the time."

"Well, you've got plenty of time to do it in, Mary Beth. That was when I was a student, myself."

"Before you settled down?"

"I'm not married, if that's what you mean."

"I figured you weren't."

"I'm gay, actually."

She raises her eyebrows. "Really? Oh, fine."

They sit in silence for a while. Clive's words have inhibited Mary Beth. She hadn't realized he was gay, but perhaps that was why she felt safe with him. It's not that she's unused to homosexuals: there are enough of them at college, after all, some of whom— of both sexes— she counts as friends. Just a little disappointment: she has found him attractive, in a middle-aged kind of way. But it was only an idle fantasy: she's committed to Todd, halfway across the world now. They're already living together and, when the next semester starts, they'll announce their engagement.

She loops her arms about her legs and draws them in to herself, resting her

chin on her knees.

“Have you got a boyfriend?” she asks.

“Yes, I have. His name’s Mark. He’s five years younger than me. He’s gone up North. A friend of ours is dying of AIDS.”

“I’m sorry. Todd’s the same. He had to stay behind; his Mom’s very ill. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry for you both.”

Connections. Things in common. Mary Beth likes to find them. The similarities between her, a twenty-year-old Californian heterosexual woman and this at-least-fifteen-years-older English male homosexual. The coincidence of objective and meeting. The randomness from which your life coalesces, the unknown strange attractors that shape it. I sound like Todd, explaining what he does to me, she thinks. Todd is a mathematician working in Chaos Theory. She met him at a faculty dance and was attracted to him immediately. He’s tall, six four, tanned and blond, archetypal beach-California. She carries a photo of him in her backpack.

“You know,” Clive says. “I’ve heard so much about this eclipse. I used to be really into astronomy when I was younger. They all mentioned this eclipse in Cornwall in 1999. I just had to go and see it. Judging by Penzance and here, it looks like lots of people felt the same.”

“Well, it is a rare event.”

“The only total solar eclipse visible from the British Isles since 1954, and it’ll be a long time until the next one. The newspapers and TV have been full of it.” He remembers an animated diagram on one of the TV programs, inscribing the Line of View on a map of Cornwall from north of Penzance to south of Truro.

“Jeez, I never realized it was such a big deal,” says Mary Beth. “Suppose I should’ve guessed.”

The van bumps as it goes up the hill toward Trezillan. “Fucking backwater,” Diana mutters. “It’s in the middle of fucking nowhere.” She takes a long drag on her cigarette.

“Well, we’re on the right track now,” says Tom. “We won’t miss anything.”

“Why couldn’t a local crew do this?” Diana goes on. “They’ll at least know where the tinpot little place is. Oh, no, Diana’ll do it. Good old Di. Give her the shit no one else wants.”

“We’re here,” says Tom. They pull up in the carpark by the village hall, on the edge of the green. A space is reserved for them. Stalls have been set up; music plays from a ghetto blaster at one end. It’s mostly women here’ Diana notices: women with young children in tow, women who don’t work outside the house.

She renews her lipstick and steps out of the van. Tom goes back to help with the camera and sound equipment. Diana stands at the edge of the green; a fiftyish woman in a dark suit strides across the grass toward her.

“Diana Mathis?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

The woman extends a hand; Diana takes it. “Good morning, Ms. Mathis. I’m Margaret Weldon, the local councilor. We’re very privileged to have you here.”

Diana smiles. So many people thought the presence of a TV camera was doing them a favor. She knows this woman pulled a few strings to get the BBC here; the event will add to her prestige. “Well, it’s not every day this sort of thing happens.”

Margaret Weldon smiles broadly. “Yes, it is rather exciting, isn’t it? I didn’t realize they were quite so rare. And it’s such a lovely day for it, too...”

The woman is much too fluttery for Diana’s taste. She continues talking as she leads Diana and the crew to the main marquee. “Do have a look around if you have time. We do take pride in our unspoiled little village. And I’d be very grateful if you’d have lunch with me.”

Silly old cow, thinks Diana. She probably doesn’t get too much excitement/n her Life. The soundman makes a chatterbox gesture behind Margaret Weldon’s back. Diana grins, and puts her finger to her lips.

At the other side of the green, Morwenna parks her car. She and Adrian walk across the grass to the stalls, Adrian one step behind.

“Now, you stay with me, young Adrian,” she says. “I am responsible for you. Your Mum doesn’t know you’re here.”

“I can look after myself.”

“You say.”

“You’re being bloody bossy.” Adrian pouts.

Morwenna stops, tums, extends a finger. “Look, Adrian. You’re with me

now. Don't make me angry."

"All right."

She takes his hand and continues walking. So embarrassing. Morwenna is treating him like a child. He's thirteen; he's not a baby anymore. He takes his hand away.

"Okay, suit yourself," she says. "But don't leave my sight."

They pass in front of one stall, a tombola. The middle-aged woman behind it says, "Hello, Morwenna! Aren't you running the shop today?"

"It's shut for the morning, Eileen," she says. "I decided. Special occasion."

"Who's this young man?" says Eileen, squinting past Morwenna to Adrian.

"This is Adrian. He does my paper round. He did it in record time this morning."

"Hello," says Adrian flatly.

"Well, the BBC have arrived," Eileen adds. "Over there, by the marquee."

Morwenna looks, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand. Adrian follows her gaze. A tall black woman is speaking to Mrs. Weldon. Something about the visitor fascinates him: the expensive suit, the twitchy manner. A city dweller, not at ease in the country. You don't see many black faces in Trezillan.

"That's Diana Mathis," says Eileen.

"She looks prettier than she does on telly," says Morwenna. "Come on, Adrian, let's get a bit nearer. We might get our faces on the news."

Over by the marquee, Diana tells Tom: "We'll get a few overviews of the crowd. If we can interview you, Mrs. Weldon —"

"Call me Margaret. Certainly."

"We can do that any time. I'd like to talk to some of those people out there."

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

"And one of the k — children, too. That'd add a nice touch."

"That won't be any problem."

“We won’t get in anyone’s way.”

THE ECLIPSE reaches fifty percent partial, and more, the Sun has become an increasingly thinning crescent. The sky over Cornwall has darkened, and will darken still more as totality approaches. The temperature has dropped; birds stop their wheeling in the sky and fly to their evening perches. Noisy children become quiet and still.

As he talks to Mary Beth, Clive senses that for once, their bodies do not matter. Masculinity and femininity no longer apply, no longer inhibit. A pure meeting of minds, and at last his body can be ignored: the rough stubble, the expanding waistline, the thinning hair. He imagines his body hair melting away, his penis shrinking inward; her breasts reabsorbed into her body, her vagina dosing up. But he opens his eyes again, and difference is still apparent: the swell of her breasts and hips, the white ridge of her bra through her T-shirt. The ground is still hard on his buttocks. The body can’t be wholly ignored.

Although he has a lover of two years’ standing, sex for him has always mattered less than companionship. He knows not everyone shares his view: certain past lovers certainly didn’t. But companionship is what he has, if only briefly, with this young American woman, and sexuality cannot muddle the equation. But he won’t see her again after today\$ before long she’ll be halfway across the globe, in another continent. He can buy her lunch, back in Penzance; perhaps they’ll exchange addresses. Perhaps.

Near to them, a small black and white portable TV is sitting on the grass, a lead running back between the gravestones and over the wall to a nearby car engine. Clive hasn’t paid much attention to it, but occasionally lets himself be distracted by it. He watches an interview with a German man talking about how he was at the ‘91 Pacific eclipse and the ‘94 South American amongst others; how he does not tire of watching eclipses and how everyone should witness one at least once in their lives — it’s a religious experience.

Clive nudges Mary Beth’s elbow and points at the TV set. That’s what it’s like for me, he thinks, something like that. Mary Beth looks up at him and smiles warmly.

Clive takes another swig of cider. He remembers when he was Mary Beth’s age, when he’d be sitting somewhere like this of a weekend, a man beside him, slipping slowly into an amiable tipsiness. Alcohol always makes him expansive, and in an excess of goodwill he slips his arm about Mary Beth’s shoulders. Normally such a gesture would horrify him: in the past, before public attitudes eased, he wanted to publicly embrace his lover, kiss him, the way he’d seen heterosexual couples do, but he knew full well he couldn’t. But she doesn’t resist, accepts his gesture with utter calmness, moves in to the circle of his arm.

Mary Beth is not surprised when Clive rests his arm on her shoulders; it's a natural consequence of the ease of their acquaintance. She's grown fond of him, as if he were a favorite uncle. She'll stay with him today for as long as she can: she'd prefer that to exploring St. Just, Penzance, Land's End on her own. Perhaps they'll keep in touch; already she regards him as a friend.

“And now over live to Diana Mathis in Cornwall.”

“Thank you, Michael. Well, I'm here at Trezillan village green, and we're not far from totality now. Adrian—” and she turns to a young boy, nearest the camera — “isn't this an exciting event?”

The camera moves in to a close-up of the boy, who is in his early teens. Clive doesn't hear what the boy says, and only marginally registers his strong Cornish accent. I must have been like that, years ago, he thinks. In my case, the Moon landings; in his case, this. He'll never forget this day. He hasn't become cynical, not like me, not like that reporter. She's seen it all, possibly seen too much. So she doesn't see anything at all. Tomorrow she'll be interviewing an old lady who's rescued a cat. It's all one long blur of news. Other people's lives don't impact on her outside her own little circle, nor on me. But at least I'm aware of it. But I don't know quite what to do about it.

The sky is darkening, as the sun is reduced to a thin tiara round the black disc of the moon. The seagulls are silent, mistaking the darkness for night. In St. Just there is no activity now: cars have stopped on the main road, even in the village center, and the drivers are looking out of their windows at the sun. Totality is very near. Mary Beth leans forward, puts her sweatshirt back on, settles back into the crook of Clive's arm.

“It's a beautiful sight,” she says.

“I'm glad it's come out this way,” says Clive. He has taken out his camera now; it rests on his lap, ready. “What a disappointment if we couldn't see the Sun. If it were overcast.”

“The sky'd still go dark.”

“But it wouldn't be the same.”

Mary Beth looks up again. The Sun is a fingernail-paring now, slipping inexorably into total eclipse.

“There it goes,” a man somewhere in the crowd shouts out.

At the very last moment, the Sun flares in a brilliant point of light at the edge

of the Moon. The diamond-ring effect, the last stage before second contact. When the Sun disappears the crowd cheers and applauds.

“Make a wish,” Clive mutters in her ear.

Mary Beth does.

Total eclipse. Portent of millennial disaster, or the time when, as they say, in its special darkness you can see yourself more clearly? As thousands of people in Cornwall, and millions more live on television, watch, at 11:10 British Summer Time Total Eclipse 1999 begins.

The sky is night-dark, and there are stars. Venus, Jupiter, and Mercury are visible, their positions carefully noted by the astronomers present. The Moon is unyielding black, a hole in the sky. Around it is the opalescent ring of the solar corona, rippling like a net curtain. A red-orange prominence spark-spits out into space. Another curls round and joins itself: the hole formed is large enough to contain the Earth. A minute passes; two. For the two minutes and twenty-three seconds of totality cameras click and whirr. People look up, holding hands in silence. And then a point of brilliant light bursts out at the side of the Moon, and grows brighter. Third contact. The corona is no longer visible, and the stars have gone out. Already the sky is lightening.

It is over. It is not Judgment Day.

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Gary Couzens is a British writer who has sold short fiction to anthologies and fiction magazines in the U.K. He writes a regular film column in *Exuberance*, and has sold non-fiction on film and theater. “Second Contact” marks his first publication outside of Great Britain.