

Papa

by Ian R. MacLeod

“Grownups,” the author’s last story for Asimov’s, appeared in our June 1992 issue. That brilliantly bizarre gender-bending tale was a finalist for the James R. Tiptree, Jr. Award. In his new story, Mr. MacLeod takes a poignant look at the questions of parenting, maturity, and aging in a future society where life spans routinely double our own.

art: Ron Chironna

An A|NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

My grandchildren have brought time back to me. Even when they have gone, my house will never be the same. Of course, I didn’t hear them when they arrived—on this as on many other mornings, I hadn’t bothered to turn on my eardrums—but a tingling jab from the console beside my bed finally caught my attention. What had I been doing? Lying in the shadowed heat, watching the sea breeze lift the dappled blinds? Not even that. I had been somewhere distant. A traveler in white empty space.

The blinds flicker. My bedhelper emerges from its wallspace, extending mantis arms for me to grab. One heave, and I’m sitting up. Another, and I’m standing. The salt air pushes hot, cool. I pause to blink. Slow, quick, with both eyes. A moment’s concentration. Despite everything Doc Fanian’s told me, it’s never become like riding a bicycle, but then who am I, now, to ride a bike? And then my eardrums are *on*, and the sound of everything leaps into me. I hear the waves, the sea, the lizards stirring on the rocks, distant birdsong, the faint whispering trees. I hear the slow drip of the showerhead on the bathroom tiles, and the putter of a rainbow-winged flyer somewhere up in the hot blue sky. I hear the papery breath and heartbeat of an old man aroused from his mid-morning slumbers. And I hear voices—young voices—outside my front door.

“He *can*’t be in.”

“Well, he can’t be *out* . . .”

“Let’s—”

“—No, you.”

“I’ll—”

“—listen. I think . . .”

“It’s him.”

Looking down at myself, I see that, yes, I am clothed, after a fashion: shorts and a T-shirt—crumpled, but at least not the ones I slept in last night. So I *did* get dressed today, eat breakfast, clean up afterward, shave. . . .

“Are you in there, Papa?”

My granddaughter Agatha’s voice.

“Wait a moment,” I croak, sleep-stiff, not really believing. Heading for the hall.

The front door presents an obstacle. There’s the voice recognition system my son Bill had fitted for me. Not that anyone mugs or burgles anyone else any longer, but Bill’s a worrier—he’s past eighty now,

and of that age.

“Are you all right in there?”

Saul’s voice this time.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

The simple routine of the voicecode momentarily befuddles me. The tiny screen says *User Not Recognized*. I try again, and then again, but my voice is as dry as my limbs are until the lubricants get working. My grandchildren can hear me outside, and I know they’ll think Papa’s talking to himself.

At last. My front door swings open.

Saul and Agatha. Both incredibly real in the morning brightness with the cypressed road shimmering behind them. I want them to stand there for a few moments so I can catch my breath—and for the corneas I had fitted last winter to darken—but I’m hugged and I’m kissed and they’re past me and into the house before any of my senses can adjust. I turn back into the hall. Their luggage lies in a heap. Salt-rimed, sandy, the colors bleached, bulging with washing and the excitements of far-off places. *Venice. Paris. New York. The Sea of Tranquillity*. Even then, I have to touch to be sure.

“Hey Papa, where’s the *food*?”

jdh

Agatha crouches down on the tiles in my old-fashioned kitchen, gazing into the open fridge. And Saul’s tipping back a self-cooling carafe he’s found above the sink, his brown throat working. They’re both in cut-off shorts, ragged tops. Stuff they’ve obviously had on for days. And here’s me worrying about what I’m wearing—but the same rules don’t apply. Agatha stands up, fills her mouth with a cube of ammoniac brie from the depths of the fridge. Saul wipes his lips on the back of his hand, smiles. As though he senses that the hug on the doorstep might have passed me by, he comes over to me. He gives me another. Held tight, towered over, I feel the rub of his stubbled jaw against my bald head as he murmurs *Papa, it’s good to be here*. And Agatha joins in, kisses me with cheese crumbs on her lips, bringing the sense of all the miles she’s traveled to get here, the salt dust of a million far-off places. I’m tempted to pull away when I feel the soft pressure of her breasts against my arm. But this moment is too sweet, too innocent. I wish it could go on forever.

Finally, we step back and regard each other.

“You should have let me know you were coming,” I say, wondering why I have to spoil this moment by complaining. “I’d have stocked up.”

“We tried, Papa,” Agatha says.

Saul nods. “A few days ago at the shuttleport in Athens, Papa. And then I don’t know how many times on the ferry through the islands. But all we got was the engaged flag.”

“I’ve been meaning,” I say, “to get the console fixed.”

Saul smiles, not believing for one moment. He asks, “Would you like me to take a look?”

I shrug. Then I nod Yes, because the console really does need reprogramming. And Saul and Agatha were probably genuinely worried when they couldn’t get through, even though nothing serious could happen without one of my implant alarms going off.

“But you don’t mind us coming, do you, Papa? I mean, if we’re getting in the way or anything. Just say and we’ll go.” Agatha’s teasing, of course, just to see the look on Papa’s face.

“No, no.” I lift my hands in surrender, feeling the joints starting to ease. “It’s wonderful to have you here. Stay with us as long as you want. Do whatever you like. That’s what grandparents are for.”

They nod sagely, as though Papa’s spoken a great truth. But sharp-eyed glances are exchanged across the ancient kitchen table, and I catch the echo of my words before they fade. And I realize what Papa’s gone and said. *We. Us.*

Why did I use the plural? Why? When Hannah’s been dead for more than seventy years?

An hour later, after the hormones and lubricants have stabilized, I’m heading down to the port in my rattletrap open-top Ford. Off shopping to feed those hungry mouths even though I want to hold onto every moment of Saul and Agatha’s company.

White houses, cool streets framing slabs of sea and sky. I drive down here to the port once or twice a week to get what little stuff I need these days, but today I’m seeing things I’ve never noticed before. Canaries and flowers on the window ledges. A stall filled with candied fruit and marzipan mice, wafting a sugared breeze. I park the Ford in the square, slap on my autolegs and head off just as the noonday bells begin to chime.

By the time I reach Antonio’s, my usual baker, the display on the fat-wheeled trolley I picked up in the concourse by the fountains is already reading *Full Load*. I really should have selected the larger model, but you have to put in extra money or something. Antonio grins. He’s a big man, fronting slopes of golden crust, cherry-nippled lines of iced bun. Sweaty and floured, he loves his job the way everyone seems to these days.

I’m pointing everywhere. Two, no, three loaves. And up there; never mind, I’ll have some anyway. And those long twirly things—are they sweet?—I’ve always wondered...

“You’ve got visitors?” He packs the crisp warm loaves into crisp brown bags.

“My grandchildren.” I smile, broody as a hen. “They came out of nowhere this morning.”

“That’s great,” he beams. He’d slap my shoulder if he could reach that far across the marble counter. “How old?”

I shrug. What is it now? Bill’s eighty-something. So—nearly thirty. But that can’t be right...

“Anyway,” he hands me the bags, too polite to ask if I can manage. “Now’s a good time.” My autolegs hiss as I back out toward the door. The loaded trolley follows.

But he’s right. Now *is* a good time. The very best.

I drop the bags of bread on my way back to the square. The trolley’s too full to help even if I knew how to ask it, and I can’t bend down without climbing out of the autolegs, but a grey-haired woman gathers them up from the pavement and helps me back to the car.

“You *drive?*” she asks as I clank across the square toward my Ford and the trolley rumbles behind in attendance. It’s a museum piece. She chuckles again. Her face is hidden under the shadow-weave of a straw sunhat.

Then she says, “Grandchildren—how lovely,” as nectarines and oranges tumble into the back seat. I can’t remember telling her about Saul and Agatha as we walked—in my absorption, I can’t even remember speaking—but perhaps it’s the only possible explanation for someone of my age doing this

amount of shopping. When I look up to thank her, she's already heading off under the date palms. The sway of a floral print dress. Crinkled elbows and heels, sandals flapping, soft wisps of grey hair, the rings on her slightly lumpen fingers catching in sunlight. I'm staring, thinking. Thinking, if only.

Back at the house, hours after the quick trip I'd intended, the front door is open, unlocked. The thing usually bleeps like mad when I leave it even fractionally ajar, but my grandchildren have obviously managed to disable it. I step out of my autolegs. I stand there in my own hall, feeling the tingling in my synthetic hip, waiting for my corneas to adjust to the change in light.

"I'm back!"

There's silence—or as close to silence as these eardrums will allow. Beating waves. Beating heart. And breathing. Soft, slow breathing. I follow the sound.

Inside my bathroom, it looks as if Saul and Agatha have been washing a large and very uncooperative dog. Sodden towels are everywhere, and the floor is a soapy lake, but then they're of a generation that's used to machines clearing up after them. Beyond, in the shadowed double room they've taken for their own, my grandchildren lie curled. Agatha's in my old off-white dressing gown—which, now I've seen her in it, I'll never want to wash or replace. Her hair spills across the pillow, her thumb rests close to her mouth. And Saul's stretched on the mattress facing the other way, naked, his bum pressed against hers. Long flanks of honey-brown. He's smooth and still, lovely as a statue.

There's a tomb-memorial I saw once—in an old cathedral, in old England—of two sleeping children, carved in white marble. I must have been there with Hannah, for I remember the ease of her presence beside me, or at least the absence of the ache that has hardly ever left me since. And I remember staring at those sweet white faces and thinking how impossible that kind of serenity was, even in the wildest depths of childhood. But now it happens all the time. Everything's an everyday miracle.

I back away. Close the door, making a clumsy noise that I hope doesn't wake them. I unload the shopping in the kitchen by hand, watching the contents of my bags diminish as if by magic as I place them on the shelves. So much becoming so little. But never mind; there's enough for a late lunch, maybe dinner. And my grandchildren are sleeping and the house swirls with their dreams. It's time, anyway, to ring Bill.

My son's in his office. Bill always looks different on the console, and as usual I wonder if this is a face he puts on especially for me. In theory, Bill's like Antonio—working simply because he loves his job—but I find that hard to believe. Everything about Bill speaks of duty rather than pleasure. I see the evening towers of a great city through a window beyond his shoulder. The lights of homeward-bound flyers drifting like sparks in a bonfire-pink sky. But which city? Bill's always moving, chasing business. My console finds him anyway, but it isn't programmed to tell you *where* unless you specifically ask. And I don't know how.

"Hi, Dad."

Two or three beats. Somewhere, nowhere, space dissolves, instantaneously relaying this silence between us. Bill's waiting for me to say why I've called. He knows Papa wouldn't call unless he had a reason.

I say, "You look fine, son."

He inclines his head in acknowledgment. His hair's still mostly a natural red-brown—which was Hannah's color—but I see that he's started to recede, and go grey. And there are deep creases around the hollows of his eyes as he stares at me. If I didn't know any better, I'd almost say that my son was starting to look old. "You too, Dad."

“Your kids are here. Saul and Agatha.”

“I see.” He blinks, moves swiftly on. “How are they?”

“They’re—” I want to say, great, wonderful, incredible; all those big stupid puppy dog words. “—they’re fine. Asleep at the moment, of course.”

“Where have they been?”

I wish I could just shrug, but I’ve never been comfortable using nonverbal gestures over the phone. “We haven’t really talked yet, Bill. They’re tired. I just thought I’d let you know.”

Bill purses his long, narrow lips. He’s about to say something, but then he holds it back. *Tired. Haven’t talked yet. Thought I’d let you know.* Oh, the casualness of it all! As though Saul and Agatha were here with their Papa last month and will probably call in next as well.

“Well, thanks, Dad. You must give them my love.”

“Any other messages?”

“Tell them I’d be happy if they could give me a call.”

“Sure, I’ll do that. How’s Meg?”

“She’s fine.”

“The two of you should come down here.”

“You could come *here*, Dad.”

“We must arrange something. Anyway, I’m sure you’re—”

“—pretty busy, yes. But thanks for ringing, Dad.”

“Take care, son.”

“You too.”

The screen snows. After a few moments’ fiddling, I manage to turn it off.

I set about getting a meal for my two sleeping beauties. Salads, cheese, crusty bread, slices of pepper and carrot, garlicky dips. Everything new and fresh and raw. As I do so, the conversation with Bill drones on in my head. These last few years, they can go on for hours inside me after we’ve spoken. Phrases and sentences tumbling off into new meaning. Things unsaid. Now, I’m not even sure why I bothered to call him. There’s obviously no reason why he should be worried about Saul and Agatha. Was it just to brag—Hey, look, I’ve got your kids!—or was it in the hope that, ringing out of the blue in what were apparently office hours in whatever city he was in, I’d really make contact?

Slicing with my old steel knives on the rainbow-wet cutting board, I remember Bill the young man, Bill the child, Bill the baby. Bill when Hannah and I didn’t even have a name for him two weeks out of the hospital. As Hannah had grown big in those ancient days of pre-birth uncertainty, we’d planned on Paul for a boy, Esther for a girl. But when he arrived, when we took him home and bathed him, when we looked at this tiny creature like some red Indian totem with his bulbous eyes, enormous balls, and alarmingly erect penis, Paul had seemed entirely wrong. He used to warble when he smelled Hannah close to him—we called it his milk song. And he waved his legs in the air and chuckled and laughed at an age when babies supposedly aren’t able to do that kind of thing. So we called him William. An impish, mischievous name. In our daft parental certainty, even all the dick and willy connotations had seemed

entirely appropriate. But by the time he was two, he was Bill to everyone. A solid, practical name that fit, even though calling him Bill was something we'd never dreamed or wanted or intended.

In the heat of mid-afternoon, beneath the awning on the patio between sky and sea, Papa's with his offsprings, sated with food. I feel a little sick, to be honest, but I'm hoping it doesn't show.

"Your dad rang," I say, finding the wine has turned the meaning of the sentence around—as though, for once, Bill had actually made the effort and contacted *me*.

"Rang?" Agatha puzzles over the old, unfamiliar phrase. Rang. Called. She nods. "Oh yeah?" She lifts an espadrilled foot to avoid squashing the ants who are carrying off breadcrumbs and scraps of salad. "What did he say?"

"Not much." *I'd be happy if they'd call*. Did he mean he'd be unhappy otherwise? "Bill seemed pretty busy," I say. "Oh, and he wanted to know where you've been these last few months."

Saul laughs. "That sounds like Dad, all right."

"He's just interested," I say, feeling I should put up some kind of defense.

Agatha shakes her head. "You know what Dad gets like, Papa." She wrinkles her nose. "All serious and worried. Not that you shouldn't be serious about things. But not about *everything*?"

"And he's so bloody possessive," Saul agrees, scratching his ribs.

I try not to nod. But they're just saying what children have always said: waving and shouting across a generation gap that gets bigger and bigger. Hannah and me, we put off having Bill until we were late-thirties for the sake of our careers. Bill and his wife Meg, they must have both been gone fifty when they had these two. Not that they were worn out—in another age, they'd have passed for thirty—but old is old is old.

The flyers circle in the great blue dome above the bay, clear silver eggs with the rainbow flicker of improbably tiny wings; the crickets chirp amid the myrtled rocks; the yachts catch the breeze. I'd like to say something serious to Saul and Agatha as we sit out here on the patio, to try to find out what's really going on between them and Bill, and maybe even make an attempt at repair. But instead, we start to talk about holidays. I ask them if they really have been to the Sea of Tranquility, to the moon.

"Do you want to see?"

"I'd love to."

Saul dives back into the house. Without actually thinking—nearly a century out of date—I'm expecting him to return with a wad of photos in an envelope. But he returns with this box, a little VR thing with tiny rows of user-defined touchpads. He holds it out toward me, but I shake my head.

"You'd better do it, Saul."

So he slips two cool wires over my ears, presses another against the side of my nose and drops the box onto the rug that covers my lap. He touches a button. As yet, nothing happens.

"Papa, can you hear me?"

"Yes..."

"Can you see?"

I nod without thinking, but all I'm getting is the stepped green lawns of my overly neat garden, the sea unfolding the horizon. Plain old actual reality.

Then, Blam!

Saul says, "This is us coming in on the moonshuttle."

I'm flying over black and white craters. The stars are sliding overhead. I'm falling through the teeth of airless mountains. I'm tumbling toward a silver city of spires and domes.

"And this is Lunar Park."

Blam! A midnight jungle strung with lights. Looking up without my willing it through incredible foliage and the geodome, I see the distant Earth; a tiny blue globe.

"Remember, Ag? That party."

From somewhere, Agatha chuckles. "And you in that getup."

Faces. Dancing. Gleaming bodies. Parakeet colors. Someone leaps ten, fifteen feet into the air. I shudder as a hand touches me. I smell Agatha's scent, hear her saying something that's drowned in music. I can't tell whether she's in VR or on the patio.

"This goes on for ages. You know, Papa, fun at the time, but... I'll run it forward."

I hear myself say, "Thanks."

Then, Blam! I'm lying on my back on the patio. The deckchair is tipped over beside me.

"You're okay? Papa?"

Agatha's leaning down over me out of the sky. Strands of hair almost touching my face, the fall of her breasts against her white cotton blouse.

"You sort of rolled off your chair..."

I nod, pushing up on my old elbows, feeling the flush of stupid embarrassment, the jolt on my back and arse and the promise of a truly spectacular bruise. Black. Crimson. Purple. Like God smiling down through tropical clouds.

Agatha's helping me as I rise. I'm still a little dizzy, and I'm gulping back the urge to be sick. For a moment, as the endorphins advance and re-group in my bloodstream, I even get a glimpse beyond the veil at the messages my body is really trying to send. I almost feel *pain*, for Chrissake. I blink slowly, willing it to recede. I can see the patio paving in shadow and sunlight. I can see the cracked, fallen box of the little VR machine.

"Hey, don't worry."

Strong arms place me back in my deckchair. I lick my lips and swallow, swallow, swallow. No, I won't be sick.

"Are you okay? You..."

"I'm fine. Is that thing repairable? Can I have a look?"

Saul immediately gives the VR box back to me, which makes me certain it's irretrievably busted. I lift the cracked lid. Inside, it's mostly empty space. Just a few silver hairs reaching to a superconductor ring in the middle.

“These machines are incredible, aren’t they?” I find myself muttering.

“Papa, they turn out this kind of crap by the million now. They make them fragile ’cos they want them to break so you go out and buy another. It’s no big deal. Do you want to go inside? Maybe it’s a bit hot for you out here.”

Before I can think of an answer, I’m being helped back inside the house. I’m laid on the sofa in the cool and the dark, with the doors closed and the shutters down, propped up, on cushions like a doll. Part of me hates this, but the sensation of being cared for by humans instead of machines is too nice for me to protest.

I close my eyes. After a few seconds of red darkness, my corneas automatically blank themselves out. The first time they did this, I’d expected a sensation of deep, ultimate black. But for me at least—and Doc Fanian tells me it’s different for all of his patients—white is the color of absence. Like a snowfield on a dead planet. Aching white. Like hospital sheets in the moment before you go under.

“Papa?”

“What time is it?”

I open my eyes. An instant later, my vision returns.

“You’ve been asleep.”

I try to sit up. With ease, Agatha holds me down. A tissue appears. She wipes some drool from off my chin. The clock in the room says seven. Nearly twilight. No need to blink; my eardrums are still on. Through the open patio doors comes the sound of the tide breaking on the rocks, but I’m also picking up a strange buzzing. I tilt my head like a dog. I look around for a fly. Could it be that I’ve blinked without realizing and reconfigured my eardrums in some odd way? Then movement catches my eye. A black-and-silver thing hardly bigger than a pinhead whirs past my nose, and I see that Saul’s busy controlling it with a palette he’s got on his lap at the far end of the sofa. Some new game.

I slide my legs down off the sofa. I’m sitting up, and suddenly feeling almost normal. Sleeping in the afternoon usually leaves me feeling ten years older—like a corpse—but this particular sleep has actually done me some good. The nausea’s gone. Agatha’s kneeling beside me, and Saul’s playing with his toy. I’m bright-eyed, bushy tailed. I feel like a ninety-year-old.

I say, “I was speaking this morning to Antonio.”

“Antonio, Papa?” Agatha’s forehead crinkles with puzzlement.

“He’s a man in a shop,” I say. “I mean, you don’t know him. He runs a bakery in the port.”

“Anyway, Papa,” Agatha prompts sweetly, “what were you saying to him?”

“I told him that you were staying—my grandchildren—and he asked how old you were. The thing is, I wasn’t quite sure.”

“Can’t you guess?”

I gaze at her. Why do she and Saul always want to turn everything into a game?

“I’m sorry, Papa,” she relents. “I shouldn’t tease. I’m twenty-eight and a half now, and Saul’s thirty-two and three-quarters.”

“Seven eighths,” Saul says without taking his eyes off the buzzing pinhead as it circles close to the

open windows. “And you’d better not forget my birthday.” The pinhead zooms back across the room. “I mean you, Ag. Not Papa. Papa never forgets...”

The pinhead buzzes close to Agatha, brushing strands of her hair, almost touching her nose. “Look, Saul,” she snaps, standing up, stamping her foot. “Can’t you turn that bloody thing off?”

Saul smiles and shakes his head. Agatha reaches up to grab it, but Saul’s too quick. He whisks it away. It loops the loop. She’s giggling now, and Saul’s shoulders are shaking with mirth as she dashes after it across the room.

Nodding, smiling palely, I watch my grandchildren at play.

“What is that thing, anyway?” I ask as they finally start to tire.

“It’s a metacam, Papa.” Saul touches a control. The pinhead stops dead in the middle of the room. Slowly turning, catching the pale evening light on facets of silver, it hovers, waiting for a new command. “We’re just pissing around.”

Agatha flops down in a chair. She says, “Papa, it’s the latest thing. Don’t say you haven’t seen them on the news?”

I shake my head. Even on the old flatscreen TV I keep in the corner, everything nowadays comes across like a rock music video. And the endless good news just doesn’t feel *right* to me, raised as I was on a diet of war and starving Africans.

“What does it do?” I ask.

“Well,” Saul says, “this metacam shows the effects of multiple waveform collapse. Look...” Saul shuffles toward me down the length of the sofa, the palette still on his lap. “That buzzing thing up there is a multi-lens, and I simply control it from down here—”

“—that’s amazing.” I say. “When I was young they used to have pocket camcorders you couldn’t even get in your pocket. Not unless you had one made specially. The pockets, I mean. Not the cameras...”

Saul keeps smiling through my digression. “But it’s *not just* a camera, Papa, and anyway you could get ones this size fifteen years ago.” He touches the palette on his lap, and suddenly a well of brightness tunnels down from it, seemingly right through and into the floor. Then the brightness resolves into an image. “You see? There’s Agatha.”

I nod. And there, indeed, she is: three-dee on the palette screen on Saul’s lap. Agatha. Prettier than a picture.

I watch Agatha on the palette as she gets up from the chair. She strolls over to the windows. The pinhead lens drifts after her, panning. I’m fascinated. Perhaps it’s my new corneas, but she seems clearer in the image than she does in reality.

Humming to herself, Agatha starts plucking the pink rose petals from a display on the windowledge, letting them fall to the floor. As I watch her on Saul’s palette screen, I notice the odd way that the petals seem to drift from her fingers, how they multiply and divide. Some even rise and dance, seemingly caught on a breeze although the air in the room is still, leaving fading trails behind them. Then Agatha’s face blurs as she turns and smiles. But she’s also still in profile, looking out of the window. Eyes and a mouth at both angles at once. Then she takes a step forward, while at the same time remaining still. At first, the effect of these overlays is attractive, like a portrait by Picasso, but as they build up, the palette becomes confused. Saul touches the palette edge. Agatha collapses back into one image again. She’s looking out

through the window into the twilight at the big yacht with white sails at anchor out in the bay. The same Agatha I see as I look up toward her.

“Isn’t that something?” Saul says.

I can only nod.

“Yes, incredible, isn’t it?” Agatha says, brushing pollen from her fingers. “The metacam’s showing possible universes that lie close to our own. You do understand that, Papa?”

“Yes. But...”

Agatha comes over and kisses the age-mottled top of my head.

Outside, beyond the patio and the velvety neat garden, the sea horizon has dissolved. The big white-sailed yacht now seems to be floating with the early stars. I can’t even tell whether it’s an illusion.

“We thought we’d go out on our own this evening, Papa,” she murmurs, her lips ticklingly close to my ear. “See what’s going on down in the port. That is, if you’re feeling okay. You don’t mind us leaving for a few hours, do you?”

* * *

A flyer from the port comes to collect Saul and Agatha. I stand waving on the patio as they rise into the starry darkness like silver twins of the moon.

Back inside the house, even with all the lights on, everything feels empty. I find myself wondering what it will be like after my grandchildren have gone entirely, which can only be a matter of days. I fix some food in the kitchen. Usually, I like the sense of control that my old culinary tools give me, but the buzzing of the molecular knife seems to fill my bones as I cut, slice, arrange. Saul and Agatha. Everything about them means happiness, but still I have this stupid idea that there’s a price to pay.

I sit down at the kitchen table, gazing at green-bellied mussels, bits of squid swimming in oil, bread that’s already going stale. What came over me this morning, buying all this crap? I stand up, pushing my way through the furniture to get outside. There. The stars, the moon, the faint lights of the port set down in the scoop of the darkly gleaming coast. If I really knew how to configure these eardrums, I could probably filter out everything but distant laughter in those lantern-strung streets, music, the clink of glasses. I could eavesdrop on what Saul and Agatha are saying about Papa as they sit at some café table, whether they think I’ve gone downhill since the last time, or whether, all things considered, I’m holding up pretty well.

They’ll be taking clues from things around this house that I don’t even notice. I remember visiting a great aunt back in the last century when I was only a kid. She was always punctilious about her appearance, but as she got older she used to cake her face with white powder, and there was some terrible discovery my mother made when she looked through the old newspapers in the front room. Soon after that, auntie was taken into what was euphemistically called a Home. These days, you can keep your own company for much longer. There are machines that will do most things for you: I’ve already got one in my bedside drawer that crawls down my leg and cuts my toenails for me. But when do you finally cross that line of not coping? And who will warn you when you get close?

Unaided, I climb down from the patio and hobble along the pathways of my stepped garden. Since Bill decided that I wasn’t up to maintaining it any longer and bought me a mec-cultivator, I really only wander out here at night. I’ve always been a raggedy kind of gardener, and this place is now far too neat

for me. You could putt on the neat little lawns, and the borders are a lesson in geometry. So I generally make do with darkness, the secret touch of the leaves, the scents of hidden blooms. I haven't seen the mec-cultivator for several days now anyway, although it's obviously still keeping busy, trundling along with its silver arms and prettily painted panels, searching endlessly for weeds, collecting seedheads, snipping at stray fingers of ivy. We avoid each other, it and I. In its prim determination—even in the flower displays that it delivers to the house when I'm not looking—it reminds me of Bill. He tries so hard, does Bill. He's a worrier in an age when people have given up worrying. And he's a carer, too. I know that. And I love my son. I truly love him. I just wish that Hannah was alive to love him with me. I wish that she was walking the streets of the port, buying dresses from the stalls down by the harbor. I just wish that things were a little different.

I sit down on the wall. It's hard to remember for sure now whether things were ever that happy for me. I must go back to times late in the last century when I was with Hannah, and everything was so much less easy then. We all thought the world was ending, for a start. Everything we did had a kind of twilight intensity. Of course, I was lucky; I worked in engineering construction—all those Newtonian equations that are now routinely demolished—at a time when rivers were being diverted, flood barriers erected, seas tamed. I had money and I had opportunity. But if you spend your life thinking Lucky, Lucky, Lucky, you're really simply waiting for a fall. I remember the agonies Hannah and I went through before we decided to have Bill. We talked on and on about the wars, the heat, the continents of skeleton bodies. But we finally decided as parents always do that love and hope is enough. And we made love as though we meant it, and Bill was born, and the money—at least for us—kept on coming in through the endless recessions. There were even inklings of the ways that things would get better. I remember TV programs where academics tried to describe the golden horizons that lay ahead—how unraveling the edges of possibility and time promised predictive intelligence, unlimited energy. Hannah and I were better equipped than most to understand, but we were still puzzled, confused. And we knew enough about history to recognize the parallels between all this quantum magic and the fiasco of nuclear power, which must once have seemed equally promising, and equally incomprehensible.

But this time the physicists had got it largely right. Bill must have been ten by the time the good news began to outweigh the bad, and he was still drawing pictures of burnt-out rainforest, although by then he was using a paintbox PC to do it. I remember that I was a little amazed at his steady aura of gloom. But I thought that perhaps he just needed time to change and adjust to a world that was undeniably getting better, and perhaps he would have done so, become like Saul and Agatha—a child of the bright new age—if Hannah hadn't died.

I totter back through the garden, across the patio and into the house. Feeling like a voyeur, I peek into Saul and Agatha's bedroom. They've been here—what?—less than a day, and already it looks deeply lived in, and smells like a gym. Odd socks and bedsheets and tissues are strewn across the floor, along with food wrappers (does that mean I'm not feeding them enough?), shoes, the torn pages of the in-flight shuttle magazine, the softly glowing sheet of whatever book Agatha's reading. I gaze at it, but of course it's not a book, but another game; Agatha's probably never read a book in her life. Whatever the thing is, I feel giddy just looking at it. Like falling down a prismatic well.

Putting the thing down again exactly where I found it, I notice that they've broken the top off the vase on the dresser, and then pushed the shards back into place. It's a thing that Hannah bought from one of those shops that used to sell Third World goods at First World prices; when there was a Third and First World. Thick blue glaze, decorated with unlikely looking birds. I used to hate that vase, until Hannah died, and then the things we squabbled over became achingly sweet. Saul and Agatha'll probably tell me about breaking it when they find the right moment. Or perhaps they think Papa'll never notice. But I don't mind. I really don't care. Saul and Agatha can break anything they want, smash up this whole fucking house. I almost wish they would, in fact, or at least leave some lasting impression. This place is

filled with the stuff of a lifetime, but now it seems empty. How I envy my grandchildren this dreadfully messy room, the way they manage to fill up so much space from those little bags and with all the life they bring with them. If only I could program my vacuum cleaner not to tidy it all up into oblivion as soon as they go, I'd leave it this way forever.

Saul's stuffed the metacam back into the top of his traveling bag on the floor. I can see the white corner of the palette sticking out, and part of me wants to take a good look, maybe even turn it on and try to work out if he really meant that stuff about showing alternate realities. But I go cold at the thought of dropping or breaking it—it's obviously his current favorite toy—and my hands are trembling slightly even as I think of the possibilities, of half worlds beside our own. I see an image: me bending over the metacam as it lies smashed on the tiled floor. Would the metacam record its own destruction? Does it really matter?

I leave the room, close the door. Then I open it to check that I've left things as they were. I close the door again, then I pull it back ajar, as I found it.

I go to my room, wash, and then the bedhelper trundles out and lifts me into bed, even though I could have managed it on my own. I blink three times to turn off my eardrums. Then I close my eyes.

Sleep on demand isn't an option that Doc Fanian's been able to offer me yet. When I've mentioned to him how long the nights can seem—and conversely how easily I drop without willing it in the middle of the afternoon—he gives me a look that suggests that he's heard the same thing from thousands of other elderly patients on this island. I'm sure a solution to these empty hours will be found eventually, but helping the old has never been a primary aim of technology. We're flotsam at the edge of the great ocean of life. We have to make do with spin-offs as the waves push us further and further up the beach.

But no sleep. No sleep. Just silence and whiteness. If I wasn't so tired, I'd pursue the age-old remedy and get up and actually do something. It would be better, at least, to think happy thoughts of this happy day. But Saul and Agatha evade me. Somehow, they're still too close to be real. Memory needs distance, understanding. That's what sleep's for, but as you get older, you *want* sleep, but you don't need it. I turn over in shimmering endless whiteness. I find myself thinking of gadgets, of driftwood spindrift spinoffs. Endless broken gadgets on a white infinite shore.

Their cracked lids and flailing wires. If only I could kneel, bend, pick them up and come to some kind of understanding. If only these bones would allow.

There was a time when I could work the latest Japanese gadget straight out of the box. I was a master. VCR two-year-event timers, graphic equalizers, PCs and photocopiers, the eight-speaker stereo in the car. Even those fancy camcorders were no problem, although somehow the results were always disappointing. I remember Hannah walking down a frosty lane, glancing back toward me with the bare winter trees behind her, smiling through grey clouds of breath. And Hannah in some park with boats on a lake, holding baby Bill up for me as I crouched with my eye pressed to the viewfinder. I used to play those tapes late at night after she died when Bill was asleep up in his room. I'd run them backward, forward, freeze-frame. I'd run them even though she wasn't quite the Hannah I remembered, even though she always looked stiff and uneasy when a lens was pointed at her. I had them re-recorded when the formats changed. Then the formats changed again. Things were re-digitized. Converted into solid-state. Into superconductor rings. Somewhere along the way, I lost touch with the technology.

In the morning, the door to the room where my grandchildren are sleeping is closed. After persuading my front door to open, and for some stubborn reason deciding not to put on my autolegs, I hobble out into the sunlight and start to descend the steps at the side of my house unaided. Hand over rickety hand.

It's another clear and perfect morning. I can see the snow-gleam of the mainland peaks through a cleft in the island hills, and my neighbors the Euthons are heading out on their habitual morning jog. They wave, and I wave back. What's left of their greying hair is tucked into headbands as though it might get in the way.

The Euthons sometimes invite me to their house for drinks, and, although he's shown it to me many times before, Mr. Euthon always demonstrates his holographic hi-fi, playing Mozart at volume levels that the great genius himself can probably hear far across the warm seas and the green rolling continents in his unmarked grave. I suspect that the Euthons' real interest in me lies simply in the fascination that the old have for the truly ancient—like gazing at a signpost: this is the way things will lead. But they're still sprightly enough, barely past one hundred. One morning last summer, I looked out and saw the Euthons chasing each other naked around their swimming pool. Their sagging arms and breasts and bellies flapped like featherless wings. Mrs. Euthon was shrieking like a schoolgirl and Mr. Euthon had a glistening pink erection. I wish them luck. They're living this happy, golden age.

I reach the bottom of the steps and catch my breath. Parked in the shadow of my house, my old Ford is dented, splattered with dust and dew. I only ever take it on the short drive to and from the port nowadays, but the roads grow worse by the season, and extract an increasingly heavy price. Who'd have thought the road surfaces would be allowed to get this bad, this far into the future? People generally use flyers now, and what land vehicles there are have predictive suspension; they'll give you a magic carpet ride over any kind of terrain. Me and my old car, we're too old to be even an anachronism.

I lift up the hood and gaze inside, breathing the smell of oil and dirt. Ah, good old-fashioned engineering. V8 cylinders. Sparkplugs leading to distributor caps. Rust holes in the wheel arch. I learnt about cars on chilly northern mornings, bit by bit as things refused to work. I can still remember most of it more easily than what I had for lunch yesterday.

A flock of white doves clatter up and circle east, out over the silken sea toward the lime groves on the headland. Bowed down beneath the hood, my fingers trace oiled dirt, and I find myself wishing that the old girl actually needed fixing. But over the years, as bits and pieces have given out and fallen away, the people at the workshop in the port have connected in new devices. I'm still not sure that I believe them when they tell me that until they are introduced into the car's system, every device is actually the same. To me, that sounds like the kind of baloney you give to someone who's too stupid to understand. But the new bits soon get oiled-over nicely enough anyway, and after a while they even start to look like the old bits they've replaced. It's like my own body, all the new odds and ends that Doc Fanian's put in. Eardrums, corneas, a liver, hips, a heart, joints too numerous to mention. Endless chemical implants to make up for all the things I should be manufacturing naturally. Little nano-creatures that clean and repair the walls of my arteries. Stuff to keep back the pain. After a while, you start to wonder just how much of something you have to replace before it ceases to be what it is.

"Fixing something, Papa?"

I look up with a start, nearly cracking my head on the underside of the hood.

Agatha.

"I mean, your hands look filthy." She stares at them, these gnarled old tree roots that Doc Fanian has yet to replace. A little amazed. She's in the same blouse she wore yesterday. Her hair's done up with a ribbon.

"Just fiddling around."

"You must give me and Saul a ride."

“I’d love to.”

“Did you hear us come back last night, Papa? I’m sorry if we were noisy—and it *was* pretty late.” Carved out of the gorgeous sunlight, she raises a fist and rubs at sleep-crusting eyes.

“No.” I point. “These ears.”

“So you probably missed the carnival fireworks as well. But it must be great, being able to turn yourself off and on like that. What *are* they? Re or inter-active?”

I shrug. What can I say...? I can’t even hear fireworks—or my own grandchildren coming in drunk. “Did you have a good time last night?”

“It was nice.” She gazes at me, smiling. Nice. She means it. She means everything she says.

I see that she’s got wine stains on her blouse, and bits of tomato seed. As she leans over the engine, I gaze at the crown of her head, the pale skin whorled beneath.

“You still miss Grandma, don’t you, Papa?” she asks, looking up at me from the engine with oil on the tip of her nose.

“It’s all in the past,” I say, fiddling for the catch, pulling the hood back down with a rusty bang.

Agatha gives me a hand as I climb the steps to the front of the house. I lean heavily on her, wondering how I’ll ever manage alone.

I drive Saul and Agatha down to the beach. They rattle around in the back of my Ford, whooping and laughing. And I’m grinning broadly too, happy as a kitten as I take the hairpins in and out of sunlight, through cool shadows of forest with the glittering race of water far below. At last! A chance to show that Papa’s not past it! In control. The gearshift’s automatic, but there’s still the steering, the brakes, the choke, the accelerator. My hands and feet shift in a complex dance, ancient and arcane as alchemy.

We crash down the road in clouds of dust. I beep the horn, but people can hear us coming a mile off, anyway. They point and wave. Flyers dip low, their bee-wings blurring, for a better look. The sun shines bright and hot. The trees are dancing green. The sea is shimmering silver. I’m a mad old man, wise as the deep and lovely hills, deeply loved by his deeply lovely grandchildren. And I decide right here and now that I should get out more often. Meet new strangers. See the island, make the most of the future. Live a little while I still can.

“You’re okay, Papa?”

On the bench, Agatha presses a button, and a striped parasol unfolds. “If we leave this here, it should keep track of the sun for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you still swim?” She reaches to her waist and pulls off her T-shirt. I do not even glance at her breasts.

Saul’s already naked. He stretches out on the white sand beside me. His penis flops out over his thigh; a beached baby whale.

“Do you, Papa? I mean, swim?”

“No,” I say. “Not for a few years.”

“We could try one of the pedalos later.” Agatha steps out from her shorts and underpants. “They’re powered. You don’t have to pedal unless you want to.”

“Sure.”

Agatha shakes the ribbon from her hair and scampers off down the beach, kicking up the sand. It’s late morning. Surfers are riding the deep green waves. People are laughing, splashing, swimming, drifting on the tide in huge transparent bubbles. And on the beach there are sun-worshippers and runners, kids making sandcastles, robot vendors selling ice cream.

“Ag and Dad are a real problem,” Saul says, lying back, his eyes closed against the sun.

I glance down at him. “You’re going to see him...?”

He pulls a face. “It’s a duty to see Mum and Dad, you know? It’s not like coming here to see you, Papa.”

“No.”

“You know what they’re like.”

“Yes,” I say, wondering why I even bother with the lie.

Of course, when Hannah died, everyone seemed to assume a deepening closeness would develop between father and son. Everyone, that is, apart from anyone who knew anything about grief or bereavement. Bill was eleven then, and when I looked up from the breakfast table one morning, he was twelve, then thirteen. He was finding his own views, starting to seek independence. He kept himself busy, he did well at school. We went on daytrips together and took foreign holidays. We talked amicably, we visited Mum’s grave at Christmas and on her birthday and walked through the damp grass back to the car keeping our separate silences. Sometimes, we’d talk animatedly about things that didn’t matter. But we never argued. When he was seventeen, Bill went to college in another town. When he was twenty, he took a job in another country. He wrote and rang dutifully, but the gaps got bigger. Even with tri-dee and the revolutions of instantaneous communication, it got harder and harder to know what to say. And Bill married Meg, and Meg was like him, only more so: a child of that generation. Respectful, hardworking, discreet, always ready to say the right thing. I think they both dealt in currency and commodities for people who couldn’t be bothered to handle their own affairs. I was never quite sure. And Meg was always just a face and a name. Of course, their two kids—when they finally got around to having them—were wildly different. I loved them deeply, richly. I loved them without doubt or question. For a while, when Saul and Agatha were still children and I didn’t yet need these autolegs to get around, I used to visit Bill and Meg regularly.

Agatha runs back up the beach from her swim. She lies down and lets the sun dry her shining body. Then it’s time for the picnic, and to my relief, they both put some clothes back on. I don’t recognize most of the food they spread out on the matting. New flavors, new textures. I certainly didn’t buy any of it yesterday on my trip to the port. But anyway, it’s delicious, as lovely as this day.

“Did you do this in the last century, Papa?” Saul asks. “I mean, have picnics on the beach?”

I shrug Yes and No. “Yes,” I say eventually, “But there was a problem if you sat out too long. A problem with the sky.”

“The *sky*?”

Saul reaches across the mat to re-stack his plate with something sweet and crusty that’s probably as good for you and unfattening as fresh air. He doesn’t say it, but still I can tell that he’s wondering how we

ever managed to get ourselves into such a mess back then, how anyone could possibly mess up something as fundamental as the sky.

Afterward, Saul produces his metacam palette from one of the bags. It unfolds. The little pinhead buzzes up, winking in the light.

“The sand here isn’t a problem?” I ask.

“Sand?”

“I mean... getting into the mechanism.”

“Oh, no.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Agatha raising her eyebrows. Then she plumps her cushion and lies down in the sun. She’s humming again. Her eyes are closed, I’m wondering if there isn’t some music going on inside her head that I can’t even hear.

“You were saying yesterday, Saul,” I persist, “that it’s more than a camera...”

“Well,” Saul looks up at me, and blanks the palette, weighing up just how much he can tell Papa that Papa would understand. “You know about quantum technology, Papa, and the unified field?”

I nod encouragingly.

He tells me anyway. “What it means is that for every event, there are a massive number of possibilities.”

Again, I nod.

“What happens, you see, Papa, is that you push artificial intelligence along the quantum shift to observe these fractionally different worlds, to make the waveform collapse. That’s where we get all the world’s energy from nowadays, from the gradient of that minute difference. And that’s how this palette works. It displays some of the worlds that lie close beside our own. Then it projects them forward. A kind of animation. Like predictive suspension, only much more advanced...”

I nod, already losing touch. And that’s only the beginning. His explanation carries on, grows more involved. I keep on nodding. After all, I do know a little about quantum magic. But it’s all hypothetical, technical stuff; electrons and positrons. It’s got nothing to do with real different worlds, has it?

“So it really *is* showing things that might have happened?” I ask when he’s finally finished. “It really isn’t a trick?”

Saul glances down at his palette, then back up at me, looking slightly offended. The pinhead lens hangs motionless in the air between us, totally ignoring the breeze. “No,” he says. “It’s not a trick, Papa.”

Saul shows me the palette: he even lets me rest the thing on my lap. I gaze down, and watch the worlds divide.

The waves tumble, falling and breaking over the sand in big glassy lumps. The wind lifts the flags along the shore in a thousand different ways. The sky shivers. A seagull flies over, mewing, breaking into a starburst of wings. Grey comet-tailed things that might be ghosts, people, for all I know—the product of my own addled and enhanced senses, blur by across the shore.

“You’ve got implant corneas, haven’t you, Papa?” Saul says. “I could probably rig things up so you could have the metacam projected directly into your eyes.”

“No thanks,” I say.

Probably remembering what happened to the VR, Saul doesn't push it.

I look down in wonder. “This is...”

What? Incredible? Impossible? Unreal?

“This is...”

Saul touches the palette screen again. He cancels out the breaking, shattering waves. And Agatha calls the vendor for an ice cream, and somehow it's a shock when she pushes the cool cone into my hand. I have to hold it well out of the way, careful not to drip over the palette.

“This is...”

And my ice cream falls, splattering Saul's arm.

Agatha leans over. “Here, let me. I'll turn that off, Papa.”

“Yes, do.”

There's nothing left on the palette now, anyway. Just a drop of ice cream, and the wide empty beach. The screen blanks at Agatha's touch, and the pinhead camera shoots down from a sky that suddenly seems much darker, cooler. Immense purple-grey clouds are billowing over the sea. The yachts and the flyers are turning for home. Agatha and Saul begin to pack our stuff away.

“I'll drive the car home, Papa,” Agatha says, helping me from the deckchair just as I feel the first heavy drops of rain.

“But...”

They take an arm each. They half-carry me across the sand and up the slope to the end of the beach road where I've parked—badly I now see—the Ford.

“But...”

They put me down, and unhesitatingly unfold the Ford's complex hood. They help me in.

“But...”

They wind up the windows and turn on the headlights just as the first grey veils strike the shore. The wipers flap, the rain drums. Even though she's never driven before in her life, Agatha spins the Ford's wheel and shoots uphill through the thickening mud, crashing through the puddles toward the hairpin.

Nestled against Saul in the back seat, too tired to complain, I fall asleep.

That evening, we go dancing. Saul. Agatha. Papa.

There are faces. Gleaming bodies. Parakeet colors. Looking through the rooftops of the port into the dark sky, I can see the moon. I'm vaguely disappointed to find that she's so full tonight. Since I've had these corneas fitted, and with the air nowadays so clear, I can often make out the lights of the new settlements when she's hooded in shadow.

Agatha leans over the cafe table. She's humming some indefinable tune. “What are you looking at, Papa?”

“The moon.”

She gazes up herself, and the moon settles in the pools of her eyes. She blinks and half-smiles. I can tell that Agatha really does see mystery up there. She’s sat in the bars, slept in the hotels, hired dust buggies and gone crater-climbing. Yet she still feels the mystery.

“You’ve never been up there, have you, Papa?”

“I’ve never left the Earth.”

“There’s always time,” she says.

“Time for what?”

She laughs, shaking her head.

Music is playing. Wine is flowing. The port is beautiful in daylight, but even more so under these lanterns, these stars, this moon, on this warm summer night. Someone grabs Saul and pulls him out to join the dance that fills the square. Agatha remains sitting by me. They’re sweet, considerate kids. One of them always stays at Papa’s side.

“Do you know what kind of work Bill does these days?” I ask Agatha—a clumsy attempt both to satisfy my curiosity, and to raise the subject of Bill and Meg.

“Pe works the markets, Papa. Like always. He sells commodities.”

“But if he deals in things,” I say, genuinely if only vaguely puzzled, “that must mean there isn’t enough of everything. . . .” But perhaps it’s another part of the game. If everything was available in unlimited supply, there would be no fun left, would there? Nothing to save up for. No sense of anticipation or pleasurable denial. But then, how come Bill takes it all so seriously? What’s he trying to prove?

Agatha shrugs So What? at my question anyway. She really doesn’t understand these things herself, and cares even less. Then someone pulls her up into the dance, and Saul takes her place beside me. The moment is lost. Saul’s tapping his feet. Smiling at Agatha as her bright skirt swirls. No metacam tonight, no Picasso faces. She doesn’t dissolve or clap her hands, burst into laughter or tears, or walk back singing to the table. But it’s hard not to keep thinking of all those tumbling possibilities. Where does it end? Is there a different Papa for every moment, even one that sprawls dying right now on these slick cobbles as blood pumps out from fragile arteries into his brain? And is there another one, far across the barricades of time, that sits here with Saul as Agatha swirls and dances, with Hannah still at his side?

I reach for my wine glass and swallow, swallow. Hannah’s dead—but what if one cell, one strand of double helix, one atom had been different. . . .? Or perhaps if Hannah had been less of an optimist? What if she hadn’t ignored those tiny symptoms, those minor niggles, if she’d worried and gone straight to the doctor and had the tests? Or if it had happened later, just five or ten years later, when there was a guaranteed cure. . . .? But still—and despite the metacam—I’m convinced that there’s only one real universe. All the rest is hocus pocus, the flicker of an atom, quantum magic. And, after all, it seems churlish to complain about a world where so many things have finally worked out right. . . .

“Penny for them.”

“What?”

“Your thoughts.” Saul pours out more wine. “It’s a phrase.”

“Oh yes.” My head is starting to fizz. I drink the wine. “It’s an old one. I know it.”

The music stops. Agatha claps, her hands raised, her face shining. The crowd pushes by. Time for drinks, conversation. Looking across the cleared space of the square, down the shadowed street leading to the harbor, I see a grey-haired woman walking toward us. I blink twice, slowly, waiting for her to disappear. But my ears pick up the clip of her shoes over the voices and the re-tuning of the band. She's smiling. She knows us. She waves. As my heart trampolines on my stomach, she crosses the square and pulls a seat over to our table.

"May I?"

Agatha and Saul nod Yes. They're always happy to meet new people. Me, I'm staring. She's not Hannah, of course. Not Hannah.

"Remember?" She asks me, tucking her dress under her legs as she sits down. "I helped carry your bags to that car of yours. I've seen it once or twice in the square. I've always wondered who drove it."

"It's Papa's pride and joy," Agatha says, her chest heaving from the dance.

The woman leans forward across the table, smiling. Her skin is soft, plump, downy as a peach.

I point to Saul. "My grandson here's got this device. He tells me it projects other possible worlds—"

"—Oh, you mean a metacam." She turns to Saul. "What model?"

Saul tells her. The woman who isn't Hannah nods, spreads her hands, sticks out her chin a little. It's not the choice she'd have made, but...

"More wine, Papa?"

I nod. Agatha pours.

I watch the woman with grey hair. Eyes that aren't Hannah's color, a disappointing droop to her nose that she probably keeps that way out of inverted vanity. I try to follow her and Saul's conversation as the music starts up again, waiting for her to turn back toward me, waiting for the point where I can butt in. It doesn't come, and I drink my wine.

Somewhere there seems to be a mirror—or perhaps it's just a possible mirror in some other world, or my own blurred imagination—and I see the woman whose name I didn't catch sitting there, and I can see me, Papa. Propped at an off-center angle against the arms of a chair. Fat belly and long thin limbs, disturbingly pale eyes and a slack mouth surrounded by drapes of ancient skin. A face you can see right through to the skull beneath.

Not-Hannah laughs at something Saul says. Their lips move, their hands touch, but I can't hear any longer. I've been blinking too much—I may even have been crying—and I've somehow turned my eardrums off. In silence, Not-Hannah catches Saul's strong young arms and pulls him up to dance. They settle easily into the beat and the sway. His hand nestles in the small of her back. She twirls in his arms, easy as thistle-down. I blink, and drink more wine, and the sound crashes in again. I blink again. It's there. It's gone. Breaking like the tide. What am I doing here anyway, spoiling the fun of the able, the happy, the young?

This party will go on, all the dancing and the laughing, until a doomsday that'll never come. These people, they'll live forever. They'll warm up the sun, they'll stop the universe from final collapse, or maybe they'll simply relive each glorious moment as the universe turns back on itself and time reverses, party with the dinosaurs, resurrect the dead, dance until everything ends with the biggest of all possible bangs.

"Are you all right, Papa?"

“I’m fine.”

I pour out more of the wine.

It slops over the table.

Saul’s sitting at the table again with Not-Hannah, and the spillage dribbles over Not-Hannah’s dress. I say fuck it, never mind, spilling more as I try to catch the flow, and I’ve really given the two of them the perfect excuse to go off together so he can help her to clean up. Yes, help to lift off her dress even though she’s old enough to be his—

But then, who cares? Fun is fun is fun is fun. Or maybe it’s Agatha she was after. Or both, or neither. It doesn’t matter, does it? After all, my grandchildren have got each other. Call me old-fashioned, but look at them. My own bloody grandchildren. Look at them. Creatures from another fucking planet—

But Not-Hannah’s gone off on her own anyway. Maybe it was something I said, but my eardrums are off—I can’t even hear my own words, which is probably a good thing. Saul and Agatha are staring at me. Looking worried. Their lips are saying something about Papa and Bed and Home, and there’s a huge red firework flashing over the moon. Or perhaps it’s a warning cursor, which was one of things Doc Fanian told me to look out for if there was ever a problem. My body is fitted with all sorts of systems and alarms, which my flesh and veins happily embrace. It’s just this brain that’s become a little wild, a little estranged, swimming like a pale fish in its bowl of liquid and bone. So why not fit a few new extra pieces, get rid of the last of the old grey meat? And I’d be new, I’d be perfect—

Whiteness. Whiteness. No light. No darkness.

“Are you in there, Papa?”

Doc Fanian’s voice.

“Where else would I be?”

I open my eyes. Everything becomes clear. Tiger-stripes of sunlight across the walls of my bedroom. The silver mantis limbs of my bedhelper. The smell of my own skin like sour ancient leather. Memories of the night before. “What have you done to me?”

“Nothing at all.”

I blink and swallow. I stop myself from blinking again. Doc Fanian’s in beach shorts and a bright, ridiculous shirt; his usual attire for a consultation.

“Did you know,” I say, “that they’ve installed a big red neon sign just above the moon that says Please Stop Drinking Alcohol?”

“So the cursor *did* work!” Doc Fanian looks pleased with himself. His boyish features crinkle. “Then I suppose you passed out?”

“Not long after. I thought it was just the drink.”

“It’s a safety circuit. Of course, the body has got one too, but it’s less reliable at your age.”

“I haven’t even got a hangover.”

“The filters will have seen to that.”

Doc Fanian gazes around my bedroom. There’s a photo of Hannah on the far wall. She’s hugging her

knees as she sits on a grassy bank with nothing but sky behind her; a time and place I can't even remember. He peers at it, but says nothing. He's probably had a good mooch around the whole house by now, looking for signs, seeing how Papa's managing. Which is exactly why I normally make a point of visiting him at the surgery. I never used to be afraid of doctors when I was fitter, younger. But I am now. Now that I need them...

"Your grandchildren called me in. They were worried. It's understandable, although there was really no cause. None at all." There's a faint tone of irritation in Doc Fanian's voice. He's annoyed that anyone should doubt his professional handiwork, or think that Papa's systems might have been so casually set up that a few glasses of wine would cause any difficulty.

"Well, thanks."

"It's no problem." He smiles. He starts humming again. He forgives easily. "If you'd care to pop into the surgery in the next week or two, there's some new stuff I'd like to show you. It's a kind of short-term memory enhancement. You know—it helps if you forget things you've been doing recently."

I say nothing, wondering what Doc Fanian has encountered around the house to make him come up with this suggestion.

"Where are Saul and Agatha?"

"Just next door. Packing."

"*Packing?*"

"Anyway." He smiles. "I really must be going. I'd like to stay for breakfast, but..."

"Maybe some other universe, eh?"

He turns and gazes back at me for a moment. He understands more about me than I do myself, but still he looks puzzled.

"Yes," he nods. Half-smiling. Humoring an old man. "Take care, you hear?"

He leaves the door open behind him. I can hear Saul and Agatha. Laughing, squabbling. Packing. I shift myself up. The bedhelper trundles out and offers arms for me to grab. I'm standing when Saul comes into the room.

"I'm sorry about getting the doc out, Papa. We just thought, you know..."

"Why are you packing? You're not off already, are you?"

He smiles. "Remember, Papa? We're off to the Amazon. We told you on the beach yesterday."

I nod.

"But it's been great, Papa. It really has."

"I'm sorry about last night. I behaved like an idiot."

"Yes." He claps his hands on my bony shoulders and laughs outright. "That was quite something." He shakes his head in admiration. Papa, a party animal! "You really did cut loose, didn't you?"

Agatha fixes breakfast. The fridge is filled with all kinds of stuff I've never even heard of. They've re-stocked it from somewhere, and now it looks like the horn of plenty. I sit watching my lovely

granddaughter as she moves around, humming.

Cooking smells. The sigh of the sea wafts through the open window. Another perfect day. The way I feel about her and Saul leaving, I could have done with grey torrents of rain. But even in paradise you can't have everything.

"So," I say, "you're off to the Amazon."

"Yeah." She bangs the plates down on the table. "There are freshwater dolphins. Giant anteaters. People living the way their ancestors did, now the rainforest has been restored." She smiles, looking as dreamy as last night when she gazed at the moon. I can see her standing in the magical darkness of a forest floor, naked as a priestess, her skin striped with green and mahogany shadows. It requires no imagination at all. "It'll be fun," she says.

"Then you won't be visiting Bill and Meg for a while?"

She bangs out more food. "There's plenty of time. We'll get there eventually. And I wish we'd talked more here, Papa, to be honest. There are so many things I want to ask."

"About Grandma?" I ask. Making an easy guess.

"You too, Papa. All those years after she died. I mean, between then and now. You'll have to tell me what happened."

I open my mouth, hoping it will fill up with some comment. But nothing comes out. All those years: how could I have lived through so many without even noticing? My life is divided as geologists divide up the rock crust of Earth's time: those huge empty spaces of rock without life, and a narrow band which seems to contain everything. And Saul and Agatha are leaving, and time—that most precious commodity of all—has passed me by. Again.

Agatha sits down on a stool and leans forward, brown arms resting on her brown thighs. For a moment, I think that she's not going to press the point. But she says, "Do tell me about Grandma, Papa. It's one of those things Dad won't talk about."

"What do you want to know?"

"I know this is awkward, but... how did she die?"

"Bill's never told you?"

"We figured that perhaps he was too young at the time to know. But he wasn't, was he? We worked that out."

"Bill was eleven when your Gram died." I say. I know why she's asking me this now: she's getting Papa's story before it's too late. But I'm not offended. She has a right to know. "We tried to keep a lot of stuff about Hannah's death away from Bill. Perhaps that was a mistake, but that was what we both decided."

"It was a disease called cancer, wasn't it?"

So she does know something after all. Perhaps Bill's told her more than she's admitting. Perhaps she's checking up, comparing versions. But, seeing her innocent, questioning face, I know that the thought is unjust.

"Yes," I say, "it was cancer. They could cure a great many forms of the disease even then. They could probably have cured Hannah if she'd gone and had the tests a few months earlier."

“I’m sorry, Papa. It must have been awful.”

I stare at my lovely granddaughter. Another new century will soon be turning, and I’m deep into the future; further than I’d ever imagined. Has Agatha ever even known anyone who’s died? And pain, what does she know about pain? And who am I, like the last bloody guest at the Masque of the Red Death, to reveal it to her now?

What *does* she want to know, anyway—how good or bad would she like me to make it? Does she want me to tell her that, six months after the first diagnosis, Hannah was dead? Or that she spent her last days in hospital even though she’d have liked to have passed away at home—but the sight of her in her final stages distressed little Bill too much? It distressed me, too. It distressed *her*. Her skin was covered in ulcers from the treatment that the doctors had insisted on giving, stretched tight over bone and fluid-distended tissue.

“It was all over with fairly quickly,” I say. “And it was long ago.”

My ears catch a noise behind me. I turn. Saul’s standing leaning in the kitchen doorway, his arms folded, his head bowed. He’s been listening, too. And both my grandchildren look sad, almost as if they’ve heard all the things I haven’t been able to tell them.

Now Saul comes and puts his arm around my shoulder. “Poor Papa.” Agatha comes over too. I bury my face into them, trembling a little. But life must go on, and I pull away. I don’t want to spoil their visit by crying. But I cry anyway. And they draw me back into their warmth, and the tears come sweet as rain.

Then we sit together, and eat breakfast. I feel shaky and clean. For a few moments, the present seems as real as the past.

“That car of yours,” Saul says, waving his fork, swapping subjects with the ease of youth. “I was thinking, Papa, do you know if there’s any way of getting another one?”

I’m almost tempted to let him have the Ford. But then, what would that leave me with? “There used to be huge dumps of them everywhere,” I say.

“Then I’ll come back here to the island and get one, and get all that incredible stuff you’ve had done in that workshop down in the port. I mean,” he chuckles, “I don’t want to have to stop for gas.”

Gas. When did I last buy *gas*? Years ago, for sure. Yet the old Ford still rattles along.

“Anyway,” Agatha says, standing up, her plate empty although I’ve hardly even started on mine. “I’ll finish packing.”

I sit with Saul as he finishes his food, feeling hugely un-hungry, yet envying his gusto. He pushes the plate back, glances around for some kitchen machine that isn’t there to take it, then pulls a face.

“Papa, I nearly forgot. I said I’d fix that console of yours.”

I nod. The engaged flag that prevented him and Agatha getting through to me before they arrived must still be on: the thing that stops people from ringing.

Saul’s as good as his word. As Agatha sings some wordless melody in their room, he goes through some of the simpler options on the console with me. I nod, trying hard to concentrate. And Hannah holds her knees and smiles down at us from the photo on the wall. Saul doesn’t seem to notice her gaze. I’m tempted to ask for his help with other things in the house. Ways to reprogram the mec-gardener and the vacuum, ways to make the place feel more like my own. But I know that I’ll never remember his instructions. All I really want is for him to stay talking to me for a few moments longer.

“So you’re okay about that, Papa?”

“I’m fine.”

He turns away and shouts, “Hey, Ag!”

After that, everything takes only a moment. Suddenly, they’re standing together in the hall, their bags packed. *Venice. Paris. New York. The Sea of Tranquillity.* Ready to go.

“We thought we’d walk down to the port, Papa. Just catch whatever ferry is going. It’s such a lovely day.”

“And thanks, Papa. Thanks for everything.”

“Yes.”

I’m hugged first by one, then the other. After the tears before breakfast. I now feel astonishingly dry-eyed.

“Well...”

“Yes...”

I gaze at Saul and Agatha, my beautiful grandchildren. Still trying to take them in. The future stretches before us and between us.

They open the door. They head off hand-in-hand down the cypressed road. “Bye, Papa. We love you.”

I stand there, feeling the sunlight on my face. Watching them go. My front door starts to bleep. I ignore it. In the shadow of my house, beside my old Ford, I see there’s a limp-winged flyer; Saul and Agatha must have used it last night to get me home. I don’t know how to work these things. I have no idea how I’ll get rid of it.

Saul and Agatha turn again and wave before they vanish around the curve in the road. I wave back.

Then I’m inside. The door is closed. The house is silent.

I head for Saul and Agatha’s room.

They’ve stripped the beds and made a reasonable attempt at clearing up, but still I can almost feel my vacuum cleaner itching to get in and finish the job. Agatha’s left the dressing gown she borrowed on the bed. I lift it up to my face. Soap and sea salt—a deeper undertow like forest thyme. Her scent will last a few hours, and after that I suppose I’ll still have the memory of her every time I put it on. The vase that Hannah bought all those years ago still sits on top of the dressing table: they never did get around to telling me that they broke the thing. I lift it up, turning the glazed weight in my hands to inspect the damage. But the cracks, the shards, have vanished. The vase is whole and perfect again—as perfect, at least, as it ever was. In a panic, almost dropping the thing, I gaze around the room, wondering what else I’ve forgotten or imagined. But it’s still there, the fading sense of my grandchildren’s presence. A forgotten sock, torn pages of the shuttle magazine. I put the vase gently down again. When so many other things are possible, I suppose there’s bound to be a cheaply available gadget that heals china.

Feeling oddly expectant, I look under the beds. There’s dust that the vacuum cleaner will soon clear away. The greased blue inner wrapper of something I don’t understand. A few crumpled tissues. And, of course, Saul’s taken the metacam with him. He would; it’s his favorite toy. The wonderful promise of those controls, and the green menus that floated like pond lilies on the screen. REVISE. CREATE.

EDIT. CHANGE. And Agatha turning. CHANGE. Agatha standing still. REVISE. Ghost-petals drifting up from her hands, and a white yacht floating with the stars on the horizon. If you could change the past, if you could alter, if you could amend...?

But I'd always known in my heart that the dream is just a dream, and that a toy is still just a toy. Perhaps one day, it'll be possible to revisit the pharaohs, or return to the hot sweet sheets of first love. But that lies far ahead, much further even than the nearest stars that the first big ships will soon be reaching. Far beyond my own lifetime.

The broken VR machine sticks out from the top of the wastebin by the window. I take it out, wrapping the wires around the case, still wondering if there is any way to fix it. Once upon a time, VR was seen as a way out from the troubles of the world. But nobody bothers much with it any longer. It was my generation that couldn't do anything without recording it on whatever new medium the Japanese had come up with. Saul and Agatha aren't like that. They're not afraid of losing the past. They're not afraid of living in the present. They're not afraid of finding the future.

I stand for a moment, clawing at the sensation of their fading presence, dragging in breath after breath. Then the console starts to bleep along the corridor in my bedroom, and the front doorbell sounds. I stumble toward it, light-headed with joy. They're back! They've changed their minds! There isn't a ferry until tomorrow! I can't believe...

The door flashes **USER NOT RECOGNIZED** at me. Eventually, I manage to get it open.

"You *are* in. I thought..."

I stand there, momentarily dumbstruck. The pretty, grey-haired woman from yesterday evening at the café gazes at me.

"They're gone," I say.

"Who? Oh, your grandchildren. They're taking a ferry this morning, aren't they? Off to Brazil or someplace." She smiles and shakes her head. The wildnesses of youth. "Anyway," she points, "that's my flyer. Rather than try to call it in, I thought I'd walk over here and collect it." She glances back at the blue sea, the blue sky, this gorgeous island. She breathes it all in deeply. "Such a lovely day."

"Would you like to come in?"

"Well, just for a moment."

"I'm afraid I was a little drunk last night..."

"Don't worry about it. I had a fine time."

I glance over, looking for sarcasm. But of course she means it. People always do.

I burrow into my hugely overstuffed fridge. When I emerge with a tray, she's sitting gazing at the blank screen of my old TV.

"You know," she says, "I haven't seen one of those in years. We didn't have one at home, of course. But my grandparents did."

I put down the tray and rummage in my pocket. "This," I say, waving the broken VR machine in my gnarled hand. "Is it possible to get it fixed?"

"Let me see." She takes it from me, lifts the cracked lid. "Oh, I should think so, unless the coil's been broken. Of course, it would be cheaper to go out and buy a new one, but I take it that you've memories

in here that you'd like to keep?"

I pocket the VR machine like some dirty secret, and pour out the coffee. I sit down. We look at each other, this woman and I. How old is she, anyway? These days, it's often hard to tell. Somewhere between Bill and the Euthons, I suppose, which makes her thirty or even forty years younger than me. And, even if she were more like Hannah, she isn't the way Hannah would be if she were alive. Hannah would be like me, staggering on ancient limbs, confused, trying to communicate through senses that are no longer her own, dragged ever-forward into the unheeding future, scrabbling desperately to get back to the past, clawing at those bright rare days when the grandchildren come to visit, feeling the golden grit of precious moments slipping through her fingers even before they are gone.

And time doesn't matter to this woman; or to anyone under a hundred. That's one of the reasons it's so hard for me to keep track. The seasons on this island change, but people just gaze and admire. They pick the fruit as it falls. They breathe the salt wind from off the grey winter ocean and shiver happily, knowing they'll sit eating toast by the fire as soon as they get home.

"I don't live that far from here," the woman says eventually. "I mean, if there's anything that you'd like help with. If there's anything that needs doing."

I gaze back at her, trying not to feel offended. I know, after all, that I probably do need help of some kind or other. I just can't think of what it is.

"Or we could just talk," she adds hopefully.

"Do you remember fast food? McDonalds?"

She shakes her head.

"ET? Pee-Wee Herman? Global warming? Ethnic cleansing? Dan Quayle?"

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry..."

She lifts her coffee from the table, drinking it quickly.

The silence falls between us like snow.

I stand in my doorway, watching as her flyer rises and turns, its tiny wings flashing in sunlight. A final wave, and I close the door, knowing that Saul and Agatha will probably be on a ferry now. Off this island.

I head toward my bedroom. Assuming it's time for my morning rest, my bedhelper clicks out its arms expectantly. I glare at it, but of course it doesn't understand, and I've already forgotten the trick Saul showed me that you could do to disable it. The house is already back to its old ways, taking charge, cleaning up Saul and Agatha's room, getting rid of every sign of life.

But I did at least make an effort with the console, and I do know now how to make sure the engaged flag isn't showing. Child's play, really—and I always knew how to call my son Bill's number. Which is what I do now.

Of all places, Bill's in London. The precise location shows up on the console before he appears; it was just a question of making the right demand, of touching the right key. Then there's a pause.

I have to wait.

It's almost as if the console is testing my resolve, although I know that Bill's probably having to put someone else on hold so he can speak to me. And that he'll imagine there's a minor crisis

brewing—otherwise, why would Papa bother to ring? I

But I wait anyway, and, as I do, I rehearse the words I'll have to say, although I know that they'll come out differently. But while there's still time, I'll do my best to bridge the years.

At least, I'll start to try.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

AK #19

Scanned with preliminary proofing by A/NN\A

October 28th, 2007—v1.0

from *Asimov's* October, 1993

"Papa" was reprinted in *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Eleventh Annual Collection*, Dozois, ed. and was nominated for the 1994 Hugo Award, Best Novelette (Nomination Below Cutoff)
