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WITHOUT END

THE SUN, HIGH IN THE HOT August afternoon, sent short shadows across the neatly trimmed grass. A small clump of people huddled in a semicircle, close but not touching. The coffin, in the center, sat on a platform covering the empty hole.

Dylan placed a rose on the black lacquer surface, and stepped back. A moment, frozen in time and space.

A hand clutched his shoulder. Firm grip, meant as reassurance. He turned. Ross nodded to him, mouth a thin line.

"She was a good woman," Ross whispered.

Dylan nodded. The minister was speaking, but he didn't care about the words, even though the rest of the group strained forward.

"She would have found this silly," Dylan said, and then stopped. Ross's expression had changed from one of sympathy to something else -- confusion. Disapproval?. Dylan didn't know, and didn't really want to find out. Outside he was calm. Inside he felt fragile, as if his entire body was formed of the thinnest crystal. One wrong look, a movement, a shadow on the grass, would shatter him into a thousand pieces.

A thousand pieces. Shards, scattered on the kitchen floor. Geneva, crouched over them, like a cat about to pounce. Look, Dylan, she said. To us, a glass shattered forever. But to the universe, possibilities. A thousand possibilities.

He stared at the black box. He could picture Geneva inside as she had looked the night before: black hair cascading on the satin; skin too white; eyes closed in imitation sleep. Geneva had never been so still.

He wondered what she would say if she stood beside him, her hand light on his arm, the summer sun kissing her hair.

For just a moment, trapped in space and time.

Stars twinkled over the ocean. Dylan stood on the damp sand, Geneva beside him, her hand wrapped in his and tucked in his pocket -- the only warm thing on the chilly beach. Occasionally the wind would brash a strand of her hair across his face. She would push at her hair angrily, but he liked the touch, the faint shampoo smell of her.

She was staring at the waves, a frown touching the corners of her mouth. "Hear it?" she asked.

He listened and heard nothing except the pulse of the ocean, powerful,

throbbing, a pulse that had more life than he did. "Hear what?"

"The waves."

In her pause, he listened to them crash against the sand, the heart of the pulse.

"It's so redundant," she said.

"What is?" He turned, his attention fully on her. She looked like a clothed Venus, rising out of the sand, hair wrapped around her, eyes sparkling with unearthly light.

"Sound is a wave, a wave is sound. We stand here and listen to nature's redundancy and call it beautiful."

He leaned into her, feeling her solidness, her warmth. "It is beautiful."

She grinned at him. "It's inspiring," she said, and pulled her hand out of his pocket. She walked down to the edge where the Pacific met the Oregon coast. He didn't move, but watched her instead, wishing he could paint. She looked so powerful standing there, one small woman facing an ocean, against a backdrop of stars.

He went through her papers for the university, separating them into piles with equations and piles without. The cat sat on the piles without, watching the proceeding with a solemnness that suited the occasion.

Dylan's knowledge of physics and astronomy came from Geneva. He had had three semesters in college, a series called Physics for Poets (hardly any equations), and by the time he met her, most of his knowledge was out of date.

(If you knew so little about women, Geneva once said, I'd be explaining to you what my clitoris is.)

His specialty was philosophy, not so much of the religious type, even though he could get lost in Middle Ages monkish romanticism, but more a political strip: Descartes, Locke, Hegel, and John Stuart Mill. He liked to ponder unanswerable questions. He had met Geneva that way -- one afternoon, wind off the lake, Wisconsin in the summer, sitting on the Union Terrace, soaking up the rays and pretending to study. Only he wasn't even pretending, he was arguing basic freshman philosophy: if a tree falls in the forest, and no one hears it, does it make a sound? Geneva had been passing at the time -- all legs and tan and too big glasses on a too small nose.

Of course, she said, because it makes a disturbance and the disturbance makes a wave, and that wave is sound.

He didn't remember what he said in response. Something intriguing enough to make her sit and argue until the sunset turned the lake golden, and the mosquitos had driven the other students away.

From that moment on, he and Geneva always talked that way. The philosophy of

physics. The physics of philosophy. He got the education without the equations and she, she felt free enough to explore the imaginative side of her science-- the tiny particles no one could see, the unified theories, the strings binding the universe.

There's something out there, Dylan, she would say, and it's more than we are.

He knew that, as he held her papers, in her sunlit office just past their den. In her crabbed writing, on those dot-matrix computer sheets, was the secret to something.

If he could touch that, he could touch her. And if he could touch her, he might be able to hold her.

Forever.

The campus bar was full of people impossibly young. Dylan grabbed his frosty mug of beer and sat across from Ross, watching the people intermingle. A different university, a different time. Now the students wore their hair short, and the professors wore theirs long. Dylan sipped, let the foam catch him full on his upper lip, and let the sound of co-mingled voices and too loud music wash over him.

"I worry about you," Ross said. His beer was dark and warm. Its color matched the tweed blend of his blazer. "You've locked yourself up in that house, and haven't gone anywhere in weeks. You don't have to get her papers in order before the end of the term, Dylan. The department just wants them on file."

Dylan shook his head. He wasn't always working. Sometimes he wandered from room to room, touching her clothes, the small sculpture she had brought back from Africa, the pieces of Inuit-carved whale bone they had found in Alaska. "I'll get it done," he said.

"That's not the point." Ross pushed his beer aside, ignoring it as a bit of foam slopped out. He leaned forward, and would probably have touched Dylan's arm if Dylan had been the kind of man who permitted it. "She's dead, Dylan. She's gone. She was a spectacular woman, but now you have to get used to living without her."

Dylan stared at Ross's hand, outstretched on the scarred wooden table. "But what if she isn't really dead? I can feel her sometimes, Ross, as close to me as you are."

"That's part of grievings" Ross said. "You're in the habit of feeling her presence. It's like a ghost limb. You know it was there; you know what it felt like, and you can't believe it's gone."

"No." Dylan's fingers were frozen to the side of the mug. He pulled them away. "She was working on space-time equations, did you know that?"

Ross removed his hand from the tabletop, the odd expression -- the one Dylan had

seen at the funeral -- back on his face. "Of course I knew that. We have to report on her research twice a term."

"She said she was close to something. That we thought about time wrong. That we were looking for beginnings and endings, and they weren't important-- and possibly not even probable. She said we were limited by the way we think, Ross."

"It's not a new area," Ross said. A cocktail waitress went by, her tray loaded with heavy beer mugs. Patrons ducked and slipped into each other to stay out of her way. "We've been exploring space-time since Einstein. Geneva was going over very old ground. The department was going to re-examine her position if she hadn't taken a new angle this term."

"Her angle was new." Dylan wiped his hands on his jeans. "It was new from the beginning. She said the problem was not in the physical world, but in the way our minds understood it. She said --"

"I know what she said." Ross's voice was gentle. "It's not physics, Dylan. It's philosophy."

Dylan's entire body tensed. "I didn't change her, Ross. She was thinking this way when we met, when she was an undergraduate. She said that our limitations limited the way we looked at the universe, and she's right. You know she's right."

"We already know about space-time," Ross said. "About the lack of beginnings and the lack of endings. We know all that --"

"But we still think in linear terms. If we truly understood relativity, time would be all encompassing. We would experience everything at once."

"Dylan," Ross said, his voice soft. "Linear time keeps us sane."

"No," Dylan said. "That's why ancient maps had dragons on them, and why no one believed that the world was round. Why Galileo got imprisoned for showing the universe didn't work the way the church wanted it to. You all got upset at her because she was showing you that your minds were as narrow as the ancients', that you have your theories of everything and think you can understand it all, when you don't take into account your own beings. She is doing physics, Ross. You're just too blind to see it."

Dylan stood up. The conversation around him had stopped, and the short-haired, too-young students were staring at him. Ross was looking at his hands.

Dylan waited, breathing heavily, a pressure inside his chest that he had never felt before. Ross finally looked up, his round face empty of all emotion. "The anger," he said. "It's part of grieving too."

They first tried it in her dorm room, shutters closed on the only window, lights off so that the posters of Einstein were hidden, so that only the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling remained. They crowded, side by side, on her narrow bed, after removing their clothes in the dark. He could smell her

musk, feel the warmth of her, but as he leaned into her body, she moved away.

"We can't touch," she said. "Defeats the purpose."

So they lay there, staring up at the bright pink and green stars. And she began speaking softly, her voice no more than a murmur in his ear.

She told him what she liked to do with him, how he tasted, how soft his mouth was, how sensitive his ear. She worked her way down his body, never touching him, only talking to him, until he thought he could wait no longer. And then she was on top of him, wet already, nipples hard, and within a few seconds, they had worked their way to mutual orgasm --the best he had ever had.

She rolled back beside him, and sighed. "Intellectual foreplay," she said. "It really works."

GHOST LIMB. From the moment Ross mentioned it, Dylan felt not one but dozens of ghost limbs throughout the house. Here, in the bedroom, done in designer pink by the previous owner (all we need is a big bow on the bed, and it'll be perfect -- for eight-year-old girls, Geneva said). Something they were going to remodel when the money allowed. The small side room, well heated, well lit, filled with boxes and scraps of Christmas wrapping: he saw babies in there. First the little boy, cherubic face puckered in sleep. Then a little girl, all wide-eyed and exploring, Geneva in the raw. Future ghosts, possibilities lopped off with the branch that was Geneva.

One night he woke in the dark, confident that he had just missed her. Her scent lingered; the energy of her presence electrified the space. He knew, just a moment before, that she had been there -- Geneva, alive, bright, and dancing with ideas.

He got up and went into the living room. The cat followed him, sleepy and dazed. Together they stared out the wide living room window at the street. A long streetlight illuminated a patch of concrete. The light's reflection made the neighboring homes look gray and indistinct. Ghost homes, full of possibilities.

The cat got bored and leapt from the sill, but when Dylan closed his eyes, he could still see her, outlined in red shadow against his eyelids. Even though she was alive, moving, and breathing, the cat too left ghosts.

It flashed across his mind, then, the possibility -- and as quickly as it appeared, it was gone. But he knew it was there. He knew he would find it, and then he would no longer be alone, among the ghosts.

"Dammit. The little shit!" Geneva's voice rose on the last syllable, so Dylan knew she wasn't upset, just inconvenienced. He came out of his office to find her standing by the front door, hands against her hips. "Cat's out," she said.

He glanced out the door. The cat sat on the porch huddled against the rain, acting as if the world had betrayed her by getting her wet. He picked her up and carried her inside, closing the door with his foot.

Geneva reached beyond him and locked the bolt.

"There's no need," he said. "Door's closed."

Geneva grinned at him. He dropped the cat and she scampered into the living room, pausing at the end of the couch to dean the vile wetness off her fur.

"Little shit," Geneva said again. She was staring at the cat fondly. "She figured out the door. I came out here in time to see her grasp the knob in both paws and turn."

"Cats can't do that," he said.

"No. Dogs can't. Cats think differently." She kissed him lightly on the nose. "Imagine, being trapped by your mental abilities. A cat can get out of a man-made trap. A dog can't."

Then she smiled as if she had solved the riddle of the universe, went back into her office, and closed the door.

He had chalk on his hands. Facing all those clean, bright students, he felt ruffled and old. Most of them sat before him because his elective brought them three credits. Only a handful liked to grasp the elemental questions as much as he did. He rubbed his hands together, saw chalk motes drift in the fluorescent light.

"The Deists believed in a clockmaker god," he said, leaning against the metal lip of the blackboard. "A god who invented the world, then sat back and watched it play, like a great ticking clock. Jefferson believed in Deism. Some say that was why he became a great political philosopher-- he believed that God no longer intervened in his creation, so the creation had to govern itself."

Dylan paused, remembering Geneva's face when he had discussed this with her, so many years ago. None of the students had her sharpness, her quick fascination with things of the mind. He waited for someone to raise a hand, to ask why those who believed in God the clockmaker didn't believe in predetermination, but no one asked. He couldn't go into his long explanation without prompting, and he didn't feel like prompting himself.

He waved a hand, almost said, "Never mind," but didn't. "Read chapters thirteen and fourteen," he said to those blank faces, "and write me a paper about the contradictions in Deistic philosophy."

"By tomorrow?" someone asked.

"Four pages," he said tiredly. "I'm letting you out early." They looked at him

as if he had betrayed them. "You can do four pages. It's not the great American novel."

He grabbed his books and let himself out of the room. The hallway was quiet. It smelled faintly of processed air, and looked cleaner than it did when filled with students. Down the stairs, he heard a door slam. A moment later, a woman appeared on the staircase.

She was tiny, blonde, her hair wrapped around her skull like a turban. When she looked up, he recognized her. Hollings, from psychology.

"What are you pondering so seriously?" she asked.

He studied her for a minute, then decided to answer truthfully. "If God were a watchmaker, like the Deists believed, and if he abandoned his watch, which they did not believe, wouldn't that leave a vacuum? Wouldn't that vacuum have to be filled?"

Her mouth opened slightly, revealing an even row of perfect white teeth. Then she closed it again. "A watchmaker makes a watch and gives it to someone else. Presumably the watch owner maintains the watch."

"That assumes a lot of watches -- and a lot of watchmakers."

"Indeed it does." She smiled and walked away.

He watched her go, wondering if the exchange had happened or if he had imagined it. He thought no one besides Geneva would engage in flip philosophies.

Perhaps he was wrong.

Perhaps he had been wrong about a lot of things.

They lay on their backs on the public dock. Below them, Devil's Lake lapped at the wood, trying to reach them. In the distance, they could hear the ocean, shushing its way to shore. The Oregon night was cool, not cold, and they used each other for warmth.

Above them, in the Perseids, meteors showered at the rate of one per minute. Dylan oooed his appreciation, but Geneva remained unusually silent. She snuggled closer and slipped her hand in his. It was thinner than it used to be. He could feel the delicate bones in her palm.

"I wonder," she said, "if that's going on inside of me."

He tensed. She didn't talk about the cancer much, and when she did, it often presaged a deep depression. "You wonder if what's going on inside of you?"

"If somewhere, deep down, two tiny beings are lying on the equivalent of a dock on the equivalent of a lake, watching cells die."

"We're watching history," he said. "The cells are dying inside you now."

"But who knows how long it takes the message to reach those two tiny beings on the lake equivalent? If the sun died now, we wouldn't know for another eight minutes. So to us, the sun would still be alive, even though it was dead."

Her words sent a shudder through him. He imagined himself, talking to her, listening to her response, even though she was already dead.

"We think about it wrong, you know," she said, breaking into his reverie. She was alive and breathing, and snuggled against him. He would know when she died.

"Think about what wrong?"

"Time. We act as if it moves in a linear fashion, straight from here on as if nothing would change. But our memories change. The fact that we have memories means that time is not linear. String theory postulates twenty-five dimensions, and we can barely handle the three we see. We're like cats and dogs and doors."

"And if we could think in time that wasn't linear, how would it be?"

He could feel her shrug, sharp shoulder bones moving against his ribcage. "I don't know. Maybe we would experience everything at once. All our life, from birth to death, would be in our minds at the same time. Only we wouldn't look at it as a line. We look at it like a pond, full of everything, full of us."

Her words washed over him like a wave, like tiny particles he could barely feel.

"Geneva." He kept his voice quiet, like the lapping of the water against the dock. "What are you saying?"

She sat up then, blocking his view of the meteor showers, her face more alive than it had been in weeks. "I'm saying don't mourn for me. Mourning is a function of linear time."

"Geneva," he said with a resolution he didn't feel. "You're not going to die."

"Exactly," she said, and rested her head on his chest.

He pulled open the heavy oak doors and went inside. The chancel smelled vaguely of candle wax and pine branches, even though it wasn't Christmas. A red carpet ran down the aisles between the heavy brown pews. The altar stood at the front like a small fortress. He hadn't been inside a church since he was a teenager, and inside this one now, he felt small, as if that former self remained, waiting for a moment like this.

A ghost limb.

He smiled just a little, half afraid that the minister would find him, and order him out. He sat in a back pew and stared at the altar, hoping the words would come back to him. He ran through the rituals in his mind. Standing up for the opening hymn, watching the choir process, listening to the readings, singing more hymns, and then the offering --and the music. . . . as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen. Amen.

World without end. He picked up a hymnal, stuck in the back of the pew, and thumbed through it. They listed the Doxology, but not the year it was written, nor the text it was written from. Surely it didn't have the meaning that he interpreted. When it came to the church, the hymn probably meant life ever after. Not time without end. Not beginnings without endings, endings without beginnings. Not non-linear time.

He stood. He had never been in this church before, of that he was certain. So the ghost limb he brought with him applied to the Presbyterian church in Wisconsin, the one in which he was raised, where they too sang the Doxology, where a red carpet ran down the aisle, where the altar rose like a fortress.

Then a memory came, as dear and fresh as a drop of spring water. He couldn't have been more than eight, sitting beside his father on Christmas Eve, listening to the way that God had sent his only son to earth, to have him die for our sins.

And why, Dylan asked, if God had a son, why didn't God have a father!

Because God is the father, his father replied. And no matter how much probing Dylan did, he couldn't get at a better answer

The beginnings of a philosopher -- the search for the deeper meanings. Not being satisfied with the pat, the quick, the easy answer. That path had led him away from the church, away, even, from God, and into Geneva, whom he felt understood the mysteries of the universe.

He wouldn't find Geneva here. She felt that the church destroyed thought. He didn't know why he had come looking in the first place.

Bare feet on the deck, cat behind her, hat tipped down over her eyes. Geneva wasn't moving. Geneva, frozen in sunlight.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

The cat leapt off the chair, robbed her soft fur against his legs, demanding attention. He crouched and scratched her back, all the while watching Geneva.

"They imprisoned Copernicus," she said, not moving. "Newton too. They kicked Einstein out of Germany, and made Socrates drink hemlock."

"It didn't go well, then," he said, sitting on the deck chair beside her.

She tilted her hat up, revealing her green eyes. They shone in the sun.

"Depends

on your point of view. If they accepted me, I probably wasn't on enough of an edge."

He didn't know how to respond. He was secretly relieved that she hadn't gotten the post-doc. MIT was an excellent school, and an even better research facility,

but she would have been in Boston, and he would have been in Oregon. Together only on breaks and during term's end.

"Did you ever think of working on your theories on your own time?" he asked.

"And give those stupid committees the pap that they want?" She sat up then, and whipped her hat off her head, letting her black hair cascade around her shoulders. "You ever think of becoming a Baptist?"

"Geneva, it's not the same."

"It is too the same. People become arbiters of thought. In your area, the church still holds. In mine, it's the universities. This is an accepted area of research. That is not. Scientists are children, Dylan, little precious children, who look at the world as if it is brand new--because it is brand new to them. And they ask silly questions, and expect cosmic answers, and when the answers don't come, they go searching. And if they can't ask the silly questions, if they get slapped every time they do, their searches get smaller, their discoveries get smaller, and the world becomes a ridiculous, narrow place."

She plopped her hat back on her head, swung her tanned legs off the deck chair and stood up. "I can make you come without even touching you. Just the power of our minds, working together. Imagine if the right combination of minds, working together, break through the boundaries that hold us in our place in the universe. We might be able to see the Big Bang at the same moment we see the universe's end. We might be able to see the moment of our birth, this moment, and every other moment of our lives. We would live differently. We would be different -- more than human, maybe even better than human."

Her cheeks were flushed. He wanted to touch her, but he knew better.

"It's steam engine time, that's all it is," she said. "A handful of minds, working together, change our perception of the world. Does a tree falling unobserved in the forest make a sound? Only if we believe that a tree is a tree, the ground is the ground, and a sound a vibration. Only if we believe together."

"And someone who doesn't believe gets denied a post-doc," he said.

"It's the twentieth century equivalent of being forced to drink hemlock," she said, and flounced into the house.

He hadn't turned on a light yet. Dylan sat in the dark, watching the fuzzy grayness slip over the entire living room. The cat slept on a corner of the couch. Geneva's papers were piled on the coffee table, on the end tables, in the corner. He had been sitting in the dark too much, thinking perhaps that was when her ghost would arrive.

A light flipped on in the kitchen and he jumped.

"Jesus Christ, don't you use lights anymore?"

Ross. Ross had let himself in the back door. Dylan took a deep breath to ease the pounding of his heart. He reached up and flicked on a table lamp.

"In here," he said.

Ross came through the dining room door, and stared at the living room. The cat curled into a tighter ball, hiding her eyes from the light.

"We need to get you out of here," he said. "How about a movie?"

Dylan shook his head. He didn't need distractions now. He felt like he was very close. Her papers held little illuminating, but his memories--they were like a jigsaw puzzle, leaving gaps, creating bits of a picture. As if she had given him the answer out of order, and he had to piece it together. Alone.

"Okay," Ross said, slumping into the sofa. "How about a beer?"

The cat sat up and looked at Ross, then jumped off the couch. Dylan wished he could be as rude.

"I want to be alone, right now," he said.

"You've been alone since the end of August. Lock yourself up in here long enough, and you'll never get over her."

"I don't want to get over her," Dylan said.

Ross shrugged. "Wrong choice of words. You got your own life, and the last thing Geneva would have done was to want you to stop living because of her."

"I'm still living," Dylan said. "I'm still thinking."

"Not good enough." Ross stood, grabbed Dylan's coat off the back of a chair, and held it out.

Dylan looked at it and sighed. Then he rubbed a hand over his face. "Sit down," he said.

Ross sat, still holding Dylan's coat. He rested on the edge of the couch, as if he were about to jump up at any point.

"When Geneva and I went to Alaska, some friends of ours took us to a glacier. We went up in the mountains, saw this fantastic lake, filled with ice bergs, and at the edge of the lake, the tip of the glacier. A boat took us right there, and we could see geologic history being made."

"I remember," Ross said. His tone was dry--get to the point, Dylan -and he clutched the coat tighter. "You told me when you got back."

"But I didn't tell you about the exhibit. One of those museum things, where they showed you how the glacier has traveled in the last hundred years or so. It receded so much that the point where we stood at the edge of the lake had been glacier only 150 years before. That sucker was moving fast. Geneva stayed inside, where it was warm, but I went back out, and put my feet where that glacier had been a hundred years ago. And if I closed my eyes, I could feel

it.

I knew what it was like in the past; it was as if it was still there, only half a step away, and I could get to it, if I took the right step."

Ross leaned back on the couch, the coat covering him like a blanket. "When Gary died," he said, "I used to go in his bedroom and pick up one of those models he worked so hard on. And if I held it just right, at the right time of night, I could feel his little warm hand under mine. Dinah would just watch me, she wouldn't say anything and I used to think she was jealous -- Gary shows up for Ross, but not me kinda thing. But she was worried about losing me too. She was afraid I would never come out of it. I still miss him, Dylan. I see another man with a six-year-old boy and it knocks the wind out of me. But I survived, and I moved on, and we have Linny now, and she's precious too."

"You're telling me this is another phase?"

"No." Ross was twisting the coat sleeve in his hands. "I'm telling you I finally know how she felt. Dylan, give yourself a chance to heal. Geneva will always be part of your past, but not part of your future."

"What makes you so sure," Dylan asked, "that they're all that different ?"

GENEVA RESTED on her stomach, knees bent, feet crossed at the ankles. She held a blade of grass between her fingers, and occasionally she would blow on it, trying to make a sound. The summer sun was hot, and the humidity was high. Wisconsin in the summer. Dylan couldn't wait to leave.

"Did you know that Mormons marry not just for life, but for all eternity?"

"You saying we should incorporate that into our vows ?" Dylan rolled on his back, feeling the grass tickle his shoulders.

"I wonder if we won't be doing that already." She put her thumbs to her mouth, a blade of grass stretched between them. As she blew, it made a weak raspberry sound. "I mean, if you look at an event like you look at a pebble, falling into a pond, the action will create ripples that will stretch out from the pebble. Each event has its own ripple, independent of another ripple -- "

"Unless they collide," Dylan said with a leer.

"Unless they collide," she repeated, ignoring his meaning. "But who is to say that once a pebble gets dropped, you can't go back to the same spot and watch it get dropped over and over again. You can in video tape, why not in life?"

"Because life doesn't have rewind and fast forward," he said.

"Who says? Time is just perception, Dylan."

He rolled to his side, kissed her bare shoulder, and draped an arm across her

back. From his perspective, the blade of grass between her fingers looked ragged and damp. "So you're saying you might perceive that you're marrying me for eternity, and I might perceive that I'm marrying you for Wednesday. So I could turn around and marry someone else for Thursday -- "

"Only if you get a divorce first." She threw away the blade of grass. "Legalities, remember? Other people's perceptions."

"-- and you would still think you're married to me forever, right?"

"I think I heard about a court case like that," she said, leaning her head into him. Her hair smelled of the sun. He kissed her crown.

She turned, so that she was pressed flush against him, warm skin against his. "But when you say you'll love me for eternity, you mean it, right?"

He leaned in, his face almost touching hers. He couldn't imagine life without her. "When I say I'll love you forever," he said, "I mean it with all my heart."

The dean's office was on the second floor of Erskine Hall, where the senior professors resided. Dylan used to aspire to walking that staircase every day. Then he would have had tenure, been able to stay in Oregon until he retired. He used to imagine that he and Geneva would buy a beach house. They would work in the city, then drive the hour to the beach each weekend. They would sit outside, on a piece of driftwood, staring at the point where the sky met the ocean. Geneva would contemplate the universe, and Dylan would contemplate her.

Dreams. Even dreams were ghost limbs. Moments, frozen in time and space.

He walked down the narrow corridors, past the rows of crammed offices, filled with too many books and stacks of student papers. The dean's office was a little larger, and it had a reception area, usually staffed by upperclassmen. This time, though, the receptionist was gone.

He knocked on the gray metal door. "Nick?"

"Come on in, Dylan, and close the door."

Dylan did as he was asked, and sat on the ancient upholstered chair in front of Nick's desk. Students probably felt like they'd walked in hell's anteroom when they came here. Everything was decorated early '70s, in browns and burnt orange.

Nick was a white-haired man in his late fifties, face flurid with too much food and stress. "I'm sorry about Geneva," he said. "She had spirit. I never expected to outlive someone like her."

Dylan made himself smile. "My mother said she was like a flare, brief but beautiful."

"You don't believe that," Nick said.

Dylan took a deep breath. "You didn't call me in here to talk about Geneva."

"Actually, I did. Indirectly." Nick stood up, and shoved his hands in his pockets, stretching out his pants like a clown's, and making his potbelly pool out. Geneva used to call him Chuckles when he did that, a comment made all the better by the fact that the gesture meant Nick was going to say something difficult. "Word is that you've been acting a bit erratic lately. Letting classes out early, missing meetings, spouting spontaneous philosophy in the halls."

"Doesn't sound like the crime of the century," Dylan said, then bit his lip. Defensive. He couldn't get defensive.

"No, and it's not even all that unusual--except for you, Dylan. You were always consistent and quiet. I'm not saying you're doing anything wrong, but your wife just died. I wanted you to take the term off, but you insisted on working, and I'm not sure that was such a good idea."

Dylan stared at him for a moment, uncertain how to respond.

It begins with little complaints, Geneva once told him. Maybe your clothes are a little unusual, or you don't conduct class according to the right methods. Then, one day, you wake up and find you've been imprisoned for your beliefs.

He opened his mouth, closed it again, and thought. The classes meant nothing this term. The students, merely full-sized reminders of how much time had passed since he had sat in their chairs, since he had met Geneva.

"You're right," he said. "I think I should take a leave of absence, maybe come back next fall term."

Nick turned, pulled his hands out of his pockets, and frowned. Obviously he hadn't expected Dylan to acquiesce so easily. "Sure it won't leave you alone too much?"

Dylan smiled and shrugged. "I'm not sure I'm really alone now," he said.

Toward the end, she had shrunk to half her size, her skin so translucent, he could see her veins. The hospital room had deep blue walls, a bed with restraints on it, and a television perched in the corner. The restraints were down, the television off, and the window open, casting sunlight against the awful blue.

Dylan sat beside the bed every day, from the moment visiting hours began until the moment they ended. At noon on August 23rd, she opened her eyes and found his. Her gaze was clear for the first time in three days, for the first time since he had brought her to the hospital.

"Dylan?" Her voice was no more than a rasp.

He took her too-small hand. It no longer fit just right in his. "I'm here, Geneva."

"You know those two tiny beings on the lake equivalent?" Each word was an effort. He leaned forward so that he could hear her. Her grip was tight in his.

"I think in about eight minutes, they're going to see a supernova."

She closed her eyes. He couldn't hear her breathing. He pushed the nurse call button, once, twice, then three times.

The grip in his hand tightened. Geneva was looking at him, a small smile on her face. "Don't mourn, Dylan," she said. "Forever, remember?"

"I remember," he said, but by that time, she had loosened her grip on his hand.

The nurses came in, with their equipment and needles, pushing him aside. He watched as they checked her, as they looked under her closed eyelids, and felt for her pulse. One of them turned to him, and shook her head. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked out of the room, a much poorer man than he had been when he entered.

On All Hallow's Eve, he packed his car to the light of the single streetlight. During the afternoon, he had taken the cat over to Ross's, explaining that he was going on a short trip, and wasn't sure when he would be back. He waited until dark, packed the car, and headed west.

He had awakened with the idea, the jigsaw puzzle complete in his mind. He knew how to find her, and how they could be together, forever, as she had said. As he

drove over the Coast Range, the puzzle became clearer; the answer seemed right.

Steam engine time, she had said. But who would have thought that a philosophy professor would be the first to ride the rails?

Geneva had. She knew that philosophers were used to broad concepts of the mind.

He pulled into the public beach at Lincoln City, grabbed a blanket and a cooler from the back of the car, and walked to the loose sand. He was careful to sit on a driftwood log, untouched by high tide.

Geneva called the point where the sea met the sky infinity. In the dark, it seemed even more vast than it did in the day. He put the blanket on the sand, set the cooler to the side, and leaned on the driftwood log.

He managed to arrive on the dark side of the moon. The night sky was full of stars, points of light, points of history. To their friends, these stars could be dead, but to him, they lived, and twinkled, and smiled for one last show.

His mind could grasp each point of light, see it for what it was, and for its pattern, feel the backdrop of blackness against it and beyond.

The ocean spoke to him in its constant roar, and beneath it, he heard Geneva's voice talking about sound and waves, waves and sound. Inspiring, she had said, and so it was.

The edge of the universe was just beyond his imagination. The whole universe was within his grasp. He didn't want to see the big bang or the end of everything.

He didn't want to see all of time, nor all of time and space. Only those points of light that were Geneva, from her birth to her death and back again. He wanted to hold all of those points in his mind at the same time, to be lying with her on the dock at the same time he sat here alone, to be holding her hand in the hospital while they played at intellectual foreplay in her dorm. He wanted his mind to be like the sky, holding history, the future, and infinity at the same time.

Geneva.

She was out there, in time and space, each moment of her existence a moment for him to hold.

He cast his mind into the inky blackness --

-- and felt the barriers break.