

# DOWNTIME

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BY the time the messenger from the DFO came, Marian had almost forgotten about the Order. You could do that if you tried hard enough. You just tucked the unwanted thoughts down into some backwater recess of your mind until the normal clutter of everyday life obscured them and then you pretended it wasn't there. Marian was good at that. She had her own special places for hiding things, dark little crevices in her soul where one might tuck a fact, an experience, or even a whole relationship, so that it never saw the light of day again.

She knew the day her sister died that a lot of new things were going to have to go in there and she'd done her damndest to make them all fit. She'd done so well, in fact, that when the door first chimed, there was a brief moment when she genuinely didn't know what it was about. Who would be coming to see her in the middle of the day?

She was curled up with her children and her pets at the time: two boys, a girl, two cats and a small dog, whom she collectively referred to as "the menagerie." They couldn't all fit on the couch at one time, but they were trying. Only Amy had given up, and she knelt by the coffee table now with her crayons laid out before her like the brushes of a master artist, her face screwed tight with concentration as she tried to draw a horse *exactly* right. When you're the oldest child, you have to do things right; the other children depend on you. Marian watched the delicate blonde curls sweep down over the paper for a moment before trying to disentangle herself from the others. With five bodies and two afghans involved it wasn't easy, and finally she yelled out, "Coming!" at the top of her lungs, in the hope that whoever was on the other side of the door would hear it and wait.

The dog didn't come with her to the door. Maybe that was an omen. Usually he was the first one at the door, to welcome

strangers. But dogs can sense when things are wrong, sometimes even when their owners don't. Marian walked past him, and ignored the complaints of both cats and children as she looked through the peephole to see who was there. It was a woman, neatly coifed and with a socially acceptable minimum of makeup, wearing some kind of uniform and holding a letter in her hand. That was odd. You didn't get many real paper letters these days, unless it was something important. For a moment Marian couldn't think of who would have sent her a registered paper letter . . . and then memory stirred in its hiding place, and she was suddenly afraid. She hesitated a moment before unlocking the door, but couldn't give herself a good reason for not doing it. Trouble doesn't go away if you refuse to sign for it, does it?

As she opened the door, Marian noted that the woman's uniform didn't have any insignia on it. That could be just an oversight . . . or it could indicate that whoever had designed the uniform believed that people wouldn't open the door if they knew what she was there for. Not a good sign.

The woman looked up at Marian, down at her electronic pad, and then up again. "Ms. Stiller?"

Marian could feel all the color drain from her face as she just stared at the woman for a moment. Maybe she should lie about who she was, and tell the woman Ms. Stiller was home? Shut the door, lock the problems outside, and stuff this memory down into the dark places along with all the others. That would buy her a bit more time. But what would it r

accomplish? Sooner or later they'd find her, and then there would be fines to deal with or of all the rest. Maybe even jail time. The government was notoriously intolerant when it came to people who tried to avoid their filial duties.

"I'm . . . I'm Marian Stiller."

The woman glanced at her pad again, as if checking her notes. You'd think the delivery folks would have their stuff memorized. "This letter is for you, Ms. Stiller." She handed her the envelope, thick and heavy. Marian took it numbly and waited. "I need your signature for it, please." The pad was given to her. Marian hesitated, then pressed her thumb on the surface. The thing hummed for a moment, no doubt comparing her print to government records. *Confirmed*, it blinked at last. The woman took it back from her, cleared her throat, and assumed a more formal position that she clearly associated with official announcements.

"Ms. Stiller, I have delivered to you an Order of Filial Obligation. You are required to read the contents and respond to them in a timely manner. If you do not, you may be subject to fines and/or imprisonment. Do you understand?"

She barely whispered it. "Yes, I understand."

"Do you have any questions?"

"Not. . . not in front of the children." She was suddenly aware of them not far away. She had never heard for the first time how their chatter had quieted suddenly. They had to be protected from this. That was her first job. Questions . . . the Department had places for questions to be answered. Later.

"I understand." The woman bowed her head a token inch. There was no sign of emotion in her expression or in her carriage. What did it feel like, to spend your day delivering messages like this? "Good day, then." Or was she one of the people who believed in the Filial Obligation Act, who thought it was a good thing? Marian didn't ask. She didn't want to know.

She watched her walk away from the house because that was one more thing to do before opening the letter. When the woman rounded a corner and that excuse was gone, she turned back with a sigh and shut the door behind her. The envelope was heavy in her hand. The room seemed unnaturally quiet.

"What? What is it?" She met the eyes of child after child, all gazing up at her with the same worried intensity as the dog in its corner. Children, like animals, could sometimes sense trouble. She looked at the letter in her hand and forced herself to adopt that teasing tone she used when they worried over nothing. "It's just mail. You've never seen paper mail before, so I'll swear."

She shook her head with mock amazement and curled up on the couch again. She couldn't read it here, not in front of them, and she certainly couldn't go off to a private room now because they were watching her. She threw the letter onto the far end of the coffee table, facedown so that they wouldn't see the DFO insignia next to the address. It landed on top of a pile of children's drawings, covering over the lower part of a horse. Amy fussed at her until she moved in. At that time everyone else was back on the couch, and she found some cartoons on the children's net and turned up the volume and hoped it would distract them. Best to just pretend the letter wasn't really important, until they forgot all about it. Then she could go off to the bathroom to read it alone with it or something, or say she had to start cooking dinner, or . . . something.

She wondered if they could hear how hard her heart was beating.

*To Ms. Marian S. Stiller, child of Rosalinde Stiller:*

*This Order of Filial Obligation is to inform you that your family status has been reviewed, and it has been determined the debt formerly assigned to Cassandra Stiller is the rightful debt in whole of Marian S. Stiller, only surviving child of Rosalinde Stiller.*

*Enclosed you will find an Appraisal of filial Debt and Order of Obligation from our offices. Please review both these documents carefully. You are expected to comply with this Order by the date indicated. Any questions you have should be addressed to our offices within that time. Failure to comply with this Order promptly and with full cooperation will result in substantial fines and/or imprisonment.*

Ohe was helping Amy with a jigsaw puzzle when Steve came home, teaching her how to analyze the shapes with her eyes so that she didn't have to try as many wrong pieces before she found the right ones. The boys had tried to help, but they didn't have the attention span to stick up with it, and they had gone off to play with the dog.

She almost didn't hear him come in. Not until he was standing in the door was she aware of his presence. She looked up then, and saw the broad smile of homecoming waver a bit, and she read something in her eyes that he didn't know how to interpret.

Amy ran up to hug him and as he lifted her up to his chest for a big one his eyes searched for Marian's. *What's wrong?*

She shook her head and glanced at Amy. He understood. The ritual of homecoming always took a while, but today he kept it as short as he could. She was grateful. She needed him more right now than the children did, and certainly more than the pets.

When he was done with all the requisite greetings, she whispered some excuse to Amy and she led him away into their bedroom. Not until he shut the door behind them did she draw out the envelope that was hidden in the nightstand and hand it to him.

He glanced at the DFO insignia on the envelope and his eyes narrowed slightly. He watched as he pulled out the letter and read it, then the forms. It seemed to her that he was reading everything twice, or maybe he was just taking his time with it. Scrutinizing every word.

Finally he looked up at her and said quietly, "You knew this was coming."

She wrapped her arms around herself. The real fear was just starting to set in, and she didn't want him to see how bad it was.

With a sigh he dropped the pile of papers down on the bed and came over to her. She was stiff when his arms first went around her, but then the fear gave way to a need for comfort and she relaxed against him, trembling. She'd been trying not to think about the Order all day long now . . . seeing him read it made it more frightening, somehow. More *real*.

"You've been lucky," he said softly. "Cassie's taken care of this for years . . . how do people get a judgment like that? Normally both of you would have been involved from the start. Now she's gone, and you're the only child left . . . it was only a question of time, Mari."

"I know, I know, but" . . . *I'd hoped it would never come to this*, she wanted to say. *What terrible words those were!* He'd think she meant that her mother should have died already when what she really meant was . . . something less concrete. Something about wishing the world would change before it sucked her down into this, or at least the law would change . . . something.

"I don't know if I can go through with this," she whispered. His arms about her tightened. "I know, honey. It's a scary thing."

But did he really know? His parents had died in an accident when he was young, before Time technology was anything more than a few theoretical scribbles on a university draft board Long before something like the Filial Obligation Act was even being discussed, let alone voted on by Congress. She found that she was trembling violently, and couldn't see how to stop it. The government had just announced it was going to take away part of her life. It would never do that to him. How could he possibly know what that felt like?

She heard him sigh, like he did when he saw her hurting and didn't know how to help. "Look, we'll go down to the DFO and talk to one of their counselors, all right? Maybe there's some way . . . I don't know . . . appeal the terms of the appraisal. Or something."

*Or help you come to terms with it.* The words went unspoken.

"All right," she whispered. It meant she could put off the matter for another day, at least. Pretend there was some way out of it, for a few precious hours.

That night she dreamed of her mother.

*Frankly, I find the whole thing . . . wrong." Her mother whipped the eggs as she spoke, the rhythm of her strokes not wavering even as her eyes narrowed slightly in disapproval. "We have children because we want them, and we take care of them because we love them, not . . . not . . ." She poured the mixture into a pan and began to beat in more ingredients. "Not because we expect something in return."*

*"Do you think it's going to pass Congress?" Marian asked.*

*"I don't know." She picked up a handful of diced onions and scattered them into the pan. "I hope not. The day we start "paying" parents for their services is the day . . . well, that day will say a lot about how much is wrong with our society, won't it?"*

The state offices of the DFO were on Main Street, in an old building that had once been the county courthouse. Marion's eyes narrowed as she studied the place, first from the outside, then passing through its great double doors. You would expect something associated with modern science to be in a building that was . . . well, modern. Gleaming sterile floors instead of ancient hardwood, minimalistic cubicles instead of scarred wooden desks. Something was all wrong.

Or maybe anything would have seemed wrong today.

She paused in the outer lobby where approved vendors were allowed to showcase their wares, and Steve waited quietly beside her. The vast bank of brochures against one wall seemed more appropriate for a tourist resort than a government office, and the brochures themselves were likewise colorful and sunny, promising services in perky catchphrases that were meant to make the alien seem reasonable. *Give your parents the Time of their lives. You will have more time for your own.* That one was from a travel agency which specialized in Time-intensive vacations, on the theory that people might be willing to accept less Time if the quality of the experience was outstanding. *Wonder where your Time is going?* another beckoned. That one was a lively color brochure which promised peace of mind in the form of special investigative services, which would track your parent's actions and provide a com-

report when you . . . when you . . . well, when you could read it. And *Time after Time* of counselors for parents, to help them organize the fragments of their "second life" in a meaningful whole.

She suddenly felt sick inside. Steve must have seen it in her face, for he whispered, "It's all right," and quietly took her hand.

It wasn't all right. It wasn't going to become all right either. But she'd be damned if she started crying about it all over again . . . least of all here. "I'm okay." Wiping some moisture from her eyes she nodded toward the door to the DFO office. He took the hint and opened it for her. Sometimes little things like that helped. Just little signs that you weren't alone in this. Thank God he had been willing to come down here with her.

The wait was long, but the place seemed well-organized and things were kept moving. Most of the people waiting were sitting in a common area reading brochures, or whispering fearful questions to their spouses, siblings, friends. A few were just staring into space, like a child who knows that he's going to be given some unpleasant medicine, and that there's no way to get out of it. Most of them seemed to be holding numbers, spit out from a machine as an entrance to the building itself, and small plastic pails near each of the desks were full of the little paper tabs.

She registered with the main desk, telling the receptionist that she had an appointment for an Appraisal adjustment, then took a seat to wait. Steve just took her hand and waited with her. There wasn't anything more he could do to help, and they both knew it.

After some time their number was called and they were ushered into a small office in the back of the building. The counselor greeted them with a smile that seemed genuinely warm, though surely it was no more than a professional courtesy. How could you do a job like this every day and keep smiling to the end of it? She was a small black woman with threads of silver hair overlaying the tight jet braids of her hair, and Marian guessed her to be about 50. Too old to be doing *Time*, if there was an alternative, and still too young to be needing it. The lines on her face bore witness to a caring nature, and Marian felt a spark of hope in her chest.

"I'm Madeline Francis," she said, and she had that kind of voice which seemed pleasant no matter what the subject matter was. "Please have a seat." She had a screen on the desk in front of her, and they waited while she looked over the files on Marian's case. "It seems to me that everything is in order," she said at last. "So why don't you tell me what you're here for?"

"I'd like the Appraisal reconsidered," Marian said. She could feel her hands starting to tremble as she said the words, and wrapped them tightly about the arms of the chair so that the tremor wouldn't show. What she *really* wanted was for this whole nightmare to be over, the Appraisal rescinded, and her life back to normal. But she knew she wasn't going to get that, not if she asked for it outright. Indirectly . . . well, one could still hope.

A finger tap on the computer screen brought up the Appraisal. "6.4. You are the surviving child, yes? That's not a very high number, considering."

*It's 6.4% of my life!* She wanted to scream the words, to rage, to cry . . . but instead she just gripped the arms of her chair tighter, until her knuckles were bloodless. "There are special circumstances."

The black woman raised an eyebrow and waited.

"I'm the primary caregiver for three children. Young children. Steve's job takes him out

the state a lot, while he's gone . I'm the only one there for them."

"We've never let strangers care for them," Steve offered.

Was that argument of any value here? Marian couldn't read the counselor's face at all. Lose their parenting two days a month at this time in their lives could affect their development.

"Ms. Stiller." The counselor's voice was soft, but beneath that softness was a stillness, a certainty that made Marian's heart pound even louder. "There are millions of families in this country who employ caregiver assistance. Most of them aren't even doing it for Time, merely gaining the freedom they need to take care of life's necessities. If you don't have relatives who can help out, then I'm sure in the coming months you can find someone to help you." She held out a hand to forestall the next objection. "Let me ask you a few questions if I may. All right?"

Marian hesitated, then nodded. Where were all the neat arguments she'd prepared for this meeting? All the proper words? She couldn't seem to find them.

"Did you have a good childhood, Ms. Stiller?"

She hesitated. "That's a very general question, isn't it? There were good times and bad times-"

"Of course, of course. Perfectly normal. But, overall, do you feel that you and Cassa got the attention you deserved? Were your parents there for you when you needed them?"

"I guess . . . yes." She knew the answer was the wrong one to give, but she didn't want to lie outright. The woman had all her files, and probably Cassie's testimonies as well. She would know.

For one dizzying moment she wished that her mother had been more distant, more harsh, that she'd have some more concrete complaints to offer to this woman, something that would justify a lesser Appraisal. Then her face flushed with shame for even thinking that.

"She was a full-time caregiver also, wasn't she? Rare in that age." The woman's hands met Marian's and held them. Warm eyes, caring eyes, but with a core of inner strength and conviction that no easy argument would shake. "You appreciated that, even at the time. Enough so that when your own children were born you decided to raise them the same way. Is that right, Ms. Stiller?"

She whispered it. "Yes. But-" Nothing. There was nothing to say. She twisted her hands in her lap as she listened, knowing the battle was already lost. Feeling sick inside.

"She was there for you when you were sick, wasn't she? When your sister was in an accident and needed physical therapy to get back on her feet again, didn't your mother take care of all that herself?"

"I . . . I don't know. I was away at college by then."

"She took a class in physical therapy at the local college, just to be able to help Cassa herself. So that strangers wouldn't have to do it." She glanced at the computer screen for a moment, her expression softening. "Your sister appreciated that a lot, Ms. Stiller. She attributed her complete recovery to the attention she got back then. To the fact that your mother put aside her own life for a time, to take care of her. She never protested her Appraisal. Do you know that? Or the fact that the initial Appraisal assigned Time to her alone, and you had to divide it up between the two of you."

Her voice was a whisper. "She was much closer to our mother than I was."

"Recently, perhaps." She glanced at the monitor. "About how long would you say that has been the case, Ms. Stiller? How long since you've, say, visited your mother on a regular basis?"

"A few years." She looked down, unable to meet the woman's eyes. "Maybe . . . two."

"Maybe five?"

She didn't say anything. Five was when Cassie had started doing Time. Mom hadn't ne  
Marian much after that . . . or so it had seemed.

"Did you know she had a second stroke?"

Marian nodded, still not meeting her eyes. "It was a small one."

"When your life is reduced by so much, every small one whittles away another prec  
portion." Softly, she said, "The doctors don't think she'll live very much longer. A few year  
most. You know that, too, don't you?"

She said nothing.

The counselor leaned forward on her desk, her hands steepled before her. "I'm going t  
honest with you, Ms. Stiller. You could appeal this thing, if you wanted. I don't think any j  
in this country will alter the Appraisal for you, but you could tie it up in litigation if  
wanted, long enough to gain some time.

The law's still new enough for that. Maybe if you tried hard enough you could even c  
judgment until there wasn't an issue any more. You understand me?"

She felt a flush rise to her face as she nodded.

"I don't think you're the kind of person who would do that, Ms. Stiller. I think in your  
way you care about your mother, as much as your sister did. You're just a bit scared, that's  
She sat back in her chair; the steepled fingers folded flat onto the desk's surface. "That's  
human. It's a scary technology."

"That's not it," she whispered. But there was no conviction in her voice this time.

"We grow up in our bodies, regard them as ours. Mind, soul, flesh, it's all one crea  
Then suddenly science comes along and makes us question that neat little package. What w  
happen if you could divide mind from body? What would that make of us? The thing is, afte  
the questioning, it turns out the answer hasn't changed. We are who we are, and even this s  
little bit of technology can't really break up the package." She paused for a moment, her  
eyes fixed on Marian, studying her. How many times had she given the same pep talk? V  
cues was she looking for, that would tell her how to proceed? "Anything else is just an illu  
Ms. Stiller. You know that, don't you? A very precious illusion, for those whose own  
have failed them."

"Yes," she whispered. "But . . ." Marian had prepared a thousand words, it seemed  
now she couldn't seem to find any of them. Was it just fear she felt, fear of a technology  
seemed to belong more in science fiction vids than in her real life? Or was there a shado  
selfishness there as well, something she should feel guilty about? The woman gave her tim  
speak, and when she did not, finally said quietly, "Ms. Stiller, I want you to do something  
me."

The words startled her out of her reverie. "What?"

"I want you to go see your mother. Not for Time, just a visit. You haven't seen her since  
Order was assigned. Tell me you'll do that. Just visit with her. And then, if you want . . . c  
back here and we'll talk about the Appraisal. Or we can arrange for counseling for you, if  
feel that's what you need." She paused. "All right?"

She drew in a deep breath, trembling, and said the words because they had to be said.  
right."

The woman handed her something. A business card. She gave it her thumbprint, watching as it sent the woman's contact information to her account.

High technology. What a blessing.

"Thank you," she whispered. Not because she felt any gratitude, but because . . . that's what you said when a meeting was over. Wasn't it?

Her husband led her out.

Amy was having trouble with arithmetic. Little wonder, since she'd rather play with her crayons than work with the computer to memorize her numbers. Marian printed up flash cards on paper, using one of Amy's drawings on the backs. The girl was fascinated with them and had to be told at least three times about how flash cards used to be in every house, way back before computers, before she would settle down to work.

It was good to do such little things, if only as a distraction. She would have liked to think that she could lose herself in the task, but the sideways glances her daughter kept giving her made it clear that Amy sensed the *wrongness* in the air. She kept waiting for her to ask about it and dreaded having to come up with an answer-any attempt at honesty would only frighten the girl, but surely she'd sense it if her mother was hiding something-yet the moment never came. Maybe Amy sensed, with a child's intuitive certainty, that there were no answers to give. So she most likely wait a day or two and then blurt out questions when they were least expected. That was her way.

That was fine with Marian. Give her a few more days, and she might be able to think of some answers.

The Home was much as she remembered it: neatly manicured lawns surrounding wide, white buildings, flowers brushing up against sun-baked bricks in carefully measured bunches, benches set along the sides of the path at precise intervals to receive those whose legs could not sustain them. There were several people about, enjoying the morning sun, and at first Marian assumed they were staff. But as she passed a young woman, it suddenly occurred to her that maybe they weren't. She found herself staring at the back of the woman's head and had to force her eyes away before others took notice. The contacts were almost invisible, she'd been told. Easily hidden beneath a full head of hair. Cassie had offered to show her what they looked like up close, but Marian hadn't wanted to see them. Were any of these normal-looking people doing Time?

She suddenly felt sick inside, and would have sat down on one of the benches if she weren't afraid that if she did so she might never get up again. What was she doing here? This was crazy. Even her *mother* had said it was crazy. Didn't that count for anything?

"Can I help you?"

She found her voice with effort. "I'm here to see my mother. Rosalinde Stiller."

"Ah, yes." The aide was young, her face still beaming with the freshness of teenage enthusiasm. Too young to even understand what Time was, much less have to worry about it. "Come with me."

They'd moved her mother. Cassie hadn't told her that. Out of the ward where cases of moderate dependency were kept, into a place where things were . . . worse. Marian could feel her chest tightening as she followed the aide down the sterile white corridors of the new wing.



No pretense of normal life here, no attempt to disguise the nature of the place. It looked and felt like a place where people died. Why hadn't Cassie told her?

*Became you didn't want to hear it, an inner voice whispered. She knew.*

"In here, Ms. Stiller." The room was small, a private one. They'd seen to that. Steve and Cassie and Marian, they'd made sure her mother had all the best things. Except that after a while . . . how much did it mean? She looked about at the bright curtains, fresh flowers on the screen . . . anywhere but at the bed. Anywhere but where she needed to be looking.

"Are you all right, Ms. Stiller?"

Her mother was frail. So frail. She had forgotten that. Sickness robs a body not only of strength, but of substance. She remembered her mother as a bundle of strength, of energy, always restless, always moving. Always doing *something*. It was hard for her to reconcile the image with the woman who lay before her. Hard for her to cling to her memories, when the very source of them had become so changed.

Slowly she sat down on the edge of the bed, and took her mother's hand. The skin felt strangely silken, thin to the touch and blue veins throbbed softly beneath her fingertips. In her hand she recognized. She looked up slowly to find blue eyes fixed on her. Clear, bright, almost like a stranger to the wrinkled flesh surrounding them. There was some emotion in those eyes, but Marian couldn't read what it was. The expressions she remembered from her youth were gone, stolen away muscle by muscle, as age severed the link between mind and body. Was this her mother, inside that flesh? She gazed into the clear blue eyes with all her might, trying to make contact with the soul behind them. Did her mother feel the same sense of dislocation when she looked in a mirror? Did she wonder whose this stranger's face was, that looked so drained and pale? Surely not her own. Surely.

*The counselor was wrong, she thought. You can divorce mind from body, even when you share the same flesh.*

"She can't really speak any more." A nurse spoke quietly from behind her. "With a little effort, a few words, perhaps. No more." Marian must have looked surprised, because the nurse asked, "You didn't know?"

"No, I . . . no. Cassie didn't tell me."

*Cassie didn't tell me a lot.*

She squeezed her mother's hand as she leaned down slowly to kiss her on the forehead. This close she could catch the scent of her familiar perfume, and she ignored the tang of the medications and ointments that breezed in its wake, losing herself for a moment in the memory she remembered. Nothing like this. But the human soul doesn't fade with age, does it? Only the flesh.

*It's only two days. She forced herself to digest the words, forced her soul to absorb them. Two days a month, and the rest of your life stays the same as it always was. Surely you can do that much for her, she told herself, trembling. Surely she deserves that much.*

*She would have done it for you.*

*Remembering: Her mother's fingers folding tissues into a neat little fan, just so, each fold perfect. Binding them around the center with another twist of tissue, tight enough to hold the bunch the layers together. Finely manicured nails prodding the layers apart, separating each fragile ply, spreading them carefully one after the other, until the whole is a delicate*

*rose, wonderfully perfect.*

*"Getting harder to do," her mother says. "My close-up vision's not what it used to be. Soon I won't be able to make these at all-" She puts the rose down in front of Marian and indicates the pile of tissues next to it. "Now you try."*

Steve insisted on coming with her. She tried to get him to stay home with the children, to let a friend take her to the Time clinic, but he wouldn't hear of it. Bless his stubborn, loving heart. He even canceled a business trip to San Diego to make sure he could be home the day before . . . in case her floundering courage called for husbandly support. And it did. She wasn't crying anymore, but she spent a lot of time that day in his arms, trying to take comfort from his presence while not letting the children sense how very scared she was.

They did, though. Children are like that. Amy even picked up enough from conversation she overheard to ask if Mommy was doing Time. For a moment Marian didn't know what to say. There was no way to lie that Amy wouldn't eventually catch on to, if Marian was going to have to do Time every month. At the same time . . . she was too young. She wouldn't understand. She shouldn't *have* to understand, not at this phase in her life.

"Mommy's going to see Grandma," she said at last. Kneeling down to meet her eye to eye, willing all the calm sincerity into her voice that she could manage. "She's going to see Grandma some Time so she can feel better."

"Will she get better then?" the child asked.

For a moment Marian couldn't speak. Finally she whispered, "Probably not, sweetheart, but this will make the sickness hurt less."

No more questions. Thank God. Maybe Amy had enough of a child's innate intuitive sense to understand that Marian had no more answers. Not now, anyway.

*She'll ask again. The boys will grow up and they will ask. What words will you use to tell them, that a child can understand? Or will you put it off until it's too late, and they have to learn the truth in school, on the street . . . from strangers? What will you do then?*

*The world has changed. This is part of it, now. You can't shield them from it forever. Later. She would deal with that later. One thing at a time . . .*

*Ms Stiller?*

Darkness. Soft darkness. Voices muted as if through cotton, distant whispers.

*Are you all right, Ms. Stiller?*

Were they talking to her, the cotton voices? It took her a minute to process that thought.

"I'm . . . I'm all right."

*You're going to feel strange for a little while. That's normal. Try to relax.*

"I'm . . . I'm trying."

*You understand what is happening, yes? It's all been explained to you?*

Why was it so hard to think? Was that because of the drugs they had given her, or her own fear? Strange, how the fear seemed distant now. Like somebody else's emotion, something to be observed rather than absorbed. "They told me."

Her heart was beeping on some monitor. She could hear it through the cotton as they spoke to her. Steady, even beeps.

*It's going to feel like you're falling asleep. There may be a sense of falling away from your own body. That's just an illusion, you understand? It comes from the drugs we use. Your mind isn't leaving your body, ever.*

"Body and soul an indivisible alliance." Did she say that aloud? The drugs were making it hard to think. Where had that phrase come from, some propaganda leaflet? She couldn't remember.

*That's right, Ms. Stiller. She could hear people moving around her, but she couldn't make out what they were doing. Was her heartbeat usually that slow? They had given her tranquilizers because she'd asked for them, but she'd never had drugs that felt this strange before. Pinpricks of electricity tickled her scalp. Were those the contacts they had inserted? She could hear her heart skip a beat. *Body and soul are a unit, they cannot be divided. What we're going to do is create an illusion that it's otherwise . . . but it's only an illusion. You're going to sleep for a while—at least, that's what it will feel like—but you'll still be here, inside your own flesh.**

"Yes, I . . . I understand . . . sort of . . ."

*Your mother will get feedback from your sensory contacts. She'll be able to receive messages to the parts of your brain that control movement. But she won't actually be in your body, you understand? Just . . . suggesting motions, and observing the world through your senses.*

Again her heartbeat quickened. The fear was a distant thing, muted by drugs. Wondering about drugs. They could tailor emotions these days like you tailored a suit. *A hit short in the tail, he's careful. Look, the sides of the dread don't match. It needs to be calmer or it won't fit.*

"It will be like she's in my body."

For her. Yes. One of the contacts moved a bit. Being adjusted? For you . . . *it will be like sleep. You may dream a hit, not whole dreams but hits and pieces, feedback from your brain chemistry, as your body interacts with the world. You understand?*

Thank God Diane had agreed to watch the children. Thank God. One less thing to worry about as she prepared to give over control of her body to someone else. Diane would know how to handle the children. She knew Marian and Steve well enough to know that while they were here, dealing with all this mad scientist machinery, they didn't want someone else explaining things to Amy and the boys. No, that was something parents should do themselves.

She remembered how her mother had explained this process to her. She'd thought it was a bad thing. Children shouldn't owe their parents their bodies.

*But you didn't know then how helpless you'd be, did you, Mom? Or how much a borrowed hour might mean?*

There was a tear in her eye. Trickling down her cheek. She tried to reach up a hand to wipe it away, but her arm didn't respond to her anymore.

Her mother would have done this for her, had she been crippled. Would have given her body to her child so that Marian could live a normal day. Twenty-four hours without pain, without handicaps, without weakness. Twenty-four hours in the body of a loved one. The ultimate gift.

*Relax. Ms. Stiller. Calm footsteps. Heart beeps. Other sounds, hospital sounds. She tried to let go, not to listen. The cotton helped. *We're going to initiate transfer now.**

The first time is always the hardest, they had told her. Like labor. Yes. The second

was easier. The youngest drew rainbows. Bright colors, youthful colors. Age was gray blue, her mother had said, cooled by time, softened about the edges. A sudden sadness for her heart, and brought fresh tears to her eyes. She missed red, suddenly. She missed the oranges and umbers of autumn in the mountains. The trees changed here, but it wasn't the same. She knew the sunlight was gold, but it didn't *feel* gold anymore. Cassie had brought flowers to the clinic, beautiful flowers, but all the smells she remembered from her youth were gone. She wanted to smell the flowers again. Leaves like precious velvet, she wanted to touch them. She wanted to feel the golden sunlight upon her face . . .

Why was she crying? She knew what the sunlight was like. Where was the sorrow coming from? A sudden bolt of fear lanced through her, and the steady rhythm of the heart monitor began to quicken. Someone else's thoughts-

She could feel hands upon her, but just barely. *Easy, Ms. Stiller. Easy. We're almost there.* The hands faded away then, and with it all the sounds of the room. A soft roaring filled her ears that seemed to have no source. She could feel herself being drawn out of her body and she tried to fight . . . but she didn't want to fight . . . soft panic wrapped in cotton, oh so distant. Someone else's panic. Someone else's body . . .

She drifted into Downtime slowly, never knowing when the transition took place. Just sleep. People didn't fear sleeping, did they?

*Waterfalls. Splashing on the skin, scouring body and spirit-Turning up her face into the rain, laughing to feel it trickle into her nose. Glorious rain and a crown of strawberries. God, the smell is sweet! So many layers to savor! Redness and freshness and sweetness and tartness all mixed up together, and she can taste each one. Crisp slickness down her back, tartness frothing in the waterfall as she laughs.*

*Youth is gold, her mother had said. Wonderful gold, that tastes like chocolate sprinkles on the tongue. Veins of gold filtering the sunlight into speckled networks of color-yellow, orange, red, green. The colors of youth, of life. Drink in the color. Roll the orange around on your tongue. Red is pepper and spice, that stings the nose. Sunlight is chocolate. Wonderful chocolate! Waterfalls are blue, not dull aged blue but the clear blue of a morning sky. The water smells of strawberries as it washes away all shame and despair. Who would have thought that a simple thing could bring so much joy?*

"Marian?"

She could feel the images parting like mist as she struggled toward the surface, toward consciousness. Strange images, like and unlike dreams. Where had they come from? The doctors had said that Time was no more than biological remote control, that the best of all science could not put two minds in contact with one another directly. Marian wasn't so sure that anymore.

"Marian?"

"Yes." She gasped the word, then opened her eyes. The clinic room came into focus slowly. "Steve?"

He squeezed her hand. The sensation helped her focus again. "You okay?"

"Yes." She drew in a deep breath, trembling, and let it out slowly. "Yes, I . . . I think so. It . . . is it over?"

He nodded.

She managed to sit up and leaned against him, weakly. Her skin felt very fresh and clean. Her hair smelled of strawberries. Shampoo? She touched the soft strands in wonderment.

"Did you . . . did you see her?" she asked him.

He shook his head as one of the nurses answered. "It's not allowed until later, Ms. Stiller. When you're both accustomed to the process, then other people can be involved. For now, it's only staff."

It felt strangely difficult to speak . . . but that was just illusion, right? Marian hadn't been permanently disconnected from anything in her body. "What did my mother . . . I mean . . ."

The nurse smiled indulgently. "What did she do, Ms. Stiller? Is that what you want to ask?" She nodded.

The nurse picked up a tablet and tapped it until it showed the text she wanted. "From nine a.m. to one p.m., your mother worked with our staff to help fine-tune her contacts. Her sensory transfer was confirmed at 1:13." A smile flickered across her face. "She promptly asked us to bring her a cannoli, with chocolate sprinkles on it. All proper cannoli have chocolate sprinkles, she assured us."

"Go on," she said softly.

"She then took a long shower. And went for a walk in the gardens. Our people accompanied her, of course. She won't be allowed to go about alone until you're both accustomed to the transfer. According to my notes she spent a long time searching out leaves from the ground, and holding them up to the sunlight and staring at them."

"It's autumn." She could feel her voice shaking as she spoke. "The colors . . . all the colors . . ." She shut her eyes and remembered the colors she had known in her dream. The sheen of seeing them. *Is that what I gave you?*

"She had . . . the usual dinner." The nurse smiled. "A sampler of all the salty and spicy things she's normally not allowed to have. Nothing for you to worry about, Ms. Stiller." She looked down at her notes, and her eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "Then it says . . . she took a shower again?"

Marian whispered, "I understand." Steve put an arm around her shoulders as she trembled.

*That's the worst part of all, her mother had told her once. When you can't even recognize yourself. That's when you feel like it's all over, like you're not really living anymore, waiting to die.*

She leaned against Steve and tried to be calm. It was over now, at least the first Time. Why did she want so badly to cry in his arms? There wasn't anything of her mother inside her anymore. Science couldn't do that. Isn't that what they'd told her?

Time was only an illusion. No direct mental contact was possible. ? !? real sharing.

"Is there anything else?" Steve asked quietly.

"Yes." The nurse went to a table by the window and picked something up. "She wanted to have this. She said you would understand."

She held it out to Marian, a small pink object that seemed to have no weight at all. It gave Marian a moment to realize what it was. When she did she exhaled slowly, taking the flower from the tissue flower into her hand. Every fold so perfectly made, every ply so perfectly separated. For a moment she couldn't speak, could only stare at the thing. Then she whispered, "Can I see it now?"

The nurse shook her head. "She's asleep right now, Ms. Stiller. The first Time is always exhausting. Why don't you come back tomorrow?"

"Of course." She whispered it, staring at the rose. "Tell her . . . tell her . . . I understand. Please."

"I will, Ms. Stiller."

"Tell her . . ." She drew in a deep breath, searching for the right words. There were none. "Tell her I love her," she said at last. It fell far short of all that she needed to say . . . but it was all right. Her mother would understand.

The tears didn't start to flow until they were in the car.

Home. Thank God. Normalcy.

She drew in a deep breath on the porch while Steve opened the door. Letting go of all her tension, all the relief, everything she'd cried about on the long ride home. It was all right. Steve saw that she'd married her for better or for worse-but she wouldn't bring it home to her children.

She felt different somehow. No, that wasn't right. She felt as if she *should* be different. She kept poking around inside her own consciousness to figure out where the difference was. Sharing a body with someone was the ultimate intimacy. Could you do that and not be changed by it? Could someone use your body and brain for a whole day and not leave her mark somewhere inside you, etched into one biochemical pathway or another?

Diane came running to the door as it opened, saw she was all right, and hugged her. "You're okay!"

"Of course I'm okay." She still had the tissue rose in her hand, and hugging Diane without crushing it was no small feat. "The children?"

"Mark and Simon are asleep. Amy's in the kitchen. I thought you wouldn't want them to wake up for you."

Children in bed. Good. Soon she'd put Amy to bed herself, and that would be normal. Rhythms of life, reasserting themselves. She needed that right now.

She managed to wriggle out of her jacket without crushing the tissue flower. She could hear the dog barking from the backyard, recognizing their voices, begging to be let back in. She grinned as he hung up their coats and then went out to get him.

"No problems?" Marian asked, as they walked toward the kitchen. She wanted to hear her again. Wanted to savor the taste of the words.

"Nothing, really."

Was there an edge to her voice, a hint of uncertainty? Marian looked up sharply. "What? What is it? Did something happen?"

Diane hesitated. "She asked about it, Marian. They all did, but the boys gave up after I reassured them that you were okay. Amy . . . didn't. Children hear things, you know. I don't worry."

Marian felt a chill of dread seep into her heart. *She can't understand this. She's too young.* "What did you tell her?"

"I told her she'd have to wait for you to get home if she wanted more information. I know how much you wanted to be the ones to explain all this! She just. . . she wanted to know"

few things were true. Stories she'd heard from other children. Most of them weren't true, they were pretty scary. She just needed . . . reassurance." Diane bit her lip as she watched for reaction . . . • somewhat nervously, Marian thought. "Just reassurance."

Marian forced herself to hold back all the sharp things she wanted to say. What good would it do now? She'd waited too long to choose the right words for Amy. Now someone else had done it for her. Berating Diane about it after the fact would get her nowhere.

*You knew it had to happen someday. Time technology is part of her world, you couldn't hide it from her forever.*

Amy was sitting at the kitchen table working on a jigsaw puzzle. It was one of Marian's own, a hard one. For a moment the girl didn't seem to notice her standing there in the doorway . . . then the dog barked as it came into the house, and Amy turned around . . . and her face broke into a broad grin of welcome as she saw Marian standing there. "Mom!"

"Hi, honey." She came up to the girl and tousled her curls. "I'm home now." Amy threw her arms around her with melodramatic glee, clearly delighted to have her home again. *Things are going to be all right. You were worried over nothing.* "I brought you a gift from Grandma." She knelt down so her eyes were on a level with the girl's, and held out the gift. "She used to make these when she was very young, before she got arthritis. See? It's all made out of tissues." Amy looked at the flower inquisitively, prodded it a few times, but didn't take it from her. "What are you doing, a puzzle?" Marian pulled up a chair to sit down. "That looks like a hard one."

"Diane said it was too hard for me. I told her I could do it if I wanted."

Marian laughed. "And so you can." God, the laughter felt good. She saw her husband standing in the doorway and nodded to him. *Fine, everything's fine.* "You can do anything you want to." She scanned the pieces and saw one that had been sorted into the wrong pile. "Here, honey, try this one. See if you can tell me where it goes."

She didn't reach for the piece Marian offered, but picked up a blue one instead. "It's okay, Mom." The girl didn't look up at her. "I can do it myself."

Was there a note in her voice that seemed different, somehow? *You're just being paranoid.* Marian told herself. *Everything's fine.* She watched her daughter for a few minutes more, studying her face as she concentrated on the puzzle. Trying to see if there was some outward sign of . . . of whatever was wrong. Finally she picked up one of the pieces again, turning it thoughtfully in her fingers, and made her voice as calm as she could as she offered it to the girl. "Look, here's a corner piece. Where do you suppose that goes?"

For a moment there was silence. The girl didn't reach for the piece that Marian held out. She didn't do anything, for a moment.

Then: "It's okay, Mom." Her voice was so quiet, so steady. "I don't need you to help me. Really."

Marian tried to speak, but her voice caught in her throat. The words of the countess echoed in her head, no gentle words this time, but every sound a thorn. *Were your parents there for you, Ms. Stiller? Don't you owe them something for that?*

"I'm okay," Amy repeated, and she looked down again to work on the puzzle.

Marian watched her for a moment longer. Then she rose and left the room. The dog yapped about her ankles, but she ignored him. Steve started to ask what was wrong, but she waved him to silence. How do you explain the loss of something which never even had a name? How

you address the fears in a child, when you couldn't make your own go away?

It wasn't until she got to her room and shut the door behind her that she realized she crushed the tissue flower.