

ALEX IRVINE

CHICHEN ITZA

DESPITE THE SENSORS AND pharm patches and the branching IV drip sprouted from the crook of his elbow, Brian's grandfather didn't look like he was dying. His face still held its color, his eyes shone, his hair was thick and bristly. The picture of health, save for the fact that he couldn't move; his nervous system had begun suffering rolling blackouts a month or so before, and now it was clear that the old man's power grid was fast approaching total failure. The doctor had offered Brian this metaphor by way of explaining a poorly understood viral syndrome that acted like an incredibly accelerated Lou Gehrig's disease, and Brian clutched at it, considering his grandfather as a sort of city whose inhabitants were being exiled by the coming blackout. It helped, somehow, to think of the old man as a collective instead of as an individual who would soon die.

"God-damn comet," a tiny speaker in the wall said. The old man couldn't talk any more, but he retained enough muscular control to subvocalize and a speech processor took care of the rest. The words came through distinctly, a slight hesitation between them the only sign of the effort it took Grandpop even to move his tongue and palate.

"Yeah," Brian said. "Once it could have showed up six weeks early."

Grandpop tried to shrug. A vein popped out in the side of his neck. Through the hospice window Brian could see across the towns of Lafayette and Boulder to the Indian Peaks, lumpy and crooked under a May snow. Foothills spread green below them, and at the base of those foothills Brian could almost pick out the exact location of the stone house next to Boulder Creek that he shared with four other grad students. Kris was probably there, fiddling with the garden she kept in the back yard. She wouldn't move in, but she used the house as a surrogate garden/laundry/dog foster home, retreating to her apartment when Brian's roommates got too omnipresent.

He looked back at his grandfather, feeling suddenly beleaguered and in need of refuge. Grandpop was dying, Brian's parents had been dead for years, Kris was fading away from him, he wasn't really close enough to any of his roommates to rely on them for support. He had no one to share the burden of the deathwatch, and Grandpop, who had always been Brian's sounding board in matters emotional, had stopped caring about love at roughly the time he stopped being able to speak.

The transformation in the old man was the worst part about the disease. Brian's mental image of his grandfather was leathery and obstinate, aggressively romantic, accidentally domineering, the kind of man whose presence automatically rearranged any space to center around him. Now, in the final stage of a terminal illness, Grandpop had withdrawn into a sort of dazed bitterness. God-damn comet was about the extent of the speaker's transmissions the past few days. Brian understood, or thought he did, but the change was still hard to deal with.

"God-damn comet," the speaker said again.

Before he got sick, Grandpop had planned a trip to Mexico to see Comet Halley from the top of one of the ruined buildings at Chichen itza. He'd been there in 1986 for the comet's previous rendezvous, on his first trip with the woman who later became Grandma Bruckner, and he'd intended the trip to commemorate Grandma and celebrate his own robust ninety-seven years. Now he lay paralyzed in a hospice in Lafayette, and every time Brian mentioned the trip -- which he didn't do very often -- the speaker growled, "Stupid sentimental idea."

It was sentimental, but it appealed to Brian anyway. Something romantic and committed about it reminded him of the way Grandpop had been when Brian was a kid. Then, the old man would have walked to Mexico.

He didn't know what to say. Grandpop wanted to see the comet, but he was going to die instead. What exactly did you say to that?

The old man was looking at him. "Grandpop, I have to go," Brian said. He stood. "I'll come back

tomorrow, okay?"

"Tomorrow," the speaker said, and Brian closed the door softly behind him.

The house was empty when he got home, but he heard Kris's voice muttering softly in the back yard. At first he couldn't make out the words, but as he passed through the kitchen, with its pawprinted floor and breakfast nook hung with copper pans, Brian's ears started to make sense of the speech.

It was a rapid-fire flow of Latin: *Cynodon dactylon*, *Eleusine indica*, *Trifolium repens*.

He stood on the back stoop watching her. Kris, on her knees in the garden, weeded around new tomato plants and among a cluster of nearly mature peas. *Pisum sativum*, *Lycopersicon esculentum*.

Automatically as breathing, she murmured the name of each weed as she tossed it into a pile by the open driveway gate: *Ambrosia artemisiifolia*, *Convolvulus arvensis*, *Taraxacum officinale*. When she paused to brush a lock of black hair from her eyes, she said *papillapigmentfilamentepidermis*, all in one rushing word.

Post-Link fugue, Brian told himself, parroting a doctor again. Perfectly normal during the first couple of weeks after the retinal piggybacks were implanted. Still, it scared the bejeezus out of him, like she was possessed, or channeling. Which in a way she was. Her freshly Linked brain was still accommodating itself to the torrent of information that now surged through her whenever she focused her attention on anything. The natural outlet was speech, and the doctors had said that a mania for naming was a common but temporary post-Uplink distraction.

"*Leptinotarsa decemlineata*," Kris said, and flicked a bug off one of the tomato plants. "Go away."

He walked toward the garden and said, "Kris."

She turned her head and Brian noticed that the two black eyes the implantation had given her were now faded to a dark yellow. "Hey, Brian," she said in her own voice, a throaty mezzo with just a little grain, and then she added "*Homo sapiens*" in the other voice, the unconscious automatic articulation of muscle. She smiled at him.

She doesn't even know she said that, he thought. He wanted to get on her bike, leaning there against the corner of the house, and ride away.

All of the doctors said it would pass, but Brian had an irrational feeling that it wouldn't, that the Kris he was seeing was the Kris he would always see, that she would go on with her savant-speech as long as he could stand to be around her. A little bit distant, a little bit preoccupied, part of her mind permanently drawn away to the volcanic flood of information that had become for her a dominant sixth sense. Doctors said what doctors said.

It hurt him that he could not share it. He had met Kris during a depression that seemed in retrospect to have been a bit self-indulgent but at the time had been like going through the day shrinkwrapped.

Nothing touched him and he couldn't muster the strength to reach out. The depression had started to lift one summer afternoon as Brian was walking along Boulder Creek behind the public library. A

hummingbird had appeared in front of his face: flash, there, bright red and hovering, one black gleam replacing another as it turned its head from side to side and looked at him. Then it was gone, and he'd stood there with the creek rippling by and a stupefied grin on his face. Speechless. Not a thought in his head. A little stoned by the intensity of the connection he'd felt, a little shaken by its evanescence.

Kris had blown into his life a few days after that, suffusing him with the kind of surprised joy he had felt at seeing that hummingbird. Only she had stayed.

Brian didn't believe in omens, exactly, but he had come to think of the hummingbird as a harbinger, if not of Kris then of his reawakening from isolation. The idea of her had become superimposed on the memory of the hummingbird, and whenever Brian thought about it he realized that she was inscribed in every pleasant memory he could think of from the past few years. He thought of her constantly. Something she'd said about Chaucer once that he'd ended up putting in an exam essay. Her recessed incisor. The taste of the skin behind her ears, the tingle of static electricity in her hair the one afternoon when they'd stayed up on South Boulder Peak a little too long. The noise she made in the back of her throat when she rolled over in the middle of the night. The intertwined scents of pinon pine needles and sexual musk. The color of the Flatirons before dawn, as they catch the hint of daybreak and glow while stars still speckle the sky: he remembered that because of the night he and Kris had spent lying in the grass at Chautauqua

Park, following the triangle of Jupiter, Saturn, and the Pleiades across the sky and talking about going to Newfoundland or Ulan Bator or Mars. Going together. The Sun had come up just as the Moon was going down, and Brian would never forget watching the sky change color around the brilliant bone-white of the Moon.

And now she had a sixth sense that drew her away from him.

Kris got up and walked over to kiss him. "How's your grandfather?"

"Other than the terminal illness, he's pretty much okay." Stupid fucking question, Brian thought, even though he knew she'd only spoken to leave him an opportunity for whatever he needed to vent. But Jesus: How's your grandfather?

Let it be, he told himself. This is hard on her too.

He started talking to distract himself from how pissed he was. "It's hard to be angry at someone who's going to die."

Kris rubbed dirt from her fingertips. "Why would you be angry at him?"

"I get in kind of a deterministic funk, you know, seeing how he's just going to die. Nothing anybody can do about it. We cure cancer, grow new hearts, regenerate severed spines -- and Grandpop gets this brand-new disease that's going to kill him anyway." From the back yard, through a break in the trees, Brian could see the upended slabs of the Flatirons wearing their late- afternoon salmon pink. "Grandpop was a big mountain climber when he was younger. He got my dad into it."

"Oh," Kris said carefully.

"It's hard not to blame him."

"Brian, you might as well blame the freezing point of water," Kris said. "Your parents fell because of a rockslide, which happened because water expands and contracts when it freezes and melts and because gravity points toward the center of the Earth. Do you think your grandfather would have taken your father climbing if he'd known it would kill his only son?"

"No," Brian said. "No, of course I don't. But I'm discovering that this ahead-of-time grief is a post-hoc-fallacy kind of emotion. Grandpop's dying. It doesn't make sense. I try to make it make sense by imposing patterns. This impulse to impose patterns spreads. I blame Grandpop for my mom and dad falling off a mountain. See?" He looked at Kris, trying very hard not to take his bottled-up anger out on her. "Self-analysis is easy, and I still feel shitty."

She just looked back at him, waiting for him to go on. So he did.

"And the thing is, he never once tried to force me into anything remotely hairy-chested or outdoorsy. I was kind of a strange being in my family; they all wanted to climb mountains and I got a bigger kick out of reading about someone else doing it. I don't think my dad ever really got comfortable with that. But after he died, Grandpop absolutely let me go my own way. He let me know that if I ever wanted to come hiking or ice-climbing or whatever, he was happy to take me along -- he asked me every single time he went -- but I also knew that he didn't look down on me for not going.

"So what do I do? I get mad at him for not pressing me. I start to think that if he thought I was a real male Bruckner, he'd want me to take up the old man's pastimes, carry on the family tradition of death-defying nature worship. That's what my father called it. Death-defying nature worship, like snowshoeing along the Continental Divide was religious. I never understood it. But I wanted Grandpop to want me to understand it, and I sort of got bitter at him for not trying harder. Put that together with what I feel now, as an adult, which is that I owe him something and don't know how to make it good, and...."

He realized that Kris had been muttering something under her breath for several seconds. When he stopped speaking, he could parse it: ergo propter hoc ergo propter hoc ergo propter hoc. Primus inter pares. Pro bono publico.

Piscem natate doces, she said, and her cheeks dimpled in a dreamer's smile. Doctum cani antiquo dolos novos. Permite canes dormitos sitos esse.

"Jesus, Kris!" he shouted.

"What?" she said, taking a step away from him.

"You don't even know, do you? You don't hear yourself naming the goddamn weeds as you pull them, in

Latin, you name me genus and species when I come out the door, now you finish my phrases to yourself while I'm trying to say something, what the fuck? Is Wheelock's Latin running all the time on one of the piggybacks?"

"The doctors explained this, Brian," she said, keeping her voice steady. Her fingertips rubbed against each other, bits of dirt falling from them into the grass. "Fugues. All subconscious. You know I'm listening to you."

"Part of you. I know part of you is. The rest is I don't know where. Up there." Brian swiped an arm at the sky, coloring with Rocky Mountain sunset. "Communing with a fucking satellite. Sure as hell isn't here."

One of Kris's hands went to her mouth, and Brian could see her making a focused effort not to cry. When she spoke, her voice had more stone than sadness in it. "You're upset about your grandfather," she said. "We've had this argument before, and I sure don't want to have it again right now. I just want to tell you one thing, Brian: don't take it out on me. You're better than that, and I don't deserve it." She turned around, jerked her bicycle upright, and pedaled away without another word.

HE VISITED GRANDPOP the next day, and the one after that, and each of the next sixteen days until the old man died quietly -- as if he could have died any other way -- on the thirtieth of May, 2061. A doctor came into the room when the Code Blue alarm started its insistent beep. He shut off the alarm and noted the time of death at the wall terminal, right under the speaker that Brian half-expected to mutter something angry and inarticulate. Brian witnessed the death statement and authorized another form attesting to the hospice's compliance with state and federal palliative-care guidelines.

"My sympathies for your loss, Brian," the doctor said with complete sincerity before leaving Brian alone with Grandpop's body.

Brian looked at the old man's face, trying to see if he could discern some difference between the stillness of death and the inert mask of paralysis Grandpop had worn for the last five or six days he'd been alive. If anything had changed, though, Brian couldn't see it. He'd been so surrounded, so permeated by the knowledge of Grandpop's death that the event itself came only as a kind of fulfillment.

"All right, Grandpop," he said, because he had to say something.

It had rained earlier that day, and through broken clouds the setting sun cast the shadows of the Indian Peaks up into the sky. In another hour Comet Halley would be visible through telescopes.

So damn mundane, Brian thought. Grandpop got old and died. He thought the haze that seemed to hang around him must be grief, but it didn't feel like grief. Grandpop got old and died.

Just like that he made the decision.

"I'll go for you, Grandpop," he said.

He caught himself waiting for the speaker to answer. Before Grandpop had fallen silent six days before, he'd gotten single-minded on the topic of memorials. Nothing, he said. Don't do anything. Let me be dead. Only the deterioration of his nerves had overwhelmed the speech processor's ingenuity, and what came out was Uh-ing. Oan oo eng. Eh ee ee eh.

It struck Brian then how creepily similar the speaker's cryptic cadences seemed to Kris's sleeping murmurs. He shivered, physically shaking the thought away.

Oan oo eng.

"I have to, Grandpop," he said. "It's for me, all right? I have to."

He lifted the crisp white bedsheet over Grandpop's face and let it settle. "Okay," he said, and went into the hall. On his way out he passed an orderly coming to prepare Grandpop's body for cremation.

"I'm going to go to Mexico in a couple of weeks," he told Kris when she came for dinner the next night. After twenty-four hours behind drawn shades trying to figure out how to mourn, Brian had wanted to go out, but Kris was jittery about the fugues, didn't want people staring in restaurants.

She put her fork down and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "I thought your grandfather didn't want you to do anything like that."

"For seventy-six years he planned to go back there the next time the comet came around," Brian said.

"After Grandma died he got even more determined about it. Then he got sick and I think it was easier for

him to reject things he'd wanted to do than admit he'd never be able to do them. Call it a rationalization if you want to. I think he was trying to make dying easier on himself."

Kris waited for him to continue, eyes steady and focused, and Brian lost his train of thought for a minute when he realized how long it had been since he'd had her direct attention. "Um," he said. "So." Maybe the doctors were right, and she'd just taken a little while to arrange the piggybacked information flow.

"It's for me really," Brian went on. "I miss the old man, and I want to do something for him. Some kind of goofy symbolic romantic sentimental thing that's exactly what he might have done before he got sick. I'm going to scatter his ashes at Chichen Itza the day Comet Halley looks best from Earth."

"Wow," Kris said, "hope it doesn't rain," and that was when Brian really knew she was there, completely there, and he was laughing with her and it was like the piggybacks had never happened.

Late, late that night, after they'd made love and fallen asleep and he'd woken up when she'd come back from the bathroom, Brian lay listening to the creek and watching Kris sleep. He felt a little jittery, as if she'd be angry if she caught him looking at her, and he figured she would if she knew why he was watching her.

He'd been reading up on the Uplink, its effects. Like any new and possibly revolutionary medical procedure, it was wreathed in hyperbole both positive and negative. From one side hosannas, from the other sackcloth gnashings. Either humanity was entering into a new age of absolute availability of information, or the fundamental incompleteness that made each human distinct was being thoughtlessly and irreversibly erased. Technoprophets heralded the advent of practical telepathy, the shared knowledge of human civilization; New Humanists deplored the headlong rush away from unmediated experience of the world. Moderate voices couldn't even hear themselves reason.

Brian wanted to be moderate. The procedure itself was safe, had been tested for years on a variety of first lower mammals and then primates: the retinal piggybacks tracked whatever the eyes focused on, and a custom-grown genetic processor framed on the patient's own bone cells and powered by body heat identified the physical objects and selected key words from the patient's speech. These objects and words became topic searches on a satellite network that would achieve global coverage by the end of 2062, and the resultant spray of information squirted along a private frequency to a receiver drilled into the mastoid part of the skull. Implantation generally caused temporary light sensitivity and some maxillary or malar bruising. There was a risk of blindness, but you could always get new eyes, and -- at least according to Kris's doctors -- the risk of psychological dysfunction due to the brain's inability to handle its radically expanded informational vistas had been wildly overstated by hostile manipulations of study data.

Kris herself had shrugged off Brian's worries: "Everything new brings alarmists out of the woodwork. In the eighteenth century people thought that vaccinations would turn you into a cow." There was no good way to answer that. And the procedure was very expensive, but Kris had money and none of it was technically challenging any more, and anyway technical obstacles hadn't kept Brian lying awake watching the woman he loved sleep under moonlight. He wanted to see if what he had read about Uplinked dreaming was true.

Kris's breathing slowed and deepened. Brian couldn't see for sure, but he thought her eyes were moving. Then she started to talk.

At first he couldn't make out any words; after a moment he figured out that she wasn't speaking English. "Matay nipagesh?" she said, quite clearly, followed by a rush of indistinguishable syllables, and then, again plain as day, "Chichen Itza. June. Sivan." All of the clarity faded from her speech again, and gradually she fell silent. Had she said something like Halley? Sure sounded like it, but that could have been associations in Brian's own sleep-deprived brain. He wanted to shake Kris awake, find out what she'd been dreaming, what language she'd spoken, what it had been like.

"I'll be damned," he whispered. It was true. The piggybacks even tracked dream-visions. The dreams of the Uplinked were open for anyone to see. Brian wondered how many dream addicts were already out there immersing themselves in slumbering Uplinked reveries.

He lay awake for a long time after that, wondering what else he had read was true.

"Did you dream about Chichen Itza last night?" he asked her in the morning, to see if she remembered.

"Um," Kris said. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"Don't you ever think it's weird that people could hack your Link and see your dreams?"

Her mug banged on the breakfast-nook table and she said, "Not this early, Brian. Please."

Brian set down the spatula he'd held hovering over scrambled eggs. "I didn't mean it like that. Not trying to be combative. Just a question. Doesn't that seem weird?"

"No mood to be persecuted," she grumbled into the steam rising from her tea.

"Kris, come on. It's been less than a month. I still have questions. Don't you still have questions? Does everything make sense for you that fast?" Brian served the eggs onto two plates, added a liberal portion of salsa to each, and sat across from her. "I'm trying to reach an accommodation with this, okay? Help me out a little."

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Brian scrolled through airfares to Merida, Mexico. Kris was putting in library time, planning to come over for dinner. Without her around, Brian had to repress a recurrent urge to turn off the terminal and walk over to the travel agency on Canyon Boulevard next to the liquor store. It wasn't that Brian hated computers; he'd just absorbed from his grandfather an abiding belief in the fundamental importance of human contact. Computers were faster, more efficient, et cetera and so on, but their eyes didn't light up when you walked in and said, "I'd like to look into airfares to Chichen Itza." It was possible to get a video link to one of the travel-and-tourism nets, but why would anyone do that when they could just walk around the corner onto Canyon Boulevard and talk to the fearsomely brisk and smiling young women at Canyon Travel? Brian was old-fashioned, so old-fashioned in fact that it was old-fashioned to be old-fashioned like he was. He knew this, and it changed nothing except for his teeth-gritted determination to get the damned reservation on the computer so there would be one less thing for him and Kris to argue about. If he went to Canyon Travel now, she would doubtless misconstrue it as a gesture of sublimated disdain for her piggybacks, and that was the last thing in the world Brian wanted.

So he scrolled through menus. As it turned out, it was easier to fly into Cozumel than Merida, and the park-service maglev shuttle from Cozumel was faster than the bus from Merida. Brian bought plane and maglev tickets, then started thinking about a place to stay. Grandpop would have camped, even at ninety-seven, but Brian felt that undertaking a journey to Mexico was gesture enough. He didn't need to sleep in the mud too.

There was a hotel, though, where he and Grandma had stayed after a downpour...

Brian pulled up a fresh screen and dug around in Grandpop's photo album. Names and places skated across the screen: Annapurna and Allagash, Gizeh and Gobi, Yosemite and Yucatan. Aha. The Piramide Inn, starting place of Chichen Itza tourists since time immemorial, or at least since the nineteen-seventies. There was Grandpop with his new girlfriend Eliza Millett, later Grandma Liza, grinning for an anonymous photographer who hadn't quite managed the focus on Grandpop's old 35-millimeter Pentax. Grandpop was hiding a cigarette behind his back, and Grandma was trying not to laugh out loud at something someone had just said. Had the photographer made a joke? In English or Spanish?

"Hm," Brian said, and ran a search for the Piramide Inn. It popped up immediately, almost obscured by a phalanx of aggressive bubblescreen adlinks. Brian patiently waited for those to pop, and then he set about making reservations at the Piramide. The symmetry of it appealed to him. Continuity.

He'd heard the back door slam, but he didn't really register Kris's arrival until she was in the bedroom with him, looking over his shoulder at the overlapping screens. "Brian," she said.

"Just a second."

"Brian, look at me."

He did. She was practically jumping in place, a wide and excited smile lighting up her face. "I want to go with you," she said.

This was more of a surprise than, in retrospect, Brian thought it should have been. "You do?"

"Yeah, I do." She nodded and smiled, waiting for him.

He found himself nodding and smiling too. "Great," he said. "Yeah, excellent. This'll be good for us. Time together, in a strange place. Yeah. This'll be good."

They kissed. Kris was a little sweaty, and Brian could feel her heartbeat where his fingers traced the hollow of her throat.

The Cenote de Sacrificios gaped at his feet before he was really ready for it, a perfectly cylindrical hole in the ground fifty meters across and twenty deep, with still green water at the bottom like the pupil of a blind eye reflecting the scattered clouds of the Yucatan sky. Omphalos, Brian thought. Next to him Kris said, very softly, "The lugubrious associations attaching to it fill the imagination with indescribable melancholy."

"What?"

She looked at him for the first time since they'd left the Piramide Inn. "It's what Desiree Charnay said when he wrote about the Cenote. He explored the whole area in the eighteen-eighties." Her nose wrinkled, ever so slightly, and she looked back down into the water. "They dredged it in 1904 because Spanish records said that the Maya threw gems in with sacrificial victims, honoring the rain god. Edward Herbert Thompson did that. He found skeletons and all kinds of jade, archaeological treasures...." Kris trailed off and smiled self-consciously. "Right. Ugly American."

That was a response, Brian thought. And I didn't say anything.

"Oh my God," Kris said, suddenly delighted. "Did you know he once wrote an essay suggesting that the Maya were survivors of Atlantis?" Her laughter rang bright from the Cenote's bare stone walls. She was no longer speaking to Brian.

"Chichen," he said, to distract himself. Mouth of the well. He knew that much just from the tour guide's theatrically convivial Spanglish introduction. To the Maya, the Cenote was a passage between worlds, a spirit gate. Grandpop would have called it superstitious bullshit, but his tone of voice would have been tintured with admiration.

Brian worked his way around to the other side of the Cenote, away from the concrete apron at the end of the causeway that led back to the main plaza of Chichen Itza. He didn't speak to Kris before he went, and he was glad to see that she was following. It meant she still knew he was there.

Several times since they'd gotten off the maglev shuttle, she'd fugued out on him, standing still but not rigid and looking at nothing in particular, her mouth moving but only drifting snatches of sound coming out.

Brian wasn't sure whether this was an improvement on the unconscious logorrhea or not. She always came back after a few seconds, but the spaces of her absence were deeply unnerving.

"Time," Brian said to her when she caught up with him. He'd come two hundred degrees or so counterclockwise from the end of the causeway. A thick stand of brush had survived the tourist onslaught long enough to disguise his intent.

"I think he would appreciate this," Kris said as Brian took an aluminum vial about the size of a cigar tube from the thigh pocket of his shorts.

"Yeah," he said. "I think so too."

With that he unstoppered the vial, leaned out as far as he safely could, and tipped a long plume of ash into the shadowed depths of the Cenote de Sacrificios. Kris watched him, and when he'd returned the tube to his pocket, she laid a hand gently on the back of his neck.

"Nobody believed they died," she said. "They were supposed to be carried away by the chacs, rain gods who lived in the earth."

Brian considered this for a while, then shook his head. "They died," he said.

HUNGER FOLLOWED with impolite quickness on the heels of Brian's moment of mourning. He and Kris walked slowly back up the causeway, looking at the people who like them but unlike them had come to Chichen Itza from wherever they had come from. It was, Brian figured, a pretty typical traveler's moment, but that didn't change its impact on him. Take several thousand people, he thought. Remove them from familiar surroundings and lump them together in a place they've all always wanted to see, and you find out just where similarities refract into differences.

Me, Brian Bruckner, I'm different from them. But I want to be different from them in some way that makes my similarities with Kristine Albritton meaningful. I want to see us as a united pair in the midst of this anonymous throng.

As soon as he'd finished that thought, lust ran right up the back of hunger and trampled it out of his mind. "Hey," he said to Kris, trying not to grin the way he wanted to grin, "let's find us a little secluded place." She played it cool, only quirked an eyebrow and letting a smile play at the corners of her mouth. "My goodness," she said. "It's true what they say about funerals."

Somewhere near the boundary of the park, they found a secluded little overgrown test trench and made love with much suppression of giggles and awkward slapping at opportunistic mosquitoes. Nobody bothered them, and once Brian had located the bug spray in one pocket of his shorts (ignoring Kris's arch joke about the aluminum tube riding against his thigh), things went more smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, that afterward they nestled into a hollow and fell asleep.

That was just broadcast worldwide to anyone who knew where to look, Brian thought distantly, stupefied by sex and the afternoon heat. Sweat trickled down his belly into his navel. The ground was soft and much cooler than the air.

But heck, what a rugged guy I am, rolling around in the Yucatan jungle. Let 'em watch.

As he fell asleep, he was thinking about Edward Herbert Thompson, one more Ugly American digging trenches in search of lost Atlantis.

By the time Brian stirred again, the light under the forest canopy had purpled into something like dusk. Kris was nowhere to be seen.

Brian got dressed and clambered out of the trench onto a trail. Not seeing Kris anywhere nearby, he headed back into the center of the park. Two thoughts competed for attention in his head: he was hungry (ravenously starving insatiable, he thought in a crude parody of Kris) and he was worried about Kris. The worry was wrapped around a core of anger.

Between El Mercado, the excavated marketplace, and the Grupo de las Mil Columnas, some kind of memorial building with an altar attached to the Templo de los Guerreros, a new marketplace had sprung into being. The rows of vendor carts weren't technically legal on park grounds, but like many other things in turbocapitalized Mexico, technicalities were easily smoothed over with the proper application of pesos. Smells of fruit, cooking meat, spices, peppers, and beer fractured Brian's attention. He hesitated, then plunged on through the market in search of Kris.

Just at the thinning fringe of the market crowds, he thought he heard her voice. Brian ducked behind a tamale stand, nearly had a heart attack when a small hairless dog scrambled up to sniff him, then found Kris under a tree, deep in animated conversation with a tall, angular woman wearing cutoff army fatigue pants and a Toluca soccer jersey. "Jesus, Kris," he said, throwing his arms up as he approached them. "You couldn't leave a note?"

As the words left his mouth, Brian became aware of an incongruity between his speech and theirs.

Discerning exactly where the difference lay absorbed his entire mind for what seemed like a long time, but Kris and the other woman had barely turned their heads toward him when he realized that they hadn't been speaking English. Kris's dream, Brian thought. He looked at the other woman, olive-skinned and black-haired.

"What," he began. Kris said, "Brian. Yael. Yael, Brian."

"You met here," Brian said, or asked. He wasn't sure.

They exchanged a glance. Yael said something to Kris, who grinned and repeated the phrase, then for Brian's benefit said, "Not exactly."

"Your dream," he said. "Kris, were you talking to her in your dream?"

"Speaking Hebrew," Kris said, "and I didn't even know I was speaking, and I didn't even know I knew Hebrew, and I didn't really know we'd met until I ran into her here." She blinked and said, "Ivrit, Hebreo, Hebreu, Hebraisch."

"Ran into," Brian said. Something was starting to come together in his head. He started to pursue it, but just then another man approached them, flinging up his hands almost exactly as Brian had. "Yael, where have you been?" he asked, his voice just a shade below a shout. "You can't just walk away like that, this is Mexico, what are you doing?" He glared suspiciously at Kris and Brian. Brian couldn't help but crack a smile.

"I was just doing the same thing," he said, and stuck out his hand. "Brian Bruckner."

"Nathan ben-Zvi," the other man introduced himself, and then they all stood looking at each other for a long moment.

"This is Kris," Brian said. "I just found out she speaks Hebrew."

Yael said something to Kris, who reached to clasp Brian's hand. "I'll be back," she said, and went with Yael across the plaza toward the ancient observatory, El Caracol.

"What did she say?" Brian asked Nathan.

"She said she wanted Kris to meet someone," Nathan answered. He shook his head. "It's like they're at a reunion."

This comment provoked a relieved feeling of fellowship in Brian. Yes, he thought. That's right. Nathan felt just like he did. They gazed at the spot in the crowd where Kris and Yael had disappeared.

"I read that there are babies who get Uplinked in utero, and never bother to learn to talk," Nathan said after a time. "They could, but they never bother."

This idea staggered Brian. To be Uplinked before you had any direct, unmediated experience of the world...were these babies picking up language from their links, or were they, dear God, forming their own language, a baby-language with a million words for mother? What did they say to each other?

"Before long," Nathan said, "they won't even notice the rest of us."

"Sure they will."

Nathan turned to him, a deep crease between his eyebrows. "Why? Why would they? Even now, Yael has an entire social, intellectual, emotional sphere that I know nothing about. That I can know nothing about. That I have no access to. And she was twenty-six when she Uplinked. A baby...what use does a baby have for the world when it has its Link before it's ever taken a breath?" He fell silent.

Brian wanted to disagree. Nathan's perspective seemed alarmist, wild-eyed, irrational. But when Brian remembered Kris naming the weeds in the back yard and then saying *Homo sapiens* to him without knowing it, he had to ask himself: How much else is going on that neither one of us consciously knows about? What bridges are we building in other directions?

El Caracol loomed to the south, crowds gathering on its observatory deck, more people streaming up its stairways that faced the cardinal directions. Brian wondered who Kris and Yael were meeting there, wondered too why they needed to meet at all if they'd already lived in each other's dreams through Uplink. Must be because they were adults, he decided. The Uplink is laid over the top of a deep matrix of impulses to connect physically, to get close to other humans. But the babies, Jesus. Was Nathan right? Against his better judgment, Brian caught himself mimicking Kris again: El Caracol, the snail, die Schnecke. Escargot?

It was a Spanish name anyway. What had the Maya called it? Now that Brian thought of it, Chichen Itza was a bizarre melange of Spanish and Mayan names: Tzompantli stood next to the Juego de Pelota, the Cenote Xtoloc next to El Caracol, Chichen Itza itself in the state of Yucatan between Merida and Valladolid. Different histories coming together, Brian thought, and only one really survived. The Spaniards won; the Maya are a curiosity. But they were right about this place: Chichen, mouth of the well. Gateway from this world to the next.

Looking over his shoulder, Brian saw the massive pyramid called El Castillo, the Castle, its eastern side in deep shadow. The sun was setting. Pyramid before me, he thought, and pyramid behind, and time like two pyramids aimed toward each other, the invisible point of their meeting the fulcrum of the present. Gateways. Into the Uplinked world.

His mind ran in circles like this for several minutes as the sun fell behind the treeline. "You here for the comet?" Nathan asked.

Brian nodded. "It's kind of a commemorative thing. For my grandfather."

"Ah," Nathan said, a little uncomfortable. "We're honeymooning. Yael's idea. If you don't want to see the comet, don't look to the south. It'll be clear any minute."

"You think they're here to see it?" Brian asked, and from the look on Nathan's face he knew that Nathan understood who he meant by they. Already the Uplinked were taking on a collective identity.

"Yeah," Nathan said. "It's a bithead thing, like some kind of organizational meeting or something. I heard Yael muttering about it."

"She dreams too," Brian said, and Nathan nodded.

Bithead, Brian thought, offended by the term despite a strong desire to use it himself. Pejorative slang was a powerfully comforting thing.

"I was thinking how strange it is that they even need to get together," Brian said. His objectivity surprised him; apart from the consequences to human culture, he was already beginning to figure out that Kris was lost to him, and still he talked about it like it was happening in a movie. He had an urge to blame even that on the Uplink: even thinking about it robbed him of the ability to experience anything immediately, in itself. But that was bullshit. He'd known Kris was receding from him for a while, and this distance was his way of accepting what he'd prepared for.

He tried to joke his way out of it. "Man, I used to think I didn't understand women. But guys like you and me, this is something different."

Nathan smiled, but just barely. Brian could see that he too knew that coming to Chichen Itza, he'd lost the woman in his life, and apparently Nathan hadn't been prepared the way Brian had. Of course, Brian hadn't known he'd been prepared until just then.

"It's mostly men, actually," Nathan said. "I read that only about thirty percent of Uplinks are performed on women."

"Well, aren't we lucky," Brian said.

Kris and Yael materialized out of the crowd and the dusk. Yael took Nathan's hands and said something softly in Hebrew. Brian heard Kris in his head: Ivrit, Hebreo, Hebreu, Hebraisch.

She walked up to him, made no move to touch him. Didn't really look at him, even; her face stayed turned toward the southwest, where El Caracol nestled dark against the last glow of sunset.

"They're here, aren't they?" Brian said to her. "The ones who could come."

"Yes. They're here," she said. To him but not really to him. Brian, not wanting to see the comet yet, cupped a hand around the orbit of his left eye and followed her line of sight to the flat top of El Caracol, dense with people looking up at the sky. A hundred, perhaps. Two hundred. He didn't know. They spilled onto the upper terraces below the observatory deck. He felt an almost gravitational tug on his hand, the night-before-Christmas desire to see, but he resisted it.

"This is why you wanted to come," he said, meaning it as a question, but it didn't come out that way even though he'd wanted to give her the chance to deny it. The possibility of reconciliation, snatched from a depth of separation he hadn't understood until just right then, arose and passed in her silent averted gaze. She saw the crowd, knew without asking which of them were speaking to her, and did not at that moment consciously count him among their number. It did not occur to her to deny what was so obviously and axiomatically and dispassionately true.

The long moment on the rim of the Cenote de Sacrificios replayed itself in Brian's mind: the spread of ash on dark water, yes, and the touch of her fingers on the back of his neck, but mostly the moment when those fingers had lifted away and the last real possibility of contact between them had drifted like a sunlit plume of ash down into the gateway between worlds. A twist of regret caught Brian's breath, and he thought, I wish I'd known.

Kris was murmuring again, almost subvocalizing the way Grandpop in his extremity had ghosted words into the speaker by his bed. On top of El Caracol, an answering murmur rippled in the damp night air, the accidental voicings of a newborn human symphony.

She started climbing the steps, her pace slow and certain, her face lifted to the sky. Brian followed her to the first platform and stopped as she continued up the worn stone steps. Yael was a step ahead of her. When Kris reached the observatory platform he almost said something. Instead he allowed his gaze to be drawn at last to the southern sky.

Comet Halley was past perihelion, moving past Earth back into the vasty deeps at the edge of the Solar System, its tail leading it into its final sojourn. It had given too much of itself this time and it would never return, but in compensation it blazed in elegiac brilliance across an arm's length of the early summer sky. "Hey there, hairy star," Brian breathed in greeting, forgetting for a moment everything but the comet's beautiful dying fall into his eyes that were only his.

When he looked away from it, Kris was gone. The dome of El Caracol stood above a tableau of still

figures with heads tilted back like Easter Island monoliths and mouths unconsciously forming words that blended into what almost but not quite ever became a kind of chant. Somehow the extended topography of heads and shoulders, black against the faintest light still in the sky, reminded Brian of the Indian Peaks, shouldering each other aside to look down into his grandfather's hospice room. Another gravitational urge drew him, this time to join, and Brian took three slow steps up toward the observatory platform, feeling for each step with his gaze locked on the rows of starlit silhouettes. Looking for Kris, knowing what he had to do to really find her. Acquiescing.

Almost imperceptibly, people began to move. Small groups slowly flowed toward the edges of the platform, began to drip down the stairway in twos and threes. Two women passed Brian, not meeting his eyes, glancing over their shoulders at the remaining figures scattered erect and murmuring around the observatory dome. Others followed, nudging Brian to the edge of the stair. On each face he saw a variant of the same expression: awestruck, fearful, uncomprehending wonder. None of them spoke, as if the undulating drone of the Uplinked watchers had made them fearful of speech.

They passed, and Brian stood alone on the terraced flank of El Caracol. At the edge of his field of vision, Comet Halley shone like an incandescent veil. In its light he could make out faces on the stone summit. He stopped himself before he could find Kris. Acquiesce to that, he told himself. Eyes closed, he listened to the crest and fall of sound, wanting at least to pick her voice from the aural palimpsest that surrounded him. He soaked it in, felt again the tidal urge to join, to find a way through the noise to emergent understanding. Time slipped by, and he began to parse single voices, most of them male. He ignored them, concentrating on the women, moving his mouth silently to get a sense of their cadence and inflection, knowing he'd recognize Kris from that even if her voice was already altering the way it had in the garden, before he'd even decided to come to Chichen Itza on a stupid romantic memorial pilgrimage, alone without any idea of how alone....

The sound of his own voice snapped him back into himself. Parroting again. Picking sounds, syllables, running words over his own tongue without knowing or, in the end, really caring what they meant. He couldn't even remember what he'd been saying, or in which language.

"Hey," someone said, and tapped him on the shoulder.

Brian blinked and started away from the contact. On the step below him stood Nathan ben-Zvi. They looked at each other for a long silent moment before Nathan said, "Don't you think.... I mean, we should go, right? Come on."

Nathan's face looked like it might fly apart at any second. A muscle spasmed in his jaw, his eyes stared beneath a deeply etched frown on his forehead, and the skin around his mouth was tight and pebbled with tension. His voice stayed remarkably steady, though, steadier in fact than Brian's when Brian swallowed and said, "Yeah."

Do I look like that? Brian thought. Nathan's wife is up there. It's worse for him. His wife. At least Kris and I hadn't made each other any promises.

Still he came back to get me.

He let Nathan stay a step ahead of him, no more, as they descended the steps and walked away from the newborn unity of the voices on El Caracol.