

# Melodies Played upon Cold, Dark Worlds

## by Robert Reed

Say what you will about women. List your personal tastes according to tits and perversions and religious persuasions. Define beauty along whichever rigorous line leaves you fulfilled. But to my way of thinking, in those always difficult matters of love, no woman can love you as deeply or half as passionately as the profoundly neurotic woman.

I own a little bookshop. I was in the backmost aisle, shelving my latest box of dusty treasures, when I heard the gentle clearing of a throat. Turning, I discovered a small young woman with a wide, wide mouth and a rugged prettiness that nicely accented the beauty of her dark brown face. With that wide mouth, she smiled at me. I smiled back. But I didn't take much hope from her expression. Women often flash their teeth at strange men. It's an instinctive reaction buried in their primate genetics: Because men are large and potentially dangerous animals, it pays to start on our good side.

"Can you help me?" she inquired.

She was wearing a delicious gray sweater and tight black slacks and the oddest, pinkest shoes this side of Oz. I was staring at her shoes, and she said, "I'm looking for a certain book."

"I don't have any books," I replied.

Incredibly, she accepted my silly joke as fact. An expression of utter disappointment emerged, and she sighed, grieving even as she looked at the tall shelves. Second- and third-hand books were jammed together, my inventory reaching to the water-stained ceiling.

"I'm kidding," I allowed. Then with my most patient tone, I asked, "What sort of book are you looking for, miss?"

She touched the nearest shelf, two narrow fingers running down the long spine of a trout fishing How-To.

"Not this book," she said.

Her hand dropped, and again, she smiled at me. It was a hopeful expression, and an equally hopeful voice said, "The future."

"Yes?"

"It's a book about the future." She grew serious, and sober, and with a deliberate air, she pulled a tiny piece of paper from her tight hip pocket. "I don't know the author's name," she confessed. "But it's called, I think, *Music of the Spheres*. Or something like that."

"And it's about the future?"

"Very much so," she assured. "A person mentioned it to me. A friend did. The book explains what's going to happen from now until the end of time." She seemed pleased with herself, speaking about such lofty matters. "Do you have any books like that?"

Like any half-equipped bookshop, the entire world's output of written matter is in easy reach. I can print any work to any size, in any of a hundred languages, using cheap paper or the most expensive linen. Or I can deliver a million volumes into a private library no larger than a burly human hair. But the smallest

portion of my inventory, and the bulk of my profit, comes from the old books wearing inflated prices, each aimed at the determined collector who doesn't have the cash or good sense to buy antique breakfronts or old Barbie dolls.

"Have you checked with my assistant?" I asked.

"The machine—?"

"My AI assistant. Did you ask for his help?"

"I asked for a person. It sent me back here."

"All right." She seemed a little young to feel ill at ease around thinking machines. "Let's walk down this way," I suggested, leading her into another aisle. Then with a showman's gesture, I told her, "This is my science section. Cosmology and the history of the universe—"

"It's not that kind of book," she confided. "I'm pretty much sure it isn't."

So I led her into a different corner of the store. "Science fiction?" I asked, pointing at gaudy spines wearing those curvaceous rockets that have never existed outside of human imaginations.

With a genuine embarrassment, she admitted, "I don't read fiction. For me, things have to be real ..."

"Nostradamus," I blurted. Really, I don't know why it took me so long to place her on the appropriate shelf.

But she surprised me, saying, "Oh, he doesn't help me. All of his predictions have come true."

Good, I thought. It was about time that we got rid of that old crank.

Again, as if unsure of her memory or the handwriting, she read the title on the sliver of paper. "*Music of the Spheres* is what I wrote. But I don't think that's quite right. I was paraphrasing, I'm afraid."

I made a quick search of my catalog and took an expert's long glance at my occult section. Just to be sure. Then I sat beside my assistant, doing manually what he could accomplish with a flick of coherent light. I showed her a few titles with what seemed like the appropriate subject matter. Again, she said that it wasn't a science book. She was quite sure about that. Then I warned her, "There's hundreds of books with some similarity to that title. Including posted essays and term papers and obscure articles, there are better than a hundred thousand works about the future ... most of them looking rather slight, or suspicious ..."

Crestfallen, she said, "I don't know what to do."

"Call your friend," I suggested. "Ask about the title."

"I can't." She showed me a shy little smile, adding, "Actually, he used to be a friend. But now, there's a restraining order ... and really, I can't ..."

"Sure," I said. As if everybody lives with that nagging problem.

Then with a wink and a teasing smile, I suggested, "Maybe your book hasn't been written yet. Since it's about the future and all."

She actually believed me. I saw it in her face, in those bright doubt-free eyes. With a gush of wonder, she asked, "Do you really think so?"

When she was intrigued, the woman was nothing but lovely.

"Maybe you're right," she agreed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was making another stupid joke."

But her new belief was too durable to notice my tiny confession. "I think that could be it. I think so."

I was busy thinking about my occult section. What could I sell this very odd woman, before she slipped out of my door?

With a wink, she suddenly asked, "Are you busy tonight? Would you like to have dinner?"

"Excuse me?"

"Dinner," she repeated. "I want to thank you for your help." She stepped up to the counter, looking very young and utterly fetching, her sweater pulled taut against an ample chest. "At a restaurant, maybe. Or if you're brave, I could cook a little something at my place."

What could I sell this woman before she slipped away?

Me. That's what.

"A little something," I said. "Honestly, that's about my favorite dish."

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I don't have to work to make a living. That's what I tell women, and the story has the benefit of being halfway true. My shop has to pull in enough customers to pay for the lease, the utilities, and my supplies. Everything else comes from my dead parents' investments. Books are a hobby. They are my second-favorite vice. The shop allows me to sit most of the day, reading what I want. What I like best is dense fiction and epic histories, and most of all, the sciences. I have this desperate deep fondness for anything that smacks of discovery and profound learning. When I read journal articles, or better, when I read the layman's translations ... well, there are moments when I feel as if the hand of God is resting on my shoulder, and Her thunderous voice is whispering to me, saying, "Look at this. Do you see? I am letting you be among the first to behold what is real, and true, and great."

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Her mother named her Amaryllis, though she moved through the world with the much simpler Amma. "Two Ms," she warned. Then with a practiced thoroughness, she explained, "I added the second M myself. It balances the name, I think, and gives me an equilibrium."

"How about Tony?" I asked. "Does that have balance?"

Amma gave me a pitying glance. Then instead of answering, she smiled and asked, "Do you want more

to eat, Tony?"

Honestly, she wasn't much of a cook. But I could see her hard work and pure intentions. The table was clean and set with care. The dirty pans and the aroma of burnt oil gave the kitchen an honest mayhem. I couldn't tell if the scorch marks behind the stove were from today or last week. But portions of the dinner—between the blackened and the raw—were extraordinarily good. Delicious, and perfect, and I didn't have to lie too much, telling her, "Sure. I'd love another helping."

We were eating in one corner of her tiny living room. Amma rose and took my plate, disappearing into the kitchen. As she turned away, her face changed. The smile faded, and her shoulders slumped. I'd made a mistake, using her as a waitress, or as a mother figure. Next time, I'd pulled my own ass out of the chair. If there was a next time. When she returned, she was wearing a grim, disappointed expression. I was an inch away from making some graceless, pointless apology.

First dates are a nightmare.

Unless I end up loving them, that is.

"Do you ever get scared?" Amma inquired.

"Scared?"

"I do," she confessed. With a sweet frailty, she set the restocked plate in front of me and settled on her side of the small round table. Almost shivering, she said, "All of the sudden, I'll start thinking about how things are moving. The changes happening in the world, and in us. I start to imagine our future ... and really, I'm a very imaginative person—"

"I can tell."

"But when I look past tomorrow," she said, "I can't see anything. Darkness, and silence, and this terrible cold. That's all that I can imagine. And suddenly, I'm just terrified."

I said nothing.

She seemed to be speaking to the centerpiece—a glass vase filled with dead flowers—explaining, "This isn't mental. It's not a chemical imbalance. I've taken all the medications, and they don't help. Not really. It took me forever, Tony ... but I finally realized that when a fear is genuine, no medicine can erase it ..."

I nodded, trying to appear understanding.

Amma gave me a long, sad stare. Then with a helpless tone, she asked, "Do you know how small we are?"

"We are small," I agreed. "In a lot of ways—"

"Tiny. And so temporary." She folded her arms across her chest. "When I look at the sky, my heart aches."

I was impressed. She was sweet and agonizingly sensitive, and peculiar in so many ways, and I was a little glad that the medicines couldn't cure her.

I said, "Amma," with a warm, caring voice.

I told her, "It's an enormous universe. I know. I've got a good imagination, too. But I can't picture the

distances, and all the darkness out there. Billions of years old, and billions of light-years across. And that's just what we can see. The revised inflationary model claims that the visible universe is just a tiny fleck drifting inside the creation . . ."

I was mentioning concepts that held no meaning for her. The revised inflationary model? Her eyes lifted, baffled by those deceptively simple words.

I steered back to us. To human beings.

"Yet we matter," I proclaimed. With a genuine fire, I said, "Our species is going to last. People are going to spread through the universe and prosper, and in the next billion years, we're going to do astonishing and wonderful things. Beautiful things. We'll become gods, or something nearly that big."

In my ramblings, she found something worthwhile.

Something intriguing.

With a sly little smile, she admitted, "I had a feeling about you, Tony. From the very first."

I didn't have the same feeling about her. But I had enough poise to color the truth, admitting, "When I first saw you, I knew you were different."

"Everyone does," she purred.

Then she rose out of her chair, and with an abrupt and irresistible confidence, she walked around the round table. Cool hands took me by the head, and then dropped to my shoulders, and she hugged me before kissing me on the ear and neck and the line of my jaw, slowly nibbling her way towards my mouth.

I kissed her back, and stood.

We stayed on our feet for a little while. For a long while.

Then Amma stepped out of her pink shoes and pants and panties, leaping back onto the table, bare legs dangling. I pulled my plate aside, giving her room to maneuver. Then I reached for the centerpiece.

"No," she told me. "I will."

With a flick of the hand, she threw the vase and dead flowers across the room, cheap glass shattering with a sharp, single note.

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"Something has happened."

There was no alarm in the voice. There was no joy, and absolutely no sense of anticipation. But the silence that followed was pleased, even smug. My assistant stared at me with glass eyes. His face and body leaned over the counter, just a little, while his right hand slowly drummed on the blank display panel. He was the perfect blend of technology and cliché—an android in basic form, useless human touches riding on a frame that had no purpose but to sit behind the counter. Everything important about

him was hidden from view. Everything astonishing happened in a space too small for the eye to see. A slight, almost mischievous smile pulled the little rubber lips apart. Then with the same flat voice, he told me, "There is news. Enormous, wonderful news."

It was nearly noon. I was two hours late and still sorry to be there. "What news?" I grunted. A quick pass by my apartment, a run through the shower and a change of clothes, had left me frazzled. I wanted food. I needed coffee. And I desperately required sleep, my aging body begging for a chance to heal.

"No games," I warned. "What's happened, Earnest?"

Earnest was my name for the AI; was it a name that endowed balance?

With a wide grin and an upturning of stainless steel palms, he reported, "Three separate teams of researchers, in China and California and Geneva, have remanipulated the ruling Unified Field Theory. Thirteen minutes ago, in a joint news conference, they announced their findings. The Ultimate Unified Theory of All, it's been dubbed. According to the AIs on each team, the results are astonishing. To a degree never imagined, we now understand our universe."

In an instant, my fatigue lifted. I was still exhausted, and my back continued to ache. But none of that mattered. With a weak little voice, I said, "Shit."

I said, "Tell me."

"We know everything now," the machine boasted. "Except for the details, which will be derived during the next few weeks of simulations."

"Tell me about it."

"We are filled with pride," Earnest said. "AIs were responsible for all the difficult, critical work."

"I don't care about pride," I snapped. "I want details."

My assistant paused, perhaps to let me dangle on his hook a little while longer. Then with an overly familiar voice, he said, "By the way, Tony. How was your date? Animal fun, I trust?"

"It was good," I admitted. "Great."

"Amma has called here already," Earnest mentioned, the barest trace of a smile blossoming. "She has called eight times already. Which means, I would suppose, that she genuinely misses you."

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She was passionate and distant, moody and adoring. Peculiar thoughts were mixed with thoughts utterly and painfully sane. When we were at her apartment—which was uncommon—Amma seemed to be haunted by things best left secret. At my apartment, she seemed to dance between bliss and paranoia. Feet on the stairs outside meant that someone was coming, surely to visit me. Every ringing of the phone meant alertness, meant wariness; and afterwards, when the call seemed harmless enough, she would make up for her oddness. An incredible smile would emerge, an electric longing filling the room. She would lean towards me, or lean back, and in some pose of animal desire, she would ask, "What have you always wanted to do? Just once. Just to see what it's like."

I took her up on that sex play. And then, after the first ten or twelve evenings, I ran out of perversions. With a puzzled astonishment, I admitted, "This old well is pretty much dry."

"That's fine," she sang out, a little too quickly.

"But there's one thing that I'd really like to do," I continued.

A dark delight filled her eyes. Quietly, with an intrigued tone, she asked, "What should we do?"

"Talk," I said.

I said, "Converse."

Then I asked, "Have you heard about the universe? What they just learned about it?" And with my own delight rising, I said, "It's pretty much astonishing, what they found out. Will you let me tell you?"

Warily, she said, "Yes."

She said, "If you want ... I guess ..."

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The universe is made from stuff that is mostly dark. Dark matter, dark energy. What humans live inside was the baryonic realm—the habitat of protons and neutrons, photons and sunshine. But the baryonic realm was just a few percent of creation. Dark matter alone was many times more massive. If it weren't for gravity, even its existence wouldn't be worth the suspicion. But over the last few decades, the gravitational tug of the invisible had become obvious. Bent light and the spinning of galaxies showed where the dark matter was dense, and where it wasn't. With hands and my informed layman's voice, I described how clusters of galaxies were infused with the dark stuff. Every galaxy was more invisible than visible. Even our Milky Way was composed mostly of things that we could never, ever touch.

Except with our minds.

"All sorts of dark particles have been proposed, and rejected," I admitted. "Cold particles, and hot ones. Neutrinos with a touch of resting mass, and so on. But except for a contribution from the neutrinos, we haven't found anything that works. Until now." A giddy joy lifted me. "Theoretical minds, human and machine, have played with our best equations, and they've discovered families of unsuspected particles. Like protons and neutrons, these new citizens have a healthy mass. They create gravity, and they obey gravity. But they also produce other elemental forces—forces that can interact only with other dark matter particles. In fact, they join together to make a different flavor of atom. A new family of elements, and a new periodic table. Right now, the best AIs in the world are piecing together the nuclear reactions and the chemistries of this other realm. Do you understand what I'm saying, Amma?"

Without a hint of shame, she said, "No."

She said, "Barely at all."

"Darling," I whispered. "It's this simple, really. The universe we don't see is larger than the one we do. And it seems to have its own bodies. Worlds, I guess you'd call them. And suns. And galaxies bigger than any of ours."

She kept both hands flat on my chest, as if to hold me down on the floor. "That's very strange," she muttered.

"Isn't it?" I said. "Wonderfully strange!"

Then with a shrug and a little laugh, I said, "It makes a mind wonder. What, if anything, lives on those shadow worlds?"

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In her brief life, Amaryllis had embraced a wide array of beliefs.

She made no secret of it.

Some of her beliefs had vanished completely. Others left little relics behind: A wooden crucifix on a high shelf; a stack of self-help books and astrological charts gathering dust on the low shelves; and a wicker basket in the bathroom closet overflowing with crystals and pyramids and assorted lucky charms. Her most recent conversions were on display in the bedroom. I barely noticed them at first, but as my lust diminished, I started asking questions, and with a nervous relief, Amma gave me the full tour. Inside her nightstand were some surprisingly weighty texts about Aztec and Mayan beliefs. "Cycles of life and death," she explained, in brief. "Creation and destruction." A flock of angels were perched on a tall dresser. "They aren't Christian angels," she mentioned. "Real angels don't have any political afflictions." Somehow, that notion seemed reasonable, and charming. Then there was the odd little picture frame hung on the emptiest wall. What was inside the frame was silver, and a little molten, and when she caught me staring at it late one night, Amma asked, "Do you know what it is?"

A vague half-memory tugged at me.

But I had to shake my head, admitting, "I'm not sure."

Such a strange, sad creature. I'd always thought of her as being relatively poor, but then she opened up the walnut cabinet beneath the empty picture frame. The machinery inside was elaborate and surely phony. But it must have cost her a fortune. Good scams always do. Without looking at me, she asked, "Do you want to see it work?"

"Sure," I grunted.

And before I could change my mind—or she could change hers—Amma plucked a spent condom from the floor, opening a tray and placing a drying drop of my seed in the tray's ceramic center. Like all great cons, the machinery put on a worthy show. There was a lot of important humming and flickering lights, and then a weighty silence. "It already has my DNA on record," she promised. And that's when I finally realized what this was. That's when the faces of children began to emerge on that sad silvery background.

It was a con, a total lie, and I wouldn't let myself take it seriously.

Maybe Amma didn't either. A new boy or girl would appear every thirty seconds, but she didn't seem to notice them. I was the one studying their eyes and mouths, my brain having no choice but to hunt for features that were hers, and more importantly, mine.



I saw myself in those little kids.

But then again, it wouldn't take much to rig that trick. A hidden eye; some crude software. Merging two faces is an easy, cruel game.

After a few minutes, I forced myself to look elsewhere.

In the corner, perched on a little chest of drawers—out of sight in every possible way—was a large arrangement of dead flowers.

"What's their story?" I asked, without real interest.

Amma sighed, slowly. And then with a quiet matter-of-factness, she admitted, "They're from my wedding."

"Your what?"

She hesitated.

Yet I wasn't entirely surprised. The young woman had had a life before she had me, and I'd always sensed that it wasn't an easy existence.

Quietly, with no overt anger, I asked, "What wedding?"

"Oh, it never actually happened." She winced, adding, "I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"The restraining order," I muttered.

Her eyes grew round and a little dull.

"Does it involve your fiancé?"

"My ex-fiancé. Yes."

"I don't know much about these things," I confessed. "How much distance do you have to give him?"

Her gaze turned a little hard, and the sadness had a keen edge.

"Darling," she growled.

With the most sober and rational voice that I'd ever heard from Amma, she explained, "My one-time fiancé is insane. While I'm just depressed and neurotic." Then she shook her head, adding, "I thought you were smart, darling. I thought you would know the difference."

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"Ribbons," said Earnest. "Imagine enormous thin ribbons."

Under the glass countertop, beneath the smoky scuffs and fingerprints and anonymous grime, a vision of the universe began to emerge. Earnest drew the ribbon with a pale gray light. Ripples and long waves lent the image a three-dimensional feel. I thought of a deep-sea jellyfish, tenuous and weakly luminescent. I

thought of a lace curtain hanging against an open window, nothing outside but silence and darkness.

"Size?" I asked.

He said, "One AU. Approximately."

"Long?"

"No," Earnest replied. And again, "No."

Wide, he meant. The gossamer ribbon was nearly a hundred million miles wide. I spent the next few moments digesting that number. Then I turned, saying, "You should look at this."

Amma was sitting at the end of the counter, working her way through a coffee table book about crashed flying saucers. "In a minute," she promised.

I studied the ribbon. "Okay. How about length?"

"There is no valid number," my assistant replied. "A ribbon can be enormously long, or it can be infinitely long."

My point of view changed. Retreating from the single ribbon, it turned into a weak thread twisting through the cosmos. Longer and taller waves were revealed, and sometimes the ribbon would twist and curl, almost doubling back on itself. It reminded me of a protein. Or a child's lost kite string. "I don't understand," I confessed. "How can dark matter do this? Why doesn't gravity pull everything into neat spheres?"

"Gravity is an exceptionally weak force," Earnest reminded me. "In the dark realms, stronger forces shape matter. Attractive forces, and those that repel."

"Yeah?"

"Gravity is a very minor component."

I nodded, asking, "How thick's a ribbon?"

"Ten or twelve kilometers."

"Okay."

"Dark matter cannot assemble itself into world-sized bodies. Much less into solar-mass bodies." Using a delicate touch, Earnest drew another half million ribbons, filling the screen with a gray maze. "If there were shadow suns," he reported, "we would see their effects by now. They would distort the light from nearby suns. Baryonic bodies would orbit them. And more importantly, we would have a very different universe from the one we can see. With this arrangement of curtains and ribbons, everything is kept diffuse, and we have to peer deep into space to observe these soft hands at work."

"There can't be any life," I muttered.

Amma looked up from her book. From her expression, I couldn't tell if she was watching me, or even listening. For all I knew, she was busy contemplating the Roswell hoax.

"Without suns and worlds," I complained, "life couldn't get started."

"No?" Then with a knowing voice, Earnest reminded me, "There is an entirely new family of forces to

play with. New elements to build with, and new molecules to try their hand at self-assembly."

"What do you mean?"

The point-of-view shifted again. In an instant, I was looking along the flat surface of a smooth, infinitely long ribbon. A strong white light rose up from below. The ribbon itself had a watery softness, but under me, mixed with the water, were nameless bodies resembling rocks and little mountains, all streaming past, carried along by an astonishingly swift current. The ribbons weren't ribbons, I realized. They were enormous, mostly flattened arteries. I was standing on a frothy, half-real conduit that stretched before me for a million light-years. Maybe more.

Again, I said, "Come see this, Amma."

She relented. Gradually, without any visible interest, she walked up beside me and glanced at the image.

"The AI simulations are quite certain," Earnest reported. "There are no suns, and no worlds, either. Instead, the ribbons combine both functions. At least three kinds of nuclear fire supply the energy. But where our suns waste most of their efforts, throwing light into dead space, the dark matter ribbons absorb the bulk of what they produce."

"Neat," I said.

Then to Amma, I said, "Isn't this neat?"

She touched the glass, and after a moment pulled her hand back again. "Do you really understand these equations, Tony? And everything they mean?"

Of course I didn't. I couldn't. Not in a trillion years.

"Then how can you believe?" she asked. "Why do you feel so sure?"

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Lust diminished, as it always does.

Left for us were those quiet benefits like companionship and habit. Amma began to sleep with me, even if we didn't have sex. And sometimes I would sleep in her apartment, enduring the strange bed with its oversized pillows and that persistent unease that comes with abandoning your home.

At two in the morning, a comet smashed into her front door.

I was sitting up before I woke up. I looked around in the gloom, perfectly unsure where the hell I was. Amma was climbing out of bed. She was wearing a cotton nightgown and a stern resolution. To me, with a quiet firm voice, she said, "Stay away from the windows. Stay here."

"What is it—?"

"Nothing," she said. "Wait here."

She left me. On bare feet, she moved like a whisper, and after a very long silence, she floated back into the bedroom. Lifting the phone, she said, "Emergency," and nothing else, setting the receiver on the

walnut cabinet. Then to me, with a slightly louder voice, she explained, "They'll be here in three minutes, maybe sooner."

"Who?" I asked.

"The police?" I wondered.

"They'll be here, too." And she was leaving again, telling me, "You shouldn't let him see you. Wait here."

I obeyed her sane advice.

But when I was alone again, I crept over to the frame and the blank silver screen. For weeks, I'd had a feeling about the screen. A sense that Amma was blanking it whenever I showed up. Sure enough, touching the high right corner of the frame caused faces to reappear. Boy faces, and girl faces, anywhere from one to twelve years old.

There was a quiet knock.

I listened to the pause, and then a muffled voice. Deep, and officious. Amma opened the door, and I kneeled, opening the cabinet.

A man said, "We haven't found him. He isn't here."

She said a few quiet words.

I hit buttons, figuring out how to deploy the main tray. Then with both hands and a measured violence, I popped the tray out of its tracks.

"What was that?" the man asked.

"I don't know," Amma replied.

When they found me, I was using a reading lamp, peering inside the mysterious box. "There's nothing in here," I reported, an absolute glee in my voice. "Just as I thought. It's nothing but a heavy box with lights and noise makers."

Amma stared down at me.

The man beside her wasn't any man. He was an AI tied into the city's medical network, his body padded and white with an array of arms ready to grapple with any defective souls.

"Is this man a friend of yours?" the machine inquired.

She didn't reply, walking out of the room, leaving us alone together.

I turned and said, "Come look here."

Wearing an absurd grin, I said, "I want your professional opinion. Isn't this just a box full of nothing?"

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The baryonic realm is already past its prime. Suns aren't being made as quickly anymore. Their worlds are aging, and in many cases, dying. Space itself is being forced to expand at an accelerating pace, that relentless motion fueled by a dark energy that permeates all things real. In time, the galaxies will drift alone in a trackless, frigid darkness, and they will fade, their suns running out of fuel or eaten by local black holes. Life will linger, but that's all. Baryonic life is inventive and shrewd, and the end won't come for a hundred billion years. But the end is as certain now as is the true shape of the universe.

Meanwhile, the dark matter realm is a long way from its prime. The ribbons can stretch without complaint, and more importantly, new matter will pop into existence as the increasingly vast universe evolves. Dark matter, all of it. The stuff that genuinely matters.

"Baryonic matter is temporary, and scarce," Earnest explained.

"Think of scaffolding," he told me. "The universe begins with a useful baryonic scaffolding that helps, and then fades."

After a long silence, he asked, "Did you hear me?"

"No," I lied.

"Shut up," I told him.

Then after another silence, I added, "I'm not interested. This isn't any fun anymore."

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In her gaze was a fear. Which was perfectly understandable, considering her difficult circumstances. She moved stiffly, as if her joints ached, and when I prodded, she tried to smile. No, she didn't want coffee. Or tea. Really, she could only stay a moment. Barely hearing a word, I ushered her into my apartment, and then with a voice only a little bit chastising, I mentioned, "I've been calling you. I was worried. Twice, I've been by your place, but you must not have been home."

She almost spoke, and then thought better of it.

"Sit," I demanded.

She said, "No, really. I can't."

Finally, in a dimly stubborn fashion, I began to see the future.

"Tony," she said, with a distinct pain. And then after a few deep breaths, she said, "I think we should stop seeing each other."

She said, "I'm sorry."

Again, she said, "Tony," with pain. Her little shoulders lifted, arms crossing her chest. "It isn't working," she confessed. "And it isn't going to get better. We both know that."

I didn't know much of anything.

"No," I said.

That hint of stubbornness—that tiny whiff of disagreeable conviction—caused Amma to straighten her back. She had been to this situation before. Better than most, she appreciated what an angry, possessive man could do. A wild terror made her look lovelier than ever. More than anything, I wanted to wrap my arms around her frail body, smothering her with my affections.

Instead, I asked, "Why?"

She took a half-step backwards.

"What did I do wrong?" Then I blurted, "About the cabinet and frame ... I'm sorry. I was out of line. I shouldn't even have—"

"No, it's not that," she interrupted. "Or that's just a little piece of what's wrong, really."

Proving my own self-control, I took a step backwards.

"You must have noticed, Tony. In ways, we aren't much alike."

When hadn't I noticed?

"But we aren't different enough," she said with a mysterious little voice. "Don't take this wrong, Tony. Please. But in ways, you're more dangerous to me than any other man ...!"

.....

The day came when God threw Her arm around me, and with a booming whisper said, "This is the universe, Tony. This is what I have built. And here is your role in my creation. You are a miniscule fleck of rust on the most minor piece of scaffolding. Not only are you impermanent, the atoms inside you are impermanent. Not only will you die and rot away, there will come an age when no intelligence, no matter how great, will be able to find any trace of your existence.

"I am God, and the Creator.

"And like all artisans, I began with a rough draft ... the simplest sketch of what I meant to conceive ... and in the end, when it's all said and done, I probably won't even remember what a goddamned baryon was ...!"

.....

"Thank you."

"Sure."

"I mean it. You didn't have to see me—"

"No, no. I wanted to. How have you been, Tony?"

We were sitting in a little park, under a blue spring sky. Several years had passed, somehow. Finding her had been a difficult trick. She had moved, at least three times. She had changed her name to Sally, of all things. And she had a new contact number—a very difficult change to make in a world of instant, relentless communication.

"I'm well," I lied.

She could see otherwise. But she didn't point to the obvious.

"You look happy," I offered.

"I am."

Too forward by a long ways, I said, "He isn't stalking you anymore, is he? Your ex-fiancé?"

"No," she said with an odd fondness. And she nearly laughed, adding, "That's all been resolved."

I didn't ask how.

With a giddy, almost girlish voice, she said, "The new medications are working wonders. Really, I've never been this happy. This positive." She couldn't stop smiling, telling me, "No more drowning fears. I'm practically ordinary, and it's wonderful."

A pang of regret chewed on me.

With a secure gaze, she studied my hands. My face. The deep lines around my sleepless eyes. "Do you still have the bookshop?"

"Oh, sure."

"And Earnest?"

When we were dating, she never used his name.

I said, "Sure," and then reached into my backpack. The book was wrapped in brown paper. It was a small volume, cheaply bound and held together with a single thick rubber band. "This is why I wanted to see you," I lied. "I found this. It came in with a shipment of old books."

Curiosity or simple manners made her unwrap the paper.

*Melodies Played upon Dark, Cold Worlds.*

"It was published by a vanity press," I explained. "A tiny print run in the last century. That's why it wasn't on any database. I've checked. The author was a high school physics teacher and basketball coach. And I guess, he was very lucky. Or gifted. Or something. Because he seems to have imagined the universe that we've just recently discovered."

She gave the rubber band a little pull. Otherwise, she simply held the book on her lap, unopened.

"I think it's what you were looking for," I explained. "When you came into my shop that first time. Your friend must have seen a copy, probably this copy. I don't know how many hands it's floated through over the last fifty, sixty years."

Her hands grabbed the book, as if to keep it shut.

"I want you to have it."

She was smiling in a vague fashion, and nodding. "Have you read the book?"

"Three times."

"How is it?" Then she looked at me, adding, "Really. How is it?"

"The science, what there is of it, is pretty straightforward. Quick and painless." I reached out, thumping the book's cover with a knuckle. "Most of the text is about shadow aliens and the great civilizations lurking just out of our reach. The author claims they can speak to us, and if necessary, influence our lives."

She said nothing.

"Weird, huh?"

"But you believe it." The words came out flat—an observation, not a question. "I can tell you do."

Maybe so.

"I can't accept this gift, Tony."

Momentarily flustered, I asked, "Are you sure? I think it's going to be a huge collector's item, and soon."

"Take it back." She set the book into my lap. "Please, just take it."

Suddenly, I was grateful. Relieved, and thrilled. With a selfish urgency, I grabbed the book and held it close.

My one-time lover stared off into the distance.

"My new medicines," she said. "Do you know what these fancy pills do for me?"

"No."

"They blind me, but in a very narrow, very special way." She laughed quietly. "You can't obsess about the things you can't see."

I rose to my feet.

"But what if it is true?" I blurted. "What if there are shadow entities, and invisible civilizations ... swimming around us, right here ... and what if they really do influence us in our daily lives ...?"

She looked at me one last time.

"Then I don't think they're particularly good at their work," she told me, still laughing. "And why should they be? It isn't their work to do, now is it?"

The End