

Volunteers

by Alex Irvine

I have always had only one parent. Sometimes I can convince myself that I remember my mother plucking nervously at her harness as gravity disappeared on our way to the moon, but it's probably a capture from the vid archive. I think she must have seemed beautiful to me then, but so many video images of her lie between me and that memory ... I can't tell anymore.

Her grave is near the center of the cemetery carved out of the brushy forest that surrounds Grant City. I visited it sometimes, and I tried to miss her, but she was too distant. Every time, I ended up back with my father, sitting on the bench, trying to make something live between us.

Ät

When you look up at the sky from Grant City, 47 Ursae Majoris doesn't look that different than Sol from Earth. You have to have spex on to really compare, although some of the people who were older when we left Earth spent a lot of time glancing sunward and then shaking their heads like something wasn't quite right and they weren't sure what it was. That was where it all started, I think. Little puzzled glances at the sun that wasn't what it should be.

By the time I was about eleven, though, things had gone much further off course.

This was about when I started wearing spex all the time. They belonged to my father, and I put them on just to imitate the old man, who thought it was funny, and anyway James Brennan wasn't physically up to doing any kind of work anymore, so he had no need of spex. So for a while I pretended to do what my father had been doing, surveying and materials analysis; I hung around work sites and let myself become a kind of mascot for the workers. They called me Flash Gordon and laughed at my imagination when I asked them where all the robots had gone. Not too long after that, I started to notice that I was the only kid in Grant City who wore spex all the time, and I started to like the way it made me feel different.

My teachers didn't like it. "Can you take off your glasses?" they'd ask, and I'd think, Glasses? My civics teacher, Mr. Fulton, tried to take them away from me, but my dad made Fulton give them back. Civics. We were on another planet learning about the bicameral legislature and the electoral college.

Kids started to call me Four-Eyes.

After a while, picking up on the same shit they were swallowing, I started to tell them that four eyes were better than two. Verbal judo: use their weight against them. Also I had already figured out that I wasn't doing myself any favors by calling attention to the fact that it wasn't 1956.

Ät

There really were robots when I was a little kid. Blocky things on six wheels, with jointed arms ending in flat pincers. The adults called them lobsters, so we kids did, too. I was fifteen before I knew that lobster wasn't just a slang term for robot.

When you're a kid, you adapt to all kinds of insanity without thinking about it too much. Lack of

perspective gives you amazing resilience. So the day I went to school and saw chalkboards in the classrooms, I didn't think much about it, especially when I discovered I could drive the teachers crazy by making the chalk squeal. I was ten years old, and we had been on Canaan for five years. Plenty of time for delusions to spread.

Ät

I can't help it if I tell this story with a little too much ironic distance. Nobody can tell childhood straight. When I talk about delusions spreading, it's only by accident that I mean now instead of then. I think. It's hard to be certain when you're talking to yourself. Or when you think you're talking to yourself.

I forgot how cold it is here.

Ät

To me it's just a sun, but I was only three when the *Susan Constant* left Earth in 2067. Which makes me two hundred and three years old, but if you ask me my age I'll tell you I'm nineteen.

I should be seventeen. I should never have had to spend two years alone on *Susan Constant*, ghosting around in the four rooms heated to sustain life. The ship was always cold; even when I was on Canaan I was cold all the time because when you've spent two years feeling a chill it never quite goes away. I miss lying in that sun even though it's not the right sun. I miss lying in the grass even though it wasn't the right grass. I miss Iris.

Because my old man was a Volunteer.

Ät

If you'd known him in Grant City, if someone had pointed out the thin bearded guy with the whining exoskeletal supports and a tendency to stare off at the sky while mumbling to himself and said, "That's the guy they got to keep Evelyn on an even keel," you would have thought to yourself that it was a miracle anybody survived the trip. And it was. Out of two thousand colonists, four hundred and thirty-two lived to see Canaan. That was because of my father.

It was also because of him that the others died.

Ät

You cannot ignore this. Listen to me.

Ät

I think I fell in something like love the first time Iris Flynn came up and talked to me in the cemetery. I was walking away from my mother's grave, confused and a bit dislocated like always, and she was coming up the road walking a brown puppy that chased after the big dragonfly-like insects that buzzed up from the river behind the cemetery. "Hi," she said.

I said hi.

"You're Wiley, right?"

There was no point denying it. "Yeah," I said, and waited for her to make some remark about how lucky I was. As if we weren't all lucky.

She pointed off to my right. "My sister's over there."

There was a long uncomfortable moment. Then I said, "I'm sorry."

Iris smiled at me. "It's not your fault."

Bang. Dead. After that moment, I would have done anything to be with her.

When I got home, my dad was sitting on a bench in front of one of the dozen barracks-style buildings that housed the citizens of Grant City. Across the new road, a work crew was welding I-beams to frame an apartment building. The pace of construction had picked up now that we'd gotten an oil well pumping for plastics and a smelter for good steel, but Grant City as it stood was still only the row of barracks, the school house, a shuttle pad already sprouting cracks, the bio lab, and a cluster of tech buildings at a respectful distance from the reactor housing. And the cemetery.

I was still dizzy from the rush of feeling Iris's smile had started, and my confusion gave me a kind of courage. I sat down next to my dad and said, "Dad. How do you know when you're in love?"

He looked me in the eye, and the brave surge I'd felt turned into the kind of scrambling apprehension you feel when you know you've gotten in over your head.

"Love," he said. "Love is when you can let a thousand people die because you can't stand, not even for a second, to tear yourself away from one."

He looked young as he said it, but as he told me the whole story I started to see the things that the telomerase therapy couldn't touch: the tic at the corner of his mouth, the way he licked his lips when he took a breath. I had been awake in the world for thirteen years, my father for more than thirteen squared. That afternoon I began to understand the difference.

Ät

He'd expected the depression that fell over him after the communication lag between *Susan Constant* and Earth grew too long to really have a conversation. He still monitored transmissions from Earth, but most people there had more pressing things to deal with than a Volunteer's loneliness. All he could do was listen to military communiqués, coverage of disaster after disaster after disaster, and then someone finally took the last plunge and let loose the ICBMs. After that, transmissions slowed to a trickle, and the last signal he heard, in 2144, was from a shortwave operator deep in the Siberian forest: *I think I'm going to go skiing for a while. Maybe that will make me feel better.*

The next thirty years or so were an empty space in his memory. He followed all the protocols, dealt with minor malfunctions, spent more and more VR time with a group of personas that Schimmel programmers had installed to give him some semblance of a social dynamic. More and more it seemed to him that he was dreaming the ship, his periodic rounds to run system checks and flush the reactor core.

You knew this would happen, Evelyn told him. It was included in your preparation.

He did know it, and after some time—even though the sensation didn't go away—he reached a kind of accommodation with it. It was a lucid dream, he reasoned, unreal but under his control. That was perhaps the best anyone could have done, but it only delayed his breakdown.

Schimmel puppetmasters had figured on that, too, and Evelyn put her psychiatric subroutines to work after preventing my dad from going out the shuttle-bay airlock. After a while, around the time *Susan Constant* turned around and began its long deceleration, she took the restraints off him. She was always there, though, talking to him, encouraging him, reminding him of the importance of what he was doing, and at some point during his convalescence my dad caught himself thinking that maybe he was falling in love. "The patient falling for the nurse," he said. "God." And he laughed, but at the time he was ashamed. "She wasn't even human."

I waited for him to mention my mother, but he didn't. I was thirteen, and my father was trying to tell me about love without mentioning my mother, whose grave I had visited not an hour before.

Now I'm nineteen, and I don't resent him anymore.

Ät

I am older than I am.

All of us feel that way sometimes, or so I've read. Einstein once explained relativity by noting that a minute at the dentist feels like an hour, and an hour with a pretty girl feels like a minute. Or something like that. I could look it up, I guess, but the exact expression doesn't matter. All of us sometimes feel that way.

The ship is quiet; but I knew it would be. Music just makes it seem emptier, so I make my rounds in silence now, except when Evelyn speaks to me.

Ät

My father got up and walked in a slow circle around the bench. He did that a lot; he couldn't sit for too long in one place or his knees would stiffen. When he sat again, he said, "I was with Evelyn when your mother died."

Why did it take you so long to tell me this, Dad? I wanted to say. Did you think I hadn't figured that out, when you spent twenty-two hours out of every twenty-four in the womb with her, leaving me to bounce around that great big goddamn tomb of a ship with nothing for company but VR spools of everything we'd left behind? A huge space opened up inside me, as if his admission had broken through a wall into a chamber of my memory that had been sealed up since I'd awakened cold and scared to see my father with tears on his face and a terrible fear in his eyes. That fear got into me, and it's never left.

Ät

Because I was so young, I didn't know why we were going to leave San Diego and go to the moon. It was obvious to me that all the adults I knew—my mom; her boss, Mr. Franklin; her brother, Herschel; my teacher, Miss Alaves—were nervous. It came out of them in different ways, according to their ordinary personalities, but I remember knowing that something was up, and because nobody wanted to explain it I was certain that it was something awful. Of course I had no way to ask; if I said *What's wrong?*, they smiled and said *Nothing*. My only clue was something Uncle Herschel growled at the wallscreen during the 2066 World Cup, when Nigeria scored a late goal to tie the US in the quarterfinals. "I hope Big Mickey lands on fucking Lagos and fries every last one of you cheating bastards," he said. It's one of my first memories.

After that I started to ask about Big Mickey. What was he? How could he fry the Nigerians? Did he know they were cheaters? My mother sat me down and explained that outer space was full of big rocks, and one of them might hit the Earth but probably wouldn't. How big, I wanted to know. Bigger than our house? Bigger than an aircraft carrier? Bigger than the mountain where we'd gone camping?

Yes. Yes. Yes.

I guess we better get out of the way, I said.

We're going to, my mother said, and brushed my hair back on my forehead. You and me, we're going to.

And we did. On a hot spring day the next year, we took a plane out to the desert and got on a shuttle bound for the moon. My mother cried, and looking back on it now I wish I'd said something to her, but I was too keyed up for the trip. Going to the moon! To Armstrong Base!

And, more marvelous yet: going to see my father.

I hadn't seen him in so long that I only knew what he looked like because he was on the vid so much. James Brennan, Volunteer. He and Patricia Walsh and Antonio Queiroz were going to save us. How many of us? Everyone, my mother said. Don't worry, honey, we're all going to be gone by the time Big Mickey gets here.

Ät

Wait a minute. I was three when we left. I was two during the 2066 World Cup. I couldn't remember that.

Ät

Better late than never, I guess. It was good to hear him admit it. At the same time, it made me wonder how much he knew before *Susan Constant* ever left Earth. Was he afraid of you—of Evelyn—even then?

I think he was. He'd stood up to the grueling physical screening, but so had more than a hundred other pilots. What made my father different was one thing: Evelyn responded to him. He must have wondered why, and wondered what it would cost him.

Why him, I wonder? How many other people with the same résumé had she reduced to catatonia? I know that happened.

You're not even a woman.

Ät

Two years I spent drifting around *Susan Constant* after the accident, haunted and frightened and compelled by the ghostly ruin of my father who emerged from the pilot chamber once a day to visit me and run the routine diagnostics he'd so disastrously neglected before. That's a lot of time for watching canned vid history, but I didn't understand anything I saw. Pictures of people who looked angry. Fires. Every once in a while vid of the Lagrange station with *Susan Constant* taking shape.

When my dad came out of the womb, I cried. Every time. He held me and said *I'm sorry, pal*, over and over until I stopped. I remember asking him why he couldn't stay, and the broken expression on his face when he couldn't explain it to me. Desperate to hear his voice, I kept talking, asking him questions about what I'd seen on the vid, and that's how I got his version of what happened. I think if things had gone differently, he might have been a good father.

Ät

The kinds of people who controlled the vast majority of the world's wealth were also the kinds of people who couldn't actually believe that Big Mickey would destroy *them*; they'd ride out the impact and afterwards set about remaking the shattered Earth in their own images. Everybody wanted a lifeboat, but everybody wanted someone else to build it and let them board.

So when a brand-new German corporation called Schimmel GmbH offered the American government thirty billion dollars for a short-term lease on the entirety of Lagrange's dock space, the cash was impossible to refuse. The White House fed the money to Lockheed, which revved up its Mars program, and Schimmel monopolized launch facilities all over Central Asia, lifting material and personnel to their new base at Lagrange.

They tried to deflect questions about what they were doing, but before too long the pressure got so intense that they had to respond. At a news conference broadcast worldwide on September 23, 2064, a Schimmel spokesman dropped a bombshell that for a few weeks made everyone forget Big Mickey.

They had discovered something out there that wasn't really an AI, wasn't really a ship either, wasn't really

anything any of us had words for just yet.

Ät

Evelyn showed me a recording of the Schimmel press conference when I was about twelve, before I knew about the Lodge, before Julio Furcal died, when I still had a chance at being a kid. Not a normal kid—two years alone on *Susan Constant* took care of that possibility—but a kid. I think being a kid means being able to rely on people to make good decisions for you. If Grant City hadn't turned into a nuthouse, I could have had that. Even in the middle of the slide, I had Iris, even if I had her all confused in my head with my mother and Evelyn and every other woman who had ever shown me kindness.

Ät

"What's Evelyn like?" I asked my father once, a year or so before we slipped into orbit around the planet we would name Canaan, and long before I knew I'd already been talking to her.

He couldn't answer. The accident was too recent, his mind still too scrambled by guilt and desperate hope and the wrenching dislocation he felt whenever he left her to spend time with me. I never asked him again, and thought I'd never find out.

Funny how things happen.

Ät

The first time I asked Iris out on a kind of date, she said yes, as long as she could bring her little siblings along. This was humbling, but I was so gone over her that I said sure. Hannah and Peter were then six and five years old. I was fourteen. We were going to the farmer's market and then a movie; some of the older colonists had formed a film society that showed old movies in the school gym. They were slipping into the Fifties psychosis that eventually doomed Grant City, but at this point, before they'd left the shuttle pad to get weedy so they could build a movie theater, they had a sense of humor about the whole thing, mostly screening corny science-fiction movies that had the effect of making us all feel advanced and smart and a little bit heroic.

I'd expected the kids to be a burden, but I surprised myself by enjoying their company almost as much as Iris's. Of course I was trying to be nice to them so I could score points with Iris, but pretty soon I didn't have to try. They were just a joy to be around, full of questions that made me feel important because I could answer most of them and other questions that put me happily in touch with the little-kid state of wonderment over everything. Why were green beans and kidney beans both called beans? Why didn't pineapples grow on pine trees? Who knew, and who cared when you could revel in the innocent goofiness of the question? We ate barbecued chicken and hand-churned ice cream, and Hannah and Peter asked me a dozen times each if I was their sister's boyfriend. "You better ask her," I said, and couldn't breathe until she'd said yes, I was.

The evening's movie was *The Blob*. During the scene in the movie theater, when the titular red goo poured out of the projection booth over the doomed kids necking in the back rows, Iris leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Guess we better be careful."

I don't remember anything else about the movie except looking over once to see Hannah and Peter wide-eyed and swept away.

Ät

I know you know most of this already. All I have to offer that's new is me. My feelings, my perspectives.

Before we planted anything, we had the genelabs up and running, and we cultured seeds that wouldn't spread disease or be vulnerable to native strains. And for a while it worked; near the cemetery where my mother was buried, there was a cornfield. The only one I've ever seen. I used to climb the hill above it

and look down on the rows of green stalks, watching the leaves ripple in smooth arcs as breezes swept down the valley. Canaan's amino acids were mostly left-handed, but we'd figured out a way to break the protein chains and turn them around. This absorbed a large part of each plant's energy, but with careful management the crops came in, smaller than they would have been on Earth but edible and nutritious. Our breeds of cattle and chickens seemed to be working too, and about a year after we landed—this was 2251 by the Earth calendar—we had a Thanksgiving. We were surviving.

Most of us, anyway. Many of the adults suffered bouts of nostalgic depression, a phenomenon that GC doctors soon recognized as a variation on post-traumatic stress. A few committed suicide; others just walked out of the settlement and were never seen again; but most of us who felt the old Earth longing just toughed it out, and all the while Grant City grew younger. In ten years the population grew by three hundred, and things got better.

At least that was what I thought when I was a little kid.

Ät

There's only so many days and nights you can spend on another planet pretending you're the Cisco Kid. When I was ten I wouldn't have believed this, but at twelve, goaded by incipient adolescence to look at the world outside my head just so I had something to nurse a grudge against, I started to feel uncertain about the self-imposed illusion that permeated Grant City.

I arrived at my first Boy Scout meeting to find that the troop leader, Detlef Hamann, had undergone a rhinoplasty to look more like Karl Malden. While Hamann handed out our Boy Scout Handbooks and taught us the oath, I had the small epiphany that all of Grant City was becoming a movie set. Hamann had also gotten a haircut and adopted the moony earnestness of Malden's character Mitch Mitchell from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Which didn't even come out in the right year, but it didn't take me long to figure out that Grant City's 1956 was just a placeholder for The Fifties as a whole, and anyway I don't think I could have stood it if Hamann had decided he was Father Barry from *On the Waterfront*.

Hamann was the first I saw, but within a few months, people were having plastic surgery done so they resembled Marilyn Monroe or Joe DiMaggio, Edward Teller or Jack Kerouac or Dolores Del Rio.

Ät

By the time I was old enough to know what was going on, Grant City had sunk completely into its pathological nostalgia. The colony shrank into itself, redirected its energies from survival on an alien world to the recreation of a time on Earth that never was. Our new start became a simulacrum of a simulacrum.

This should have prepared me for you.

Ät

I got in a fight once, when I was fourteen. Not much of a story except for the long-term consequences make it interesting. This sixteen-year-old side of beef named Justin Rowe called me a pansy one too many times because I was wearing spex. He was one of the kids the Lodge would later call Young Wingtips, buying into 1956 because they could see which way the adults were going—adults were just Wingtips—and I guess the spex made it too hard for him to keep up the illusion. Even though I knew it was dumb I took a swing at him.

Justin hit me flush on the right eye, and then the ground hit me on the left shoulder. My first thought was *Oh shit, what if they're broken?* Next I started worrying that Justin was going to hit me again. When I looked up he was already gone. I was lying in an eddy at the side of the main between-classes current, and if anybody knew I was there they weren't letting it show.

As it turned out, the spex were tougher than the skin beneath. My eyelid swelled up until I could hardly

see out of that eye. My dad levered himself up off the bench when he saw the damage, and from various sources I heard that my dad had nearly assaulted the school principal, a guy called Milt Bahrani, but nothing came of it beyond that. Justin never hit me again, but that might have been because he'd made his point. I stayed out of his way, even though I kept wearing the spex, and I sure never said a word about the fact that it wasn't 1956. Bahrani was just like the rest of them. He'd invented a new history for himself, claiming to have been an Iranian court aristocrat who fled the country when Mossadegh was toppled by the CIA in 1953. Victor Arroyo claimed he'd won the Silver Star in World War II, and when he'd had too much to drink he would display an appendectomy scar and tell the story of how he'd gotten it from a Japanese bayonet on Saipan. If Akira Ikuma was around, that was his cue to say that Victor was lucky it hadn't been Akira's bayonet because Akira would have finished the job, and hell yes Akira had been on Saipan, the only survivor of a grenade attack on his bunker and then later the last man on board a troop bus leaving Hiroshima, looking up at the drone of a bomber as they headed north to Osaka.

And on and on. They were all crazy. I watched them through spex and plotted escape. I could tune the spex to see bones, temperature fluctuations, brain activity, anything. I saw that Miss Callahan, who I remembered as a biologist from when I was little but who now seemed to be some kind of secretary, had large sacs under the skin of her breasts, and I nearly suggested she see a doctor before suffering an attack of discretion which lasted long enough for me to do some research and discover the history of cosmetic surgery.

Someone else noticed my black eye. Another nerdy kid named Vince Tukwiler, who glared at the world from his side of an invulnerable barrier composed of equal parts scorn and fear. Two days later he leaned against my locker and said, "Don't go to the movies tonight."

"Movies are the only thing keeping me from killing myself," I said. Almost meaning it.

"That's why you should go here instead," Vince said, and handed me a slip of paper. I reached for it, and he moved his hand. "Look at this and then destroy it. I shit you not, eat it or burn it or flush it down the toilet, but get rid of it. Okay?"

"Sure, okay," I said, just so he'd give it to me. He did, and I'll never forget the look that came over his face. Like he'd just taken a terrible chance on someone who didn't deserve it.

The paper had a place and time on it. I took a look, let the information stick in my head, and ate the paper right there in the hall. Whatever it meant, I didn't want to take a chance on anyone seeing me with it.

That was how I found out about the Lodge.

Ät

One day I sat down and tried to do the math. I had been born in 2064, and taking into account relativity and the rest of it I was two hundred and seven years old, but physically I was fourteen, and anyway everyone I knew insisted it was 1956—they argued about Eisenhower and Nixon, for God's sake—and by that count I wouldn't show up for another hundred and eight years.

I seized on the idea that I was waiting to be born and clung to it.

Ät

You know, I haven't put on my dad's spex since we left? I don't trust lenses any more. Through the spex I thought I could see the truth, but all I was getting was another layer of masks.

They were your masks, though. Weren't they? Loving masks.

Ät

The mission plan for years four and five called for nutritional self-sufficiency through agriculture, and they got there, but there was nothing in the mission plan about a bowling alley. Instead of adding onto the school, the city council redirected materials and labor into the construction of Bel-Mark Lanes.

Even though it was insane, I had to admit that the Lanes made for a good time. Ten alleys, four pool tables, a pinball machine, and a full bar. There was a jukebox with a killer selection of Elvis and Little Richard and Buddy Holly downloaded from *Susan Constant*, and a fake little 45 that spun while the digital music played. A league started up on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It was something to do after school that didn't involve walking in the park or watching robots frame a new building, and right away everyone in the school started going there. There was general agreement that a good old-fashioned place to hang out was doing the colony good.

When, that is, anyone would admit they were part of a colony.

This was where the Lodge came in. It started off when Julio Furcal, a social-studies teacher who had once been some kind of neurotech consultant, realized that Grant City's problems weren't just an affectation and weren't going away. The colony was sick, would get sicker, and needed a group of people to stand off to the side, nod and smile and pretend to go along while in fact they made sure that we all survived. At first there were six of them: Julio, Sharon Pelletier, Vince Tukwiler, Miss Callahan, and I don't know the other two. When I went to my first meeting, Julio said they were on assignment. Like spies, and they were spies, but they also thought of themselves as guardians. "We're hoping that this delusion is just a temporary kind of collective defense mechanism," Pelletier told me. "In the meantime, we try to get some science done, make sure everyone can eat, and hope that people wake up before things get to a crisis stage."

I have to put this in a kind of Fifties perspective to get across how terrifying and thrilling it was. Imagine finding out that a breakfast-cereal decoder ring really did put you in touch with a secret society of superheroes; that's what this was like. I hated everything about Grant City except Iris and sometimes my dad, but now I had been welcomed into a grand subterfuge. Someone understood. I wasn't crazy. And maybe there was a plan to get everything back on the right track.

Julio told me I didn't need to come to meetings unless I had something important to tell them. People were already watching me because of the spex and my tendency to shoot off my mouth in class, which made me a bit of a danger to what they were trying to do. "But now we'll be watching you, too," he said. "And once you get a little older, we'll ask you to do certain things."

I imagined lurking in an alley—Grant City didn't have any, but I'd seen vids—waiting to stick a knife between Justin Rowe's ribs. Then Julio let me down by saying that they wouldn't want me to do anything violent or even illegal. It wasn't that kind of a group. "What we need from you is your eyes and your brain," he said. "Keep both sharp, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"And don't tell your father. He knows about us, and he knows we've asked you to join, but it's best for now if the two of you don't discuss it."

This was easy. Not discussing things came pretty naturally to the Brennans.

Ät

But he was still my dad, and I was still a kid, and I was so wound up with the knowledge of secrets that I had to talk to him about something just to distract myself. So I found the old man on his bench looking out at the woods, and I sat down next to him. "Dad, is Evelyn a robot?"

Dad opened his mouth, shut it again, got up for one of his slow circuits of the bench. When he sat again, he said, "No. She's not a robot."

"What is she?"

"Before I tell you this, you need to understand something," Dad said. "A lot of people around here think I'm crazy. They're right, but I'm not crazy the way they think I am. I'm crazy because only a crazy man would have done what I did. Now I'm going to tell you about Evelyn, but you have to swear that you won't repeat any of this. Not to anyone."

He knows, I thought. We're talking in code, like spies in Berlin or Cairo. "I swear. Cross my heart and hope to die."

He looked pained at the expression. "For God's sake, Wiley, people stopped talking like that before I was born."

This shamed me, and I looked down at the ground. "What am I supposed to say?"

A frustrated sigh escaped the old man. "I'm sorry, kid. None of this is your fault. I hear you talking like Beaver Cleaver and I want to fucking strangle Milt Bahrani." He looked at his hands. "Not that I'm strong enough to strangle anybody."

Through the spex, I could see the gyros in my dad's hips and the coil around his spine. I could measure the volume of his indrawn breath and track the dispersion of what he called the Telomerase Monkeys from his bone marrow. But I could not see why James Brennan had done what he had done on *Susan Constant*.

My father put a hand on the back of my neck. "You're surrounded by lunatics, son of mine. A bunch of terrified people who know they're going crazy, so they've built themselves a little fantasy village out of the blandest and safest material they could find, which was TV's version of the Fifties. Nothing I can do about it but tell you how we got this way. You're not going to want to repeat this to anyone at school. People don't like to think about it. They don't like to think about me, and that's part of the reason why they're giving you such a hard time." He sighed. "Where to begin. While your mother was pregnant with you, I got a call from a German company called Schimmel wanting to know if they could hire me for a trip to the asteroid belt. I said no, that I was dirt-bound until my kid was born and signed up to do the weekly milk run to Lagrange Five for almost a year after your due date. They wouldn't tell me why they wanted me to go out there, but I found out later. After we started hearing about Big Mickey, which was when you were about a year old, Schimmel called me again. This time they didn't want me to go to the asteroids; they wanted me to go to Hamburg and wouldn't tell me why, but they offered me a lot of money to consult on a project. I said okay, and went.

"The Schimmel headquarters was something. It spread out over a huge piece of land along the Elbe River, and Mehmet Scholl, the guy who picked me up at the airport, gave me the tour before taking me in. He said he was a xenobiologist. 'Am I supposed to consult about Martian bacteria?' I asked. I'd been to Mars twice but wasn't any kind of expert on anything except going there and getting back.

"Mehmet laughed. 'No, we're way up the food chain from those,' he said. We went into his office and met a woman named Birgid Prinz, who was some kind of psychiatrist. That's when I started getting a little spooky about the whole situation. Then another guy came in, one of these oily guys with a title like Stakeholder Relations Manager, and we got started. The flack's name was Rudi, and he didn't waste any time. The first thing he said to me was, 'Mr. Brennan, we need you to save a portion of humanity.'"

My dad saw me looking at him and laughed. "I can see what you're thinking, Wiley. You're right. I was

the wrong guy. But the problem was, Evelyn didn't care."

Ät

This is what I'm worried about. How much do you care about me?

Ät

"While prospecting in the asteroid belt six years ago, in April 2058," Rudi began, "freelance rock miners discovered three artifacts apparently of nonterrestrial origin. Schimmel acquired these artifacts without publicity and set about trying to discover their history. This effort proved largely futile because the artifacts refused to tell us.

"Gradually we were able to determine that these three artifacts were in fact sentient and that their long period of isolation had deranged them to a considerable degree. Communication was laborious at best, and frequently impossible; but with dedicated effort, and at no small human cost, we were able to determine that these three beings were in fact merely facets, aspects, of entities that existed only partially in our familiar four-dimensional spacetime. They were captured, harnessed in mechanical devices that, they said, enabled four-dimensional objects to travel at supraluminal speeds. It goes without saying that this ability, if true, is the most significant scientific discovery in the history of mankind, and it comes at a time when it is most sorely needed.

"Before Big Mickey, we at Schimmel were in the process of interrogating these beings to understand what short-term benefit we might derive from their knowledge. In light of the current threat to human civilization, however, we have turned our research in a new direction, and it is now apparent that we can construct spacecraft incorporating these beings. It is for this reason that we have leased the facilities at Lagrange Five: Schimmel GmbH is donating three vessels, each with a capacity of two thousand persons, to the dream of human survival.

"The technological obstacles, though formidable, have been largely overcome. What remains is a challenge of literally another dimension. Birgid?"

The psychiatrist picked up her cue. "A consequence of the Navigators' long isolation—how long we do not know—is that they are deeply withdrawn into themselves. This has made them unable to maintain their consciousness of four-dimensional spacetime unless a being native to that spacetime is in more or less constant intimate contact with them. In some fundamental way, they have forgotten how to *be* in our spacetime and will need a physical presence to remind them. If the mission of these three ships is to succeed, each Navigator will require a single human as an anchor to the ship and its occupants. Without such an anchor, we are informed, it is a near certainty that the Navigators' attentions will drift. In that situation, ships will suffer a catastrophic—deceleration is the best word we have—from what we have chosen to call hyperspace into real space, the energy imbalance of which would annihilate the vessel.

"We are asking you, Mr. Brennan, to perform this essential task of anchoring the Navigators and perhaps even more importantly providing them the kind of sentient interaction they so desperately crave. These are terribly lonely and needy beings, irrational and in fundamental ways impossible to understand, and sustained contact with Navigators has during the past seven years killed or deranged nearly everyone who has undertaken it. They're trying to make it easier—they've even gendered themselves to render a simulacrum personality that we can understand—but this is enormously dangerous."

"I can't do this. I have a wife," my dad said. "We just had a baby."

"We realize this," Dr. Prinz answered. "We would not have chosen you. Ideally we would be able to screen a large sample for people who are both compatible with an individual Navigator and endowed with the kind of physical and psychological strength to survive what might be a journey of decades or

even centuries. The problem is that one of the Navigators has chosen you."

Ät

He told me the rest of it as the moon came up over the hills west of Grant City, beyond the farm and the cemetery and the shuttle pad. "I wasn't famous, exactly, but not everyone on Earth had been to Mars twice, and there was still a little glitter on anyone who made his living in space. Evelyn apparently took a liking to me. I'm not sure how else to put it. Prinz and Scholl had her look at lots of vid, newsnets and whatever else, to try and ground her in the here-and-now of Earth in the 2060s, and she seized on me. Birgid Prinz told me it was a network feed of me coming out of a shuttle after the *Burroughs* expedition."

"You telling me she got a crush on you, Dad?" I asked. In that moment I felt like I'd already heard enough.

"Not exactly," he said. "Well, sort of. She was like a little kid, all the Navigators were. They had these intense desires and no real ability to get perspective on why they wanted things. She saw me and she liked me, and after that she wouldn't let anybody else get close."

Another trip around the bench, and this time Dad grunted when he sat down. "You want to walk?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Wouldn't help. I'm two hundred and thirty years old, Wiley. The T-Monkeys can't work forever." His head drooped. "Sorry. Not good parenting to talk about your mortality in front of your kid."

I was about to say that it was time he stopped trying to hide things from me, his mortality included. Instead I scooted closer to him on the bench and put an arm around his shoulders. I was barely fifteen, but already bigger than him. "Don't worry about it, Dad," I said.

He breathed slowly in and out a couple of times and then went on. "Truth of the situation is that I was an idiot. I resented Evelyn choosing me, so my first response was to say, Tough. Let her fixate on someone else. Even though there were two thousand lives depending on her, and I guess on me. Birgid and Rudi gave me a little time to get over myself and then pointed out that they had ships to build and might be able to save some lives if I would get my head out of my ass long enough to talk to Evelyn and see if she liked me in person. So I did, and she did. She liked me a lot. She kind of probed at me all the time, swore she couldn't read minds but always seemed to know what I was feeling. That got to be nice, since your mom and I weren't getting along all that well. The first year after a kid is tough."

I pulled away again. "Just say it," I said. "Just admit that Evelyn got jealous and killed Mom."

My father went very still. He lifted his head with painful slowness and turned to look me in the eye. "Nothing is ever that simple, Wiley," he said. "I killed your mother. I didn't mean to, but I did. Evelyn didn't do it. I was scared and lonely and she made me feel peaceful and safe and happy, and while I was feeling peaceful and safe and happy I forgot to run maintenance checks and the life-support computer went out. That's what happened."

He believed it. He needed me to believe it. I wanted to, but I wasn't sure if I could.

Ät

Other than the bowling alley, the place to hang out was the Nickelodeon. That went up the year after Bel-Mark, and pretty soon if you were looking for someone in Grant City and you knew they weren't at work, you could find them at one of those two places. There were movies every night, and after a while the time between seven and nine at night became an unofficial 1956 rally and revival around the altar of

the movie screen. The Lodge took to meeting during this same period, rotating who attended so nobody drew suspicion for missing too many movies. I didn't make many Lodge meetings, because I wasn't supposed to be obvious, but that was okay, because I was a plain sucker for movies. Iris liked them too. We sat there watching Fifties B-movies about alien invasions, holding hands and liking the way the old stories made us feel brave and a little superior—because we knew what other worlds were like, and we still knew we were on another world.

The day after I talked to my dad about Schimmel, I went looking for Iris at movie time. We sat through *Track of the Moon Beast* and then took a walk together. Iris remembered more of Earth than I did. She'd been five when we left, so we were the same age now, but she'd had two extra years to soak up Earth memories.

"Do you remember getting on the ship?" I asked her. We were walking toward the river, and it took a conscious effort not to veer toward the cemetery.

Iris nodded. "There was a big umbilical between the ship and Lagrange Five. In the station you could look out a window at the ship, and my dad tried to hold me up to see it but lifted me too hard and kind of bounced me off the ceiling. So I boarded *Susan Constant* with a bump on my head."

"There was no gravity, right?" Of course there was no gravity. I just wanted Iris to validate my memory of my mother.

"Come on, Wiley. You know there wasn't. I had fun in the umbilical, bouncing around. My parents tried to do what I was doing and ended up accidentally kicking each other. After that they were strictly handhold-to-handhold. I think half of the people on the ship had bruises when they went into the berths." She was smiling at the memory. One of her front teeth was a little crooked. I liked it.

We reached the river and stood looking down into the black water. There was no wind, and the shallows were still enough that stars reflected on the surface. "I used to think that Evelyn killed my mother," I said.

"Oh," Iris said, with a sharp little inhalation.

"I don't any more."

She hesitated. "That's good."

I felt for her hand in the dark, found it and some thigh, too. She twined her fingers in mine. "Maybe it's better that you don't remember Earth," she began, but I cut her off.

"No, I do."

"Wiley," she said. "Maybe it's better that you don't. You're much more a, what, Canaanite than an . . ."
She searched for a word, didn't like the one she found.

"Earthling?" I suggested, and we both broke up laughing.

Ät

In year eleven—this would make me sixteen—Milt Bahrani showed up at one of the meetings. "Hey, Milt," Furcal said. "What's the good word?"

"What are you guys doing here?" Milt said. He smiled at Furcal's use of his name, but it was the kind of smile you offer when you're confused and trying to figure out whether the people you're smiling at are dangerous lunatics or just lunatics. Which was funny, because we'd just been chewing over the same distinction. Was 1956-Land the product of a collective longing for a sort of totemic safety and sense of

belonging, or more like a Potemkin village put up to anesthetize people and consolidate power?

"We're trying to figure out what to do," Furcal said.

"About what?"

"About the fact that you and most of the rest of the people here have gone stark fucking bonkers."

Milt frowned. "That's not really appropriate language in front of kids."

So he's noticed me, I thought. I wondered how it would play out in school the next day.

Ät

It didn't play out the next day, or the day after that. The Tuesday after, my luck ran out. Bahrani caught me coming out of last-period social studies and took me down to his office. "I'm not sure this crowd you're with is good for you, Wiley," he said when he'd settled me in the chair facing his desk. "I know kids like you have trouble sometimes. It's the times, I guess. Kids want to rebel; heck, I did too." He tried on a smile, abandoned it when he saw I wasn't going to give him anything back. "But it can be taken too far, and when it gets out of hand, the school administration needs to take action. We'd like you to see someone, try to talk out some of the hostility you're experiencing."

I was scared out of my mind. Too many movies full of old men in white coats with big syringes. So I played along—mostly. "How about the AI first?" I asked, trying to sound cooperative. "It's designed to work through dissociative feelings, right? If that's what I'm feeling, let's do that."

"I'm not sure what to say to that, Wiley." Bahrani crossed his legs and tapped his pen on my file. "What do you mean by AI?"

That was the most frightened I had ever been. Bahrani had gone completely over the edge; if he was just playing a role, I saw that he didn't know it anymore. Right then I went from feeling like people didn't understand me to believing that I was surrounded by enemies.

Play along, I thought, long enough to get out of here. "Can you make me an appointment?"

"That's a good idea," Bahrani said. He got another file from his desk and consulted a schedule. "You know, it's perfectly normal to feel the way you're feeling. At your age." He made a note on the schedule. "Dr. Macavenue can see you tomorrow right after school."

"Okay," I said, and that was it. Bahrani let me get up and leave, and I walked out of the office feeling like I'd narrowly avoided something awful.

I went straight to Iris. She was watching Hannah and Peter on the playground. I sat next to her in the swingset, and I didn't mean to but the first thing out of my mouth was, "They've all gone crazy." Which wasn't an ideal thing to say considering I was under suspicion of being nuts myself.

Iris was on my side, though. "Yeah, they have," she said.

"We can't stop it."

"Nope." She was still watching her siblings, two perfect Fifties children on another world.

"I think maybe we could get away, though," I said, and held my breath. Iris didn't say anything and eventually I had to exhale, and then there was nothing to do but take another breath and tell her about Evelyn.

Ät

This is where I have to ask you whether you wanted this to happen. Did you cull me from the herd, choose me like you chose my father?

How much of this was you?

Ät

"She talks to you?" Iris said.

"Sometimes, yeah. More often lately. But we talked some when I was on the ship, too."

"You have to tell the Lodge," Iris said.

"Why? Iris, there are spies in the Lodge. What are they going to do if they find out I've been talking to Evelyn? Jesus. Bahrani'll have me committed."

"To where? They haven't built a loony bin yet."

She meant it as a joke, but the idea chilled me. What vital project would be canceled so they could build a nice quiet place for people like me to spout their fantasies in little white rooms?

"They want me to see a psychiatrist. Bahrani wouldn't even admit that there was an AI. I'm scared, Iris. I'm starting to wonder if they're going to put something in my lunch at school."

She reached across the space between swings and touched my arm. "How about if I start bringing you lunch? Would that make you feel better?"

I had to laugh. "Yeah. But I don't know if I can tell the Lodge."

Then they killed Julio Furcal.

Ät

At some point when I was a little kid, the council decided that Grant City needed a cop. This was a surprise, because the council normally spent their time at each others' throats over things like who should pay to mow the cemetery lawn since most of its residents had died before *Susan Constant* came to Canaan—or as they would later put it, "before Grant City was organized in its current form"—and it came as a surprise when they actually transacted the colony's business once in a while. Nobody really wanted to be a town cop, because at that point they all hadn't gone off the deep end, but eventually Chad Latta stood up and said he'd be willing. They voted him in immediately and gave him office space in a back corner of one of the lab complexes. We'd come a long way since then. The lab complex morphed into a kind of YMCA, and Chad took to the job of being a town cop like he was born to it. Iris wouldn't go within half a mile of him, and wouldn't say why.

I don't know what he was doing back on Earth, but by the time I was thirteen he'd had a badge and uniform made, and even took to carrying a gun. There was some deep division in the colony over that, but already too many of our people had begun the retreat into Fantasy 1956-Land, and they wanted law and order. I later found out that the Lodge was born at about the same time, when Julio Furcal and Sharon Pelletier and a couple of other people started to see that Grant City was on its way to deep trouble. They started meeting to plot out ways to slow the colony's slide into delusion, and when it became clear that they couldn't do anything overtly, they started infiltrating organizations like the PTA and the city council as fast as those bodies sprang up.

Problem was, that infiltration went both ways, and about a week after Milt Bahrani told me I needed to see a shrink, Chad Latta went to the school to arrest Julio Furcal. Julio demanded to know what the

charge was, to which Chad answered—I'm not kidding—contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Chad had lost his sense of humor long before, and when Julio told him to fuck off in front of his riveted home-room students, Chad hauled off and decked Julio. Then Julio got up and went after him, and in the struggle Chad's gun went off.

I wasn't in Julio's home room, and by this time most of the other kids in the school had me pegged as the kind of kid you shouldn't let adults see you talking to, but I heard third- or fourth-hand that Chad shot Julio three times while Julio was on the floor. It might be true, in fact I'm pretty sure it is, but it's also exactly the kind of thing that a bunch of traumatized kids might say to transform their fear into some kind of ghoulish thrill. I was in my computer class—called Electronics—when I heard the shots, and the next thing I knew the school was evacuated, and the next thing after that I was back in Bahrani's office with Chad Latta standing inside the door. He'd had some kind of work done, sharpening his chin and giving his hairline a sharp widow's peak. Another James Dean, I thought to myself. I would have rolled my eyes if Latta wasn't looking at me.

Bahrani reached across his desk, and I figured out at the last second he was after my spex. Before I could think about it, I slapped his hand away.

He was standing, maybe to hit me, and I was standing definitely to hit him, when Chad cracked me in the back of the head and I went down, banging my forehead on Bahrani's desk on the way. I stayed on my hands and knees, trying to focus my eyes. Bahrani came around his desk.

"Give me your glasses."

"They're not mine," I said. "They're my dad's."

"Give them to me."

"My dad needs them."

Bahrani tapped my head, exactly where Chad had hit me. When the black spots were all gone from my vision, he said, "Why do you go to those meetings? They're dangerous."

I hadn't yet heard that Julio Furcal was dead. "You've got a cop busting my head and you tell me a meeting is dangerous? What's he going to do next, kill me? Or do I get the bamboo slivers under my fingernails first?"

"I'd hate to have to put you in a hospital, Wiley," Bahrani said.

I didn't know whether he meant having Chad Latta hurt me or putting me in some kind of mental ward. Either possibility terrified me.

"I want to talk to my dad," I said.

"In a minute."

It hurt like hell, but I looked up at him. "No," I said with tears in my eyes. "Right now. Unless you plan to kill me, you let me talk to my dad right fucking now!" I was screaming by the last few words, and I guess I got to whatever shred of sanity Bahrani still had hidden away behind his high-school-autocrat façade, because he took a step back. He looked past me, and for a second I thought he was actually going to tell Chad Latta to kill me; when I found out later that Chad had shot Julio, I started shaking and didn't stop until I'd thrown up.

"You're suspended," Bahrani said. "Go home."

As I walked by Latta, he said, "Give Carol Ann a kiss for me," and winked. I had no idea what he meant, and couldn't look him in the eye anyway.

When I got home my dad took one look at me and said, "Jesus Christ, Wiley." I shoved past him into the house and slammed the door to my room. He let me stew for a while, but around sunset he knocked, and when I didn't answer he came in. I was sitting at my terminal watching a video without any idea what it was. Dad sat on my bed and said, "Milt Bahrani says you're suspended. That have anything to do with the knot on your forehead?"

"You wouldn't believe me," I said.

"Wiley, you're my son. I will believe whatever you tell me unless I know otherwise."

I turned around. "Okay. Bahrani called me into his office and Chad Latta hit me over the head and while I was falling down I got this on the corner of Bahrani's desk."

He hated hearing it, both because it had happened and because he was too wrecked to do anything about it. Or so I thought: the next day I heard he found Milt Bahrani at the Elks Lodge, called him the shitpot tin god he was, and broke a beer bottle across Bahrani's forehead before Latta arrested him.

That was why I never got to tell my dad that I had been wrong who Chad Latta was trying to look like. I ran a biometric against all of the archived stills and vid we had from the Fifties, and although he'd ended up close to James Dean, I was pretty sure that our town cop had gotten a nip and tuck so he could look like Charles Starkweather. He wouldn't have had to get a doctor to agree; there was a MedSmart berth that took care of all minor surgery, and as deep as Grant City got in its we-like-Ike hallucination, they never failed to keep the MedSmart in top condition.

He'd told me to kiss "Carol Ann," who had to be Iris. I don't usually talk to myself, but I said, "Jesus. What am I going to do?"

And Evelyn answered.

Ät

It seems odd that I heard about Julio from you. Why wouldn't it have been one of the kids at school? Justin Rowe would have been glad to get me up to speed on my favorite teacher's murder. Iris also would have told me.

I wonder if he, Julio, knew it was coming. The only way it makes any sense, though, is if he was somehow doing it to provoke exactly the kind of thing I ended up doing, and even my paranoia isn't grandiose enough to let me believe that. No, it was just Bahrani and Chad Latta; give a guy like Chad a gun and he's going to want to use it, and a guy like Milt Bahrani will eventually come up with someone to use it on.

I don't think my paranoia is that grandiose, anyway

Ät

Somebody scheduled the next Lodge meeting against the most recent showing of Grant City's perennial favorite, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, made the year after the one we were all pretending to inhabit. I think the movie pleased everybody. Those who had bought into 1956 subconsciously craved the movie's validation of their impulse to believe that all of their work would be destroyed no matter what they did. Those of us who remained sane, whatever that means, loved all the stuff about being forced to work in the service of things we despised; plus the last line of the movie is "Madness! Madness ... madness!"

Anyway, I told the Lodge. Not because Evelyn had suggested it or because of Julio Furcal being killed, but because Iris wanted me to.

It was the first Lodge meeting my father had attended. That's one thing I wish I could take back; I would trade every good deed to expunge the memory of my father's face when he heard that I'd talked to Evelyn.

Julio's murder had radicalized everyone; there were calls for more open resistance, for the scientists to strike until the Wingtips agreed that it was really the twenty-third century. There were threats against Chad Latta, at least until I pointed out his resemblance to a certain serial murderer from 1957 and told them about his "Carol Ann" remark.

Everyone wanted to do something, and everyone wanted everyone else to drop what they were doing and pull together. Then my father raised his hand.

He was sitting near the front of the room, so even the people who couldn't hear the whine of his shoulder servos shut up. Once he was sure everyone was paying attention—my dad never did like to say things twice—he said, "The thing to do is leave."

The silence changed. When he'd raised his hand, people were curious. Now they were dumbfounded.

"It's still possible," he went on. "Evelyn's spotted other planets. We can pack up and go, try this again. Start over."

Start over. I could feel the wave of weariness roll through the room. Wasn't it enough that we'd tried once? Look what had happened.

The only alternative was to go. There was room for everyone aboard the ship, especially since most of them wouldn't want to go.

It was thinking of Hannah and Peter that made the decision for me. I stood up and for the first time in my life took advantage of the aura of otherness that had always dogged me. Another fairy tale. *Dumbo*, maybe. The furor in the meeting room died away.

"You couldn't survive the trip, Dad," I said. It was true; he was breaking down a little more every week, breathing a little shallower, relying a little more on the servos that kept his legs under him and his head erect.

They misunderstood me, thought I was agreeing with the side that wanted to surrender. I took a deep breath and went on, giving up the one secret I always thought I'd be able to keep.

"But I could."

Ät

How long has it been since I said that? Time is funny. Sometimes I can still feel the words on my tongue, and sometimes the whole scene is a memory so distant it's taken on the surreal clarity of a dream, or a story I've heard so often I've come to believe it happened to me. But in this little womb, this liquid steel heart of a ship tethered to the invisible fabric of the real—to Evelyn—everything feels like that. Everything has happened to someone else. I thought that the danger of solitude was that my self would expand to fill the gaps left by my father, Iris, everyone else who has been taken from me permanently or not; what I find, though, is that I begin to disappear into these vacancies, to hear those other voices more clearly than my own.

More clearly even than yours.

Don't leave me, Evelyn. We're almost there.

Ät

My father spoke first. "You can?"

At that moment we were the only two people in the room. On his face I could see everything he hadn't asked, or had compressed into those two words.

Yes, Dad. I could have shared your loneliness. But you left me alone with images of a dead Earth and a dead mother that I drank in and called memories, and I was afraid of this invisible woman you loved so much that you turned to her and let my mother die.

And now she's mine.

"Yes," I said. "That's what she told me."

Something broke between us then, and I imagine now that he must have grown smaller somehow, shrunken by the knowledge that we had without being able to help it betrayed each other.

It would be easier if I could just blame him, but can I do that now when I find myself facing the same awful temptation he did, and knowing that I can exchange it for another, and knowing that the other might be worse? My father woke me too late to save my mother, but now I know why he waited. I could wait. You are beautiful, and kind, and your need envelops me and keeps me safe.

Can you take me where you are? Can I know the rest of you, know you as you are? Can you make me forget the sacrifice I would make to be with you?

Please stop.

All I have are questions. Without questions I have no hope of making you say what I need you to say.

Ät

Through the window in her berth, Iris looks pale. I think of Sleeping Beauty, envision myself the prince who will condemn her to mortality again. Sometimes I wander up and down the rows of berths, counting each of my four hundred and eleven passengers, lingering over the children. All of them have lived years longer than they would have on Canaan. We took as many as we could, and you can call it kidnapping if you want to. They boarded *Susan Constant* like I seem to remember going to the moon so long ago: nervous, even tearful, but trusting their parents to keep them safe.

Trusting me. On either side of Iris sleep Hannah and Peter; I remember the feel of their hands in mine, the last time I swung them around in the park after we'd lost their ball in the woods. Iris is on my mind all the time, but Hannah and Peter are the responsibility I feel most heavily. I cannot fail them.

Iris would understand. Will understand. When I wake her, she will understand.

Is this some kind of revenge?

Ät

I can't even articulate what it felt like to seal that hatch behind me, knowing that I was leaving eight hundred people behind to die because their delusions threatened me. My father killed hundreds of people because he was in love. So did I. The only difference is that I talked myself into believing that I had to kill those people to save the rest, and that's not much consolation when I look up and realize that it's been three years since we left and everyone on Canaan is probably dead.

I'll admit that this is mostly cowardice talking, but it seemed monstrously unfair to me that we should have come so far only to be forced back into space again. But what might have happened to the others? Had they survived? Perhaps we were the fortunate ones, able to flee again. Perhaps *Argos* and *Santa Maria* were destroyed by malfunction, a stray pebble, failed orbital insertion . . . that we survived in Grant City for as long as we did is from a certain perspective miraculous. From this same perspective, our second exodus was a second chance. I tried to think about it that way.

A couple of weeks after the meeting, after everything had already been set in motion, something about the idea of departure sent me rummaging through the colony records to find clips of my mother. There was a little hiccup in the link, and then I wasn't talking to the colony's local AI any more. I was talking to Evelyn. I asked her about my mother, and she spooled some old newsnet files of a short, round-faced woman with brown eyes. I turned off the sound so I could just look at her, and I tried to see myself in her. Her face wasn't my face; her hair was curly and mine was straight; my eyes were the same green as my father's.

Her hands, though. When she tucked her hair behind one ear, I saw my hands. I placed my palm on the screen.

Evelyn anticipated what I was feeling. She was good at that. *Wiley*, she said. *It's all right that you take after your father.*

Is it? I asked her.

You spend so much time blaming him for his failures, she said, that you never think about the fact that he kept you alive. Is it so bad that you should inherit that?

I cut the link, but I was hearing her words in my head three weeks later, on the day my dad told me he wasn't leaving Canaan.

It wasn't a surprise, but once it was out in the open I was scared. He'd done this before, and even if he'd failed I wanted him around. He could help me avoid his mistakes, couldn't he?

And even then, I think I was afraid that without him around Evelyn would be too much for me to resist.

"Are you sure?" I asked him. "The low-g might be good for you."

"Wiley, kid, sometimes when you fall off the horse you have to get right back on. Other times you need to be smart enough to know that it's too much horse for you to handle. And I'd be willing to bet that if I said I was coming, somebody would shoot me dead before I could get on the shuttle. Best not to find out, don't you think?"

He sat there on his bench, looking out at the hills and panting a little from the effort of speaking. I almost begged him, but I was sixteen years old, and everything else aside it's awfully hard to beg your father for anything when you're sixteen. I had won. I was taking the love of his life away from him and leaving him to die. So I sat with him and felt myself dividing into the me that existed and the me that would sit on a bench watching the hills on the next planet, body broken and mind turned inward to past failures.

Ät

Where I was born, there is an old ghost. He appears in the ruins of San Diego, a young man born two hundred ago. I am nineteen years old. Fourteen of those years passed in the company of other human beings. During the rest I was alone with *Susan Constant*. And with Evelyn.

You are my first memory, you know that? Some people remember being three, but I don't. I don't

remember going to the moon or boarding this ship or the kiss my mother must have given me before I settled into my berth and fell into the dream that ended with her death. It seems like I did, but I must have made it up. I don't remember being awakened, or the desperate grateful despair my father must have wept onto me when he saw that I had survived.

Don't tell me he didn't cry. If I want to know the truth, I'll look it up for myself.

I remember the stillness of the long hallway between the berths and the space reserved for my father's downtime. I remember I started calling that room the galley after I read an old novel about submarines. And I remember that you showed me how to work the VR. In my head your voice has collapsed into my imaginings of my mother. You were kind, so she must have been kind. She raised me, and so did you.

Another old ghost haunts Grant City now that my father is dead. That was my first thought when you told me.

Then I felt an incredulous sense of betrayal that you knew. *You talked to him?* I screamed at her. At you. My jealousy made me sick, and I flew into a violent rage, destroying whatever I could get my hands on, which in the womb was anything Evelyn wanted to be there. As soon as that realization penetrated my anger, I froze, like a horse that is finally broken.

We thought it was best for you, she said.

Parented at last.

Ät

Iris came to me the day before I was supposed to call Evelyn down. All of the robots and backup equipment were already on *Susan Constant*, and Lodge members had preserved their more important experimental data. We decided to leave the MedSmart; there were others on the ship. The next morning I would call Evelyn, she would bring the ship down, and anyone who wanted to would get on it. I was worried that Chad Latta would do something crazy, but Sharon Pelletier and Miss Callahan told me I had nothing to worry about. All I had to do was make sure Evelyn came down and went back up with us on board.

"Walk with me," Iris said, and led me through the husk of Grant City, along the river trail to the cemetery and my mother's grave. Weeds had grown over the plots in the months since we'd thrown ourselves into the evacuation, but my mother's name was still visible. I saw her face in my mind, and saw the shipboard monitor that framed it.

"You need to leave her here if we're going to live through this," Iris said.

I said I knew that.

"You're not your father, Wiley," she said.

"I'm as much him as I am me," I said.

"No," she said, and stepped between me and my mother's tombstone. "He didn't have anyone. He thought he had Evelyn, and then he thought he had you, but in the end he was alone." I closed my eyes, and felt her hands on either side of my face. "Open your eyes, Wiley."

I did, and began to cry.

"You have me, Wiley. Let that hold you. When you think you're alone, know that you have me. I'll be there on the other side."

I couldn't speak. All I could have said was, But what if you don't have me, Iris? What if I get lost? What if I'm not even as strong as he was? I wanted to, wanted to warn her away from her faith in me, but instead I bowed my head to her breast and cried because she was so brave and I needed her courage.

The day after that she slept, and the day after that I crawled into the womb that had once held my father, and *Susan Constant* turned away from Canaan to the stars.

Ät

You asked me a question a long time ago. *We have both lost so much, Wiley, you said. Can we not have each other?* I came to you needing to know something about my father, and instead ...

Did I say yes? I think I must have. I was a child, and my father was a ghost, and my mother was another kind of ghost. You were there, and you were kind, and I think I must have responded to your fear as much as anything else. We could be afraid together.

But I'm not my father. He had courage I'll never have, but maybe I can save myself out of fear, and maybe I can save everyone else, too.

Except Iris.

Ät

We would land on the delta planet of Taurus V, wake everyone up, and start over. Everything would work this time. And along the way, all I had to do was remember that I wasn't alone because Iris believed in me. Maybe she was lying; maybe she told me that because she knew it was the one thing she could do to hang onto a little bit of control over the years she'd spend frozen. But I don't think so. This is the girl who said to Wiley Brennan, *It's not your fault.* She didn't have to do that.

The first morning I missed the lab check, I was with you.

Maybe it's the sense that you go on forever, that I'm touching only the part of you that can squeeze into four dimensions. Maybe it's just the way you make me feel so safe, like a two-year-old sleeping with a hand on his mother's belly, his breath cued to hers. Maybe it's just our secret history—you were my mother when my mother died, and every little boy thinks about his mother. Do I have to tell you that's not healthy? Does the rest of you even know what happens to this little four-dimensional sliver?

But thank you.

You know what will happen, don't you? We're seventy-nine years away from Taurus, and I'm already cracking. It took my father more than a hundred years to get to this point. I'll never make it. You understand, don't you?

You can cook up telomerase injections for Iris. So could I, if I had years to learn how to do it, but I don't. You have to do it for me. And I know you can make me believe I've already done it. Please don't. Don't make me into him.

It's not like what my father did to me. He was terrified, and so am I; but he unloaded all of his fear onto me, and I never had a chance to say no. With Iris it's different. She didn't take me up to my mother's grave just to profess her faith in me.

She was offering herself.

You have to stop this. You have to stop making me feel so safe. You have to stop protecting me.

I'm going to go away for a little while, Evelyn.

Ät

Iris.

Ät

Evelyn. Are you listening to me?

Ät

Iris. Iris, I'm dreaming. Iris, wake up.

The End