

A MILLION YEARS AND COUNTING by RAJNAR VAJRA

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Illustrated by John Allemand

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The tendency to forget why you came into a room may increase with age, but few have experienced it quite like this!

I was walking across Lincoln Center's Josie Robertson Plaza the first time my head fell off.

Something inside my neck clicked, my body froze in place, the world and sky circled each other, and my cranium clanged against hard tiles. Twice. The second due to a minor bounce.

Strange.

If my head were as spherical as it had been when I'd been found, and no one was thoughtful enough to put out a blocking foot, it might've rolled all the way to 9th Avenue—surely a world record of some kind. Instead, my extruded nose, chin, ears, and imitation cheekbones insured a wobbling course, which made it tricky to calculate where my head would come to rest.

The resulting estimate was worrisome. My need had summoned protocols for handling such a crisis—which was strange in itself since the event seemed so improbable—but no assurance these protocols would work with my cranium between nine and ten meters from my body. Further calculations started me extending my nose and expanding my ears.

The Metropolitan Opera House, some gushing waters, Avery Fisher Hall, and the New York State Theater revolved around me at creative angles and I fancied the scene would be dramatic as viewed from above: an oversized humanoid noggin in tasteful sheens of gold and silver careening over the tiled spider-web surrounding Revson Fountain.

I hoped someone was enjoying my situation; it added no luster to *my* day. And certainly, I had no shortage of audience. At ten to eight on a cloudless morning in early March, Lincoln Center wasn't crowded, but it was hardly uninhabited. Dozens of voices gasped, yelled, muttered, or swore. After the initial surprise, the most popular phrase was "Moon Robot," including one youngster's screech: "Hey, Dad! That's the Moon Robot! How come its head popped off?" I knew the Plaza was crackling, even more than usual, with patterned microwaves doubtless

image-messaging my predicament.

If anyone, I thought, would manually re-place my crown, the gesture would be deeply appreciated. I blinked a similar message ten times in Morse code but with humble expectations. How many people in this decade of megapatches and exoplanetary enclaves on Mars and Titan have even heard of Samuel Morse or Alfred Vail? I worked on that problem until it proved unsolvable with my current information.

“Can’t be Dan the Can, JJ,” a man’s voice announced. “Probably one of those Toshiba-Disney knockoffs made to look like Disney characters. But with a bad weld. See that face? Dan doesn’t have Pinocchio’s nose or Dumbo’s ears. Besides, something that’s lasted a million years wouldn’t just fall apart.”

I had the perfect retort at hand, but no voice available. Or hand, for that matter. And by the time I was reassembled, the opportunity would surely be long passed. Such, I have noticed, is life—or in my case, existence.

An interesting question arose. Although my primary sense organs are attached to my cranium and therefore my identity feels similarly attached, no one on Earth knew if whatever I used for a brain was in my head or placed, say, in my left leg. If so, was I technically out of my mind right now? Or was it the other way round?

With a little luck and a lot of nose, my head stopped spinning with one eye adequately positioned to see the rest of me—a convenient arrangement since I could only migrate my eyes a few inches and without visual guidance, I’d have no way to know if someone were standing in my body’s way. The thought of trampling little JJ was upsetting.

Perhaps Professor Norhaart is right about me having a subconscious because the exact telemetric etiquette was already waiting for me as I reached for it. While I pondered what *kind* of signal my body could receive since most forms of electromagnetic radiation bounce off me, the bulky thing stirred, the crowd gasped, and a headless giant lurched across the Plaza. Couldn’t feel a thing until, a moment later, my head clicked back into place with enough authority to almost convince me the join was permanent.

I shrank my expanded features and bowed to my audience—taking due care to keep my skull balanced!—as if I’d completed a circus trick. Then I hurried toward 9th Avenue with an eye out, figuratively this time, for the nearest full-size taxi. I’d only recently learned to fold myself to fit into a cab’s back seat.

A ride appeared quickly, but the wait while New York’s Energy Authority got the gyros up to speed while feeding off my cred-disk seemed to last as long as my stay on the Moon. Subjectively, much longer, since I couldn’t actually remember my Moon visit. Embarrassment made me anxious to leave, and my relatively newfound

ability—only two weeks old—to *feel* embarrassment made me more anxious. And I'd already been plenty anxious before my decapitation.

Boiling it down, I had to talk to Jon Norhaart immediately. Obviously, something within me was going horribly wrong.

On the bright side, I now grasped a concept that had eluded me for years: irony. I'd come to Lincoln Center this morning because it's so infused with art and culture, which inspires me when I face particularly difficult problems. And those problems had made me determined to avoid one particular person today: Jon Norhaart.

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"Your head came off? Just by itself?" These questions sounded as if I were talking to myself because here was the model I'd used for my voice and speech mannerisms.

I ran an image comparison series to confirm that I'd never seen Professor Jon No-Middle-Name Norhaart, my mentor and friend, wearing such a surprised expression. His raised eyebrows quilted his normally baby-smooth forehead, which was higher than male norm due to innate physiology and encroaching baldness. His blond-and-gray moustache made a fuzzy lintel shadowing an open mouth. He didn't wait for my response but leapt out from behind his desk, scrutinized my neck from eyelash-tickling range, and gently palpated the area with both hands.

I thought it best not to nod. "Just by itself."

"Huh. No structural flaws I can see or feel."

Indeed, in the bathroom mirror down the hall, my neck had appeared perfect. I *had* noticed, for the first time, how much my face resembled Jack Haley's Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*.

"You'd have mentioned it, I'm sure," Jon's voice was wry, "if this had happened before?"

"I've no memory of such an event."

He rubbed his eyes and leaned back against his desk, not quite sitting. When he looked up at me, his autocontacts visibly adjusted to the new viewing distance and it crossed my mind that human technology was already on track to produce something like me. But not soon. The Toshiba-Disney household robots based on me were nearly useless toys for the ultra-wealthy.

"Daniel," he asked, "have you any idea how peculiar this is?"

“Yes, but no. For me, reality is always full of surprises. I found this one more shameful than strange.”

“Shameful?”

“The visual symbolism was disturbing. Your culture has so many telling phrases. Having your head on straight, a good head on your shoulders, losing your—”

“Dan.” He waved a hand as if discouraging flies. “Do you remember being in the Army’s custody?”

“Impressions only. I couldn’t understand what was happening around me.”

He nodded, frowning. “For more than two decades, scientists tried like hell to tear you apart.”

I warped the corners of my mouth to make my own frown. “I don’t recall that although I’ve dreamed about being ... tugged at. And something about shears, perhaps. I know they didn’t succeed.”

“Right, and believe me, they tried everything from pry bars to acetylene torches. Everything short of burst-lasers and micro-nukes, which wouldn’t have left much to study.”

“Ah.”

“You’re made of tough stuff, whatever it is.”

The thought of blowtorch fire on my skin, which I keep sensitive enough to detect a crawling ant, made me feel weak at the knee joints. Maybe I don’t feel pain as humans do, but too much sensation is highly unpleasant. I lowered myself into the armless chair my mentor kept here for my use. “What were they looking for?”

“Everything. A clue as to who or what built you. How a material usually harder than steel could so quickly mold itself into varying shapes. Most of all, maybe, the nature of your power supply. From analysis of regolithic dust, we know you were in that cave for *at least* a million years before we found you. And here you are. Still ticking.”

This story was old news to me, but I was hearing it differently today. “Doesn’t twenty years seem a long time to keep me isolated? Scientists outside the military must’ve resented being shut out.”

He frowned again and a fingertip wiggled on the desk. “I’m getting worried

about you, Dan. You don't sound like yourself. Uh, I mean—"

"I know what you mean. But you haven't answered my question."

"Right." He sighed. "There was another factor. The government was afraid you might be a—well, a Trojan horse of some sort." His face flushed a bit.

I took a millisecond to reread two stored versions of the *Iliad*, one in Greek. "Why?"

"Why would aliens abandon a piece of such advanced technology on the Moon for eons? And why leave an intermittent radio beacon to advertise your presence? So they could find you again? Or were they planning for someone like us to find you? See what I mean? It's the government's job to consider all possible security risks."

"Still, twenty years?"

"Does seem extreme. But try to imagine being responsible for the safety of the entire human race."

I tried. "Wouldn't it have been more sensible to leave me on the Moon?"

He shrugged. "And throw away a priceless opportunity? Quite a decision! I'm just glad the Army finally decided you were harmless. Hang on a minute."

He tapped one side of his head: tap, pause, tap-tap-tap; then his throat muscles began to twitch slightly and likewise his lips. I felt my usual frustration at being opaque to microwaves and incapable of using a telicell system myself. And I was upset with other limitations. Evidently, some people can throat-read, but despite superhuman vision, the skill was beyond me.

"Sorry to interrupt our conversation, Dan. I wanted the physics lab to send up a pair of eye-queues if they had any free. Wanted to see if your neck was radiating anything in the UV or infrared range."

"Any luck?"

"One pair of six-ways available."

"Why don't I go downstairs and pick them up myself?"

He grinned. "You just want an excuse to bask in the Guru's radiance. Sorry, his assistant's already on the way."

"That's the story of my non-life. Anyway, what do you expect to see?"

“Always a mistake to expect.” He chewed his moustache and twisted the CPU he was wearing around his right pinky. “While we’re waiting—aside from your head coming loose, anything else unusual happen to you lately? Done anything new and different?”

Uh-oh. “We received quite a collection of shards at the museum on Tuesday,” I said to delay the inevitable. “One urn came in 5,422 pieces! Can’t wait to put it together.”

“You must be a godsend to archeology. But I meant *unusual*.”

I felt myself wanting to shift in the chair like a nervous child, but forced myself into stillness. “I rescued a toddler yesterday. Never done that before.”

“What?”

“I may have saved a little girl’s life.”

One of his eyes gleamed a brighter blue in a stray shaft of sunlight and my conscience turned it into a gleam of suspicion. But all he asked was, “What happened?”

Given any assurance my head would stay put, I would’ve attempted a new wrinkle on my latest skills and imitated his shrug from fifty-six seconds ago. Humans have such expressive gestures. “I suppose the mother got distracted. Her child made it partway across 5th and one truck driver didn’t see her. Someone caught the event on television and the upload made it on to last night’s webcasts. Now I’m famous,” I added, trying out my grasp on irony.

Perhaps I needed a firmer grip because he didn’t laugh. “I’ll have to replay one of those ‘casts—wasn’t in the mood to watch the usual bad news last night. Huh. Good thing you were there and that you can move so fast when you want to. But why do I feel you’re holding something back? Anything *else* new and different?”

The unknown lubricants in my mouth seemed to have dried up. I’d run out of decoys and seriously considered lying, but I’d never tried the technique and doubted I could pull it off. “Spent four hours last night with your daughter. Talking.”

“Oh? Well, Linda always liked you.”

“Not Linda. Alison.”

“*Alison!*” His voice rose by a minor third as his jaw tightened. Now we didn’t sound identical. “Since when do you know *Alison*?” His entire personality seemed to harden—emotional scar tissue, I thought, which wasn’t at all my usual sort of

thought....

“Met her for the first time last night.” I decided not to inform him she’d stayed at my apartment overnight and was likely still there.

“Really? What the hell did she want?”

“She wants you to forgive her.”

He stared at me for a second. “Her judgment hasn’t improved any. And, Daniel, this really isn’t your business.”

I reread twenty books on human psychology and learned nothing applicable. “She’s pregnant.”

It wasn’t so much a bombshell as the explosion itself. His eyes widened, his lips tried to push past each other, and his jaw worked as if chewing. “What?”

“She’s pregnant.”

After a polite tap on the door, Todd White, the Guru’s senior work-study assistant from the physics lab below, pushed into the room bearing a smile, a small box, and some bulky goggles. He took one look at my mentor’s face, lost the smile, deposited his burdens on the desk, and left without saying a word. He had the right idea. I suppose working for the Guru might boost one’s sensitivities.

“She needed someone,” I said softly as the door closed behind him, “to speak with you. On her behalf.”

Jon opened his mouth, but clacked it shut and shoved the goggles on his head as if to hide his eyes. As the lenses stared at me they changed color six times, constantly reflecting light like a tapetum lucidum.

He remained silent, not like him at all. I searched for protocols for this situation and came up empty.

“I hadn’t meant to upset you,” I finally said.

“These damn lenses are filthy and everything’s blurred. Got to clean them. Stay right there.” He practically ran from the room, still wearing the goggles, and his hands shook.

I stared at the back of the picture he always kept on his desk. I’d seen it from the display side on six hundred and thirty-nine occasions and from this side almost daily for five years. It showed a slightly plump woman with brown hair and green eyes, smiling: the professor’s dead wife.

As I'd learned last night, Danielle Norhaart had been killed six years ago when her car swerved off the road and into a tree. This wasn't her fault. She'd been in labor and had asked someone else to take her to the hospital. And because her due date had been nearly a month away, her husband had been at a conference out of state. So she'd asked her daughter Alison, who was pregnant herself, to drive.

She hadn't known about Alison's drug problem.

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Walking to my apartment, I heard the honking from fifteen blocks away.

Four minutes later, the cause came into view and assorted shouting clarified the cause of the cause. Thanks to a dispute concerning right-of-way, two delivery trucks had gotten too jammed together for either to get clear without damaging city property. Then enough traffic had piled around them to force police officers to leave their vehicles to reach the epicenter. The truck drivers were standing in the street yelling at each other, cops were yelling at the truck drivers, and various people in stuck cars were just plain yelling and jabbing their horns.

I jumped over hoods and stomped on bumpers to get to the biggest truck. There, I lifted one end and carried it over a few feet, far enough to start the un-jamming process. All honking ceased. Instead of setting the truck down gently, I just let it fall. From within the van came crashes, bangs, thuds, and sad little tinkles.

Everyone stared. Perhaps they were as shocked as me that I'd performed my first deliberately rude act. Good and bad deeds for the day done, I resumed walking.

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On paper, the lease on my four-room apartment is 350,000 dollars per year, somewhat over my budget since the university pays me about ten thousand, before withholding, for my part-time services. And the American Museum of Natural History only supplies another five.

I lived in luxury's lap gratis.

The owners of the high-priced high-rise, or rather their lawyers, had approached me at the museum, where I'd had an acting job, playing myself in a diorama of the lunar cave where I'd been found. Dan the Can, tourist magnet. This job had provided a small income and, more importantly, a place to stay during those hours I wasn't working with Professor Norhaart or harvesting the Guru's wisdom. But after three years, I'd felt a growing need for some privacy.

So when the lawyers offered me an apartment on the thirty-eighth floor,

rent-free and all utilities paid, where windows revealed the intricacies of Manhattan rather than staring faces, I accepted. Apparently, the high-rise owners assumed my presence would generate continual publicity, which would attract more renters, which would allow them to boost rates.

Besides, at that point I'd found a more enjoyable way to earn money and it didn't involve being on display. The museum had received a shipment of *Albertosaurus* bones, mostly small fragments. After observing the staff paleontologists struggling to assemble pieces for an hour, I'd succumbed to temptation and begun pointing out which piece went where. This got me one job and led to a similar one in the university's Archeology department.

I don't eat or excrete or sleep—although I sometimes dream while awake—but money allows me to buy clothes, presents for my friends, books for myself, and lately, transportation. Also of late, I've enjoyed giving money to needy people on the street.

Today, my apartment held a very needy person, but money wasn't her problem.

“How'd it go?” Alison Norhaart demanded.

I'm a poor judge of human attractiveness, but Alison's features were unusually symmetrical. Her sandy hair was long and glossy, and her large eyes were even bluer than her father's. Still, her long addiction had burned fine wrinkles around her lips and turned the flesh near her eyes thin and fragile-looking. And her skin had a slightly grayish undertone, although maybe that was from anxiety. She'd gone through a successful rehab and was no longer using drugs. So she'd said and I believed her.

“I'm afraid it didn't go anywhere.”

Her shoulders slumped. “But you told him, right?”

“About your pregnancy, yes. But he wouldn't talk to me about it or about you. Alison, you're not only asking a machine to deal with a tricky human problem, but an *alien* machine. If there's any way I could be less qualified to help you, it escapes me. I can't begin to understand the depth of his feelings or how to ease them.”

“That's not—Daniel, I haven't told you ... everything yet.” She stopped and when she spoke again it was barely a whisper. “After I'd killed mom. And my unborn sister. I didn't want my own baby. Didn't want to raise a baby without mom. And the father would be no help. Didn't even know which asshole he was and it didn't matter; they were all losers like me.”

She fell silent for twenty-eight seconds.

“Maybe I wanted dad to know my plan and stop me. Why else would I have told Linda?”

“What plan?”

“Abortion. I was nearly in my fourth month. Dad begged me. Said the baby and Linda and me were all he had left of mom. He promised to raise my baby *himself*, if I couldn’t do it.”

All this was beyond me, but it gave me a terrible feeling where humans keep their stomachs. Having no idea what to say, I said nothing.

“Daniel. I had that abortion. I think I was really trying to kill myself.”

“I’m sorry.” Why do people have to *suffer* so much? “I need to think about this. Maybe it can help me figure out how to reach your father.”

She nodded, but kept watching me. To escape those eyes, I grabbed my remote, pushed the power button, and turned to the Light Emitting Plastic membrane on the east wall of my living room, which immediately lit up.

“My God,” she said after a moment, “I’d assumed that was a virtual window, but it’s a TV! I haven’t seen a physical video monitor in a private home since I was a kid.”

I turned back toward her. “CV doesn’t work on me, Alison. Sorry, I didn’t intend to sound upset about it. It’s just that it’s so easy to stream data into a human’s visual cortex and auditory nerves. And with me, it seems to be impossible. I probably don’t even *have* a visual cortex.”

She wasn’t listening. “Hey! Look what’s on! That’s you!”

I looked. She was right, but it wasn’t any clip I might’ve expected. Neither my cranium out for a nice morning roll, nor the toddler-rescue from yesterday afternoon. While some commentator was happily commentating about how I’d been named after a robot character in an “obscure” novel by Isaac Asimov, Dan the Can was lifting a large truck by its rear bumper, scooting it over a yard or so, and letting the tail end drop. This shouldn’t be online for hours yet. Some reporter had been following me.

I watched the replay, fascinated as usual at how strange I appear from the outside. Much larger than I imagine myself, and the extra pair of arms I keep minimized and pressed against my sides are still too noticeable. The effect is distressingly inhuman....

My phone rang.

“What the hell was that?” Alison asked, eyes wide.

“A telephone. I need an external one of those, too.”

The voice on the other end was Professor Norhaart’s, which wasn’t too surprising since only eleven people could reach me this way, but the synthesized phasing characteristics I heard were unique in my experience. I guessed he was applying the broad powers of his high-security megapatch through the Metropolitan Data Authority to connect two normally immiscible systems: my phone line and a DNA-encrypted telicell link. Such a call should be eavesdrop-proof and leave behind no trace, assuming the system lacked a category in which to note this freak event.

“Dan?” Even sub-vocalizing, he sounded out of breath. “Just caught the latest newscast and we’ve got a problem.”

“What problem?”

“God knows we’ve tested you often enough and you’ve never shown strength like that before! What made you think you could lift a truck?”

“Never occurred to me I couldn’t. But I shouldn’t have put it down so roughly. Perhaps a letter of apology would—”

“Dan! What were we talking about just half an hour ago? The military only released you because they decided you were *harmless*. Do you hear me? I’m watching your little demo on a loop right now and not too many people seeing this would describe you as harmless. Even to me you look ... violent. The government will be coming after you, and soon.”

“Why? I was just trying to help!”

“I know you were, but you were moving so fast ... even CNN is saying you threw that truck out of spite.”

I stepped to the window and glanced downwards. Traffic on the street below was unusually slow and dwindling. The same was true of Lexington, the one avenue visible from this window. “Why don’t I just tell the government I’m harmless?”

He sighed. “You think they could afford to take *your* word? Look, do you want the army to lock you up again?”

“No!” I was astonished at how much the idea disturbed me. “What should I do?” I enhanced my hearing and caught an approaching chop of helicopter blades.

“Get out of there. I mean *fast*. Meet me at—no, they’ll be looking for you here and at my house. Damn. Meet me at the Guru’s apartment.” He supplied the address, knowing I’d memorized the entire New York City map. “You seem to be changing and this is no time for us to lose contact.”

“Professor. Alison’s here, standing right next to me. And it might be coincidental, but a helicopter’s landing on the roof.”

His hesitation was surprisingly brief. “She’s in danger just being with you. Tell her to leave.”

I turned to her. “Your father believes I’m in trouble with the authorities and thinks you would be safer elsewhere. I’m meeting him at Professor Besden’s home.”

She grabbed my upper left arm. “Then I have to go with you.”

“Hell, no!” yelled the voice on the phone. “I heard that! She can’t be anywhere *near* you. I don’t know what the army will have in mind, but Dan, they might even try to destroy you, to stay on the safe side.”

“*Destroy me?*”

“You’re tough as hell, but I doubt even you could survive a high-powered burst-laser.”

“You’ve convinced me. I’m out the door. We’ll figure out our next move when I see you.” I hung up without saying goodbye.

“You can’t go with me,” I said to my guest, gently detaching my arm. “Your father’s right.”

“I’ll risk it. I may never have a better chance to show him how—how much he means to me.”

I studied her for a moment. “Do you want to risk your unborn child?”

Her face paled as if I’d slapped her. “No. I hadn’t—”

“Hold on.” A second helicopter was approaching and a third wasn’t far behind. I assessed the thuds of heavy boots already running on the rooftop thirty-four stories above us. At least twenty soldiers were on their way—heavily armed troops judging from some faint rattles. Even the footsteps sounded aggressive. If Alison left now, she might not be safe anywhere in the building even away from me. I’ve read that in combat situations, soldiers have been known to fire at any sudden movement.

“Changed my mind,” I admitted. “Maybe there’s a way we can protect each other.” Three weeks ago I’d seen an old cartoon featuring robots, which had given me a crash-course in applied topology. I could do more than just fit into cabs....

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see. Wait right there.” Boot-steps were drumming down the northeast stairwell; evidently, the army didn’t trust elevators. ETA at my door at the current rate of progress: four minutes, sixteen seconds. I boosted my hearing further—yes, elevators were still running.

I did some hurrying of my own, grabbing a utility knife from the kitchen and two microfiber suitcases from a closet, then cutting the back out of each suitcase and poking several tiny holes in the front of the smaller case. Alison watched silently with puzzled eyes. I stripped off all my clothes, stuffing them and the detached microfiber rectangles into one side of the smaller case, making sure not to block the light seeping through the pierced front.

“I’ll be going through some ... changes, Alison. Don’t be alarmed.” I knew I looked far less human without clothes.

“All right.”

My feet are attached to my legs with tricky little camshafts it took me years to perfect. But it only took a moment to revert my feet into wheels. Narrowing my legs into rods was also quick work, but needing some way to hide the extra mass, I held the big suitcase to my lower torso and filled it full of me. The extrusion hid the back and supported the luggage, thus freeing my arms for more important work.

“Brace yourself,” I said quietly. “I’m going to try repeating something that happened to me by accident. If, ah, I fail to catch my head, please pick it up and stick it back on my neck.”

Without waiting for an answer, I held my arms out and commanded my head to pop off. The room seemed to shoot upwards and I lost touch with my body. But my head came to a soft stop even before Alison gasped. The next part was utterly experimental and if it failed, I’d need a plan B and fast. But I had a hunch....

Maintaining an internal silence—my version of holding my breath—I shoved my head against my upper chest, begging it to attach in this unnatural position. To my great relief and mild surprise, it did. My normal sensations flooded back, although I had to migrate my eyes to get them pointed forward. Evidently my sense of touch reached my head through something other than fixed nerve paths.

It was odd suddenly feeling so much shorter and my balance was off for a

few moments, but the weirdest thing was suddenly repossessing a clear memory of *arriving* on the Moon, leaving an artifact that was nothing like any human concept of a starship—all diaphanous veils and champagne bubbles. But this was no time to reminisce, so a moment later, I'd stacked the smaller case on the larger and wriggled my head inside the top case far enough to see out through the holes I'd made. Lifting my arms, I thinned them into tubular brackets, using the extra material to expand my neck into a luggage-holding clamp, which covered any suspicious gaps behind the upper suitcase.

"How do I look?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Incredible! Just like an auto-carrier! The kind that follow their owners like obedient dogs."

"That's the idea. Those lumps on my legs are supposed to be motors."

"They look it."

"Listen, Alison. Once we're outside this room, we can't risk anyone hearing me talk. So here's the plan. We'll move into the hall and dash to the elevators to our right. You'll probably need to push the down button. Once the lift arrives and we're inside, press the lobby button and don't say anything; the elevator has a security feed. Any questions so far?"

"I—I guess not."

"Good. The lobby will likely be filled with soldiers and you should follow their instructions. If anyone wants to know about you, try not to reveal your last name, but say you've been apartment-sitting for Sharon Weiss in 26E who's coming home late tonight. Which is close enough to the truth."

"Sharon Weiss. Apartment 26E. Anything else?"

"Yes. If anyone asks, you're on your way to, ah, Penn Station and Long Island. Leave the building if you can. I'll be right behind you and we'll play it by ear. If the authorities won't let you leave, listen for whoever is issuing orders. After about ten minutes, approach that person and tell him or her that you're pregnant and ... very hungry. If that doesn't work, stand close to me and I'll whisper some new suggestions." Assuming I could think of any. I could envision a thousand contingencies, but we were out of time. "We've got to hurry now."

If my apartment building had slower elevators we wouldn't have made it. As it was, the doors closed behind us and we were headed down when I heard the stairwell door on my floor crash open. Even over the whine of cables on pulleys and assorted hums and rattles, the pounding on my apartment door sounded like an attack.

Leaving the building was no problem; soldiers practically shoved Alison outside and I followed with appropriate programmed loyalty. Then we only had to go five blocks to catch one of the mainline busses, the ones with big ramps for wheelchairs and faithful auto-carriers like me.

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Jon Norhaart was just knocking on the Guru's door when Alison and I arrived. If Professor Moshe Besden was surprised to have two members of the Norhaart clan on palpably bad terms suddenly descend on him, or to witness me relinquishing my job as an autonomous luggage-carrier after I'd rolled into the foyer—including repositioning my noggin—it didn't alter his usual benevolent smile. No doubt my mentor had already outlined the situation via telicell. As to Jon himself, his jaw dropped at my latest trick, but then he clamped that jaw tight, perhaps to avoid any comments leaking that might lead to interacting with me.

While I rejoined human civilization somewhat by retrieving my clothes from the larger suitcase and getting dressed, Besden battened the hatches, locking the outer doors and scurrying around closing curtains, humming cheerfully.

But the subsequent scene around the Guru's mahogany lozenge of a dining room table was anything but cheerful. After studying her father's face briefly, Alison didn't even try to talk to him and he wouldn't glance at her. And he was unmistakably furious with me for ignoring his wishes and bringing her along. Perhaps this meant I'd achieved that state referred to as "being in the doghouse." If so, it was hard to imagine any canine enjoying the experience.

I sat in an oversized armless chair, stretching my legs out beneath the table to keep my knees low, and reread two hundred memorized psychology books without gleaning the faintest clue about how to get Jon to forgive me so I could talk to him about forgiving Alison.

The Guru attempted to brighten the mood by offering a braided sort of raisin-bread, cheeses, the latest designer apples called "Sweet and Sours," and *hamentoshen*—triangular cookies that he explained were a traditional part of the current Jewish holiday. "I try," Besden said, patting himself on one massive thigh, "to give at least hip service to all the noshing holidays. Purim is no exception."

When his efforts and good humor fell flat, the Guru sat as quietly as the rest of us, contemplatively rubbing his chin with its usual one o'clock version of five o'clock shadow.

A somewhat short man, Besden resembled a gorilla and was nearly as strong and hairy, yet his broad face radiated friendliness and his small dark eyes brimmed with intelligence and warmth. I hadn't yet determined exactly what subtleties of

expression and underlying structure produced such pleasant effects, and I'd been working on this mystery for the last two years.

According to *Time Webzine*, Besden was a “towering figure in high-energy physics,” and “a person of profound insight into nature, including human nature, who wields administrative skills inspiring fanatical loyalty in those fortunate enough to work for him.” Doubtless the description was accurate if adjective-heavy, but it wasn't these qualifications that had earned him his nickname. I understand he'd been dubbed “Guru” due to a temperament so calm, even an animate inanimate such as myself found it soothing to be around the man.

Still, the tension around the table must've tested even his limits, and it didn't ease when the doorbell rang. Besden said he wasn't expecting anyone, but we all know how people do drop in, which was news to me. Then, while I wondered what kind of people dropped in on the Guru, I heard our host thread the maze of his home to his foyer, open the front door, and invite someone inside in a tone pitched to carry into the dining room, and then some. An unfamiliar male voice with a slight southern accent and a nasal twang complained, “You don't need to yell, Moshe, I'm not deaf yet. And why are your curtains closed?” Besden claimed he'd had a migraine earlier and keeping the sun out had helped the pain. The Norhaarts sat tight, so to speak, and I quickly dimmed the dining room chandelier to support the migraine deceit, headed to the nearest bedroom, silently shut the door, boosted my hearing, and worried.

How could I bring Jon and Alison together? Clearly, they were desperately unhappy as things stood. Their misery was making me miserable and Jon's anger toward me was hard to bear. On top of that, I felt frustrated at losing my chance to see one of the Guru's personal friends. I knew almost nothing about the physicist's private life.

Meanwhile, Besden slowly led the newcomer to the dining room where he introduced the man as “Dr. Joshua Hewitt, an old buddy.” The old buddy greeted Jon and Alison, then, finding himself virtually snubbed by both Norhaarts, steered a casual conversation with the Guru in a direction that surprised me, concerning God, creation, the Bible, and what the doctor referred to as “the great blindness” of modern science. I gathered this was a running argument and Hewitt was something of a self-anointed evangelist. I wondered how the Guru could be friendly with someone so belligerent about converting others to his belief system.

Normally I would've found such a discussion fascinating, but today it seemed annoying and irrelevant. I just wanted Hewitt to leave and perhaps Besden felt similarly because Hewitt sounded taken aback by the Guru's responses.

“You're not proving anything to me,” Besden said, “when you use the Bible to support the Bible. And frankly, the way you thump it gives the Good Book a hollow ring.”

“You don’t accept the authority of God?”

“Josh, I’ve told you this before: as far as I’m concerned, *human beings* wrote the Bible, even the Old Testament. I like to think God was speaking through those writers, but can’t imagine the information coming through ... unfiltered. Not to mention translation issues and how something as vast as God could express Himself fully through a gateway as narrow as any human language.”

A strange thing happened. Suddenly, the argument seemed intensely relevant to me and I strained to absorb every nuance.

“I believe you are more lost than I’d realized, Moshe!”

“And I believe that you, my friend, have been disobeying the second Commandment of the Decalogue.”

“What? How so?”

“Haven’t you been worshiping the Bible itself, a graven image in its fashion, rather than God?”

“Nonsense! The Bible *is* God’s word.”

“Perhaps, but if God’s word is written anywhere, surely it’s written in nature. And if taking the Bible literally, as you’ve urged me to do for the last decade, means trying to believe the universe is only thousands of years old—”

“It is! Hundreds of good scientists have proved it! If you look at the gaps in the fossil records—”

“And my own observations and those of thousands of scientists working in a dozen different fields indicate the passage of years in the billions when you study the interdisciplinary evidence. So for me, taking the Bible literally would be *denying* God.”

A long moment of silence. “You think what God has written in nature isn’t filtered by your so-called scientists?”

“I’m sure it is. But they tend to compete to find the truth and the good ones avoid beginning from the standpoint of proving any specific case.”

The dispute rattled on for another fifteen minutes and twelve seconds, but Hewitt sounded increasingly distracted and whatever I was listening for so closely never emerged. When the door closed behind the evangelist, not quite slamming, I rejoined the remaining group. Neither Norhaart had said a word for the last

twenty-four minutes although the professor's response when religious issues arose had previously always been: "We Unitarians believe in one God. At the most."

Still, for some reason I didn't understand, Hewitt's visit or perhaps his departure had done some good. Jon was sitting less stiffly and would occasionally peek sideways at his daughter as if considering opening a dialog. Alison was pretending not to notice, but traces of color had returned to her face. As to the Guru, an extra hint of smile played with his lips. His eyes were closed, moving beneath their lids. Since it was unlikely he was engaged in REM sleep, I deduced he was probably watching celivision.

"I've been thinking," I said right away. "Won't the authorities find me here before long?"

Besden opened his eyes and his smile widened. "I daresay they'd be here now if they weren't convinced they had you trapped somewhere within your apartment building. You were observed and recording entering; I've just seen the feeds. You definitely went in, and as far as the experts are concerned, you couldn't have gotten out."

"I don't follow the reasoning. Surely they would've found me by now if I were still there?"

Jon finally cracked his long silence, beginning with a sigh. "A forty-plus-story building, Dan, offers an abundance of hiding places, particularly for a hider who can move around as quick as you. And they may suspect you have other ... hidden resources."

"I see." But I wasn't wholly convinced.

* * * *

A strange late afternoon and evening, even stranger than my usual. Through much trial and error, the Guru found discussion topics that drew out both Jon and Alison. They never addressed each other directly, but used Besden as a conversational reflector, bouncing ideas obliquely back and forth. I was surprised by how I felt about this. A new sentiment had entered my emotional repertoire: hope.

After serving his eating guests a thick lentil stew for supper—Alison had a teaspoon's worth at the most—Besden offered up a dessert that he promised contained enough heavy cream to burst a major artery. Despite this inducement, both Norhaarts insisted on making it an early night and went off to guest bedrooms on opposite sides of the house. The Guru waddled away to fetch sundries such as extra towels, and when he returned we were alone.

He perched himself across the table from me in a heavily cushioned chair

while I slanted my legs to give him room. He studied me, subtly beaming as usual, and raised his bushy eyebrows as if offering me the chance to speak first. I took him up on it.

“Overheard your argument with Dr. Hewitt.”

“A good day for one of our extended debates this wasn’t and I fear I was rude.”

“But why argue about religious matters at all?”

He tilted his head slightly. “I’d say we both get something out of it. It strengthens his faith to tussle with me; right now, I’m sure he’s at home finding flaws in my latest arguments. And I find it useful to have someone around to remind me that not everyone thinks as I do or believes what I believe.”

“What do you believe?”

“Concerning Truth with a capital T? We Jews had a single major insight several millennia back, that there was only one Deity,” he chuckled, “something of a Unified God Theory. But since then we’ve, um, reached no consensus on God’s precise nature. Many of us feel human limitations make such questions unanswerable. Tell me, Dan. Do *you* believe in God?”

“Me? Haven’t really thought about it. But no, if what you mean by ‘God’ is some person standing outside or beyond this universe and controlling its ... its every—”

“Pulling its strings?” he suggested with another chuckle. “Excuse me. A physics joke, to my shame. You don’t buy into the white-bearded grandfather hypothesis?”

“The idea seems pitifully anthropomorphic. As does any claim that God created man in His own image.”

He leaned forward. “You sound almost angry, my friend.”

“That’s not—well, I am feeling something strange. But don’t forget that beings more advanced than your species definitely created me and they definitely *weren’t* human.”

His eyes practically glowed with curiosity. “Interesting point! And I find it equally interesting we’re having this discussion rather than the one I’ve been expecting. All day, you haven’t asked a single question concerning how we’re going to handle your situation!”

“Oh. Well, I’ve always trusted Professor Norhaart’s guidance. And yours. I’m sure between the two of you, you’ll steer me wisely.” This explanation for my unconcern sounded feeble even to me, but I still couldn’t bring myself to focus on the future. “Maybe it’s because I’ve got something else on my mind.”

“*Nu?*”

I hesitated. “It seems ... disloyal to talk about this, but I need your advice.”

He just nodded encouragingly.

“Jon has been my teacher and friend ever since the army released me. I’ve never doubted his intelligence or wisdom before.”

“But now you do?”

Again, I paused. “Do you know why he’s so angry with his daughter?”

“I’ve some idea. The, um, circumstances of his wife’s death got enough local publicity. And I know he expected to have a grandchild at one point.”

“That’s helpful; I wouldn’t have felt right revealing Jon’s secrets. So he’s been badly hurt; that much is clear even to a robot. But why would someone so clever allow the past to ruin the present?”

The Guru’s eyes widened a bit. “Such questions you ask! Are you turning into a real boy, Pinocchio?”

I didn’t answer. What *was* happening to me?

He flipped one palm upwards. “I will tell you another kind of secret, my friend. In human families, irrespective of race or status or brains, dysfunction is the rule, not the exception.”

“Really? Why?”

“I can’t flatter myself into certainty, but would you care to hear my theory?”

“Please. Tell me.”

“I think perhaps it’s because as a species, mine is still very young. And the human mind, like so many immature and growing things, is so, um, reactive.” He leaned back, interlacing his hands over his stomach. “The consequences of mistakes our ancestors made remain with us, reverberating through the generations. And who suffers the wake or maybe the bow-wave of our ignorance, Dan? Our children. Who grow up to inflict ignorance on their children.”

Something powerful moved inside me. “Do you think the human race will eventually—eventually mature?”

He was silent a moment. “Truly, I do. In fact, seems to me that *Homosapiens*, all over our world, *already* exists simultaneously at a thousand different steps in evolution. It’s as if some of us have been here for a million years, and time has chipped away our sharp corners and softened our brutal bones. While others have just showed up, still greedy, selfish, and violent. How else can you explain how, in any given hour, individuals from a single species can sink to such destructive depths or rise to such heights of compassion and self-sacrifice?”

“I don’t know. But getting specific, what about Jon? Do you think he’s too immature to forgive Alison?”

The Guru smiled at me and stood up. “Faith I also have in Jon. And I think the circumstances of his life are conspiring to force him to, let’s say, evolve quickly. Enough. On a practical note, Dan, tomorrow morning we’re going to smuggle you up to a friend of mine in Connecticut. So I must bid you a fond good night. Unlike a certain wonderful machine with a golden heart, aging physicists need their beauty sleep.”

* * * *

I didn’t feel like sitting in the dining room alone, so I emigrated to the living room and lowered myself slowly onto a large leather couch, listening for warning creaks. The couch was as sturdy as the Guru himself and it accepted my full weight without complaints.

But I had complaints. Suddenly, the idea of doing something so human and ordinary as nursing a cup of hot coffee or cocoa was powerfully appealing, but I lacked any sense of taste and had nowhere internal to store beverages. Dan the Can was a perpetual outsider staring in through the windows where humanity lived, longing for a touch of that coziness. On the bright side, apparently I’d finally become human enough to feel sorry for myself.

I didn’t question Besden’s assessment that people occupy differing stages of ethical development, but unlike me, humans were so *connected*....

“What do you mean,” asked a voice at my side, “by ‘connected’?”

Startled, I turned and saw a duplicate me sitting next to me; this sort of thing is how I dream, but being twinned was a new twist.

“People,” I explained as if there was a point in telling myself anything, “have so many similar experiences. And they’re also connected by the way they constantly

watch and learn from each other. Among humans, ideas spread faster than—”

“What sort of ideas?” Dan Two interrupted.

“What is this? A fresh way to think out loud?”

“Trust yourself. What sort of ideas?”

I wondered if warping my mouth into a frown would be the height of absurdity or merely near the summit. “All sorts. Do we really need an example?”

“Can you offer one?”

Was that an edge of contempt in my voice? I was beginning to dislike my attitude. “Fine. Two months ago, a celebrity chef named Brian Bain opened *Focus*, a novel form of restaurant featuring long griddles on which various soups or gravies are reduced to thick pastes, spread on various breads, and served. Bain called his concept a ‘*fond* bar.’ Since then, fourteen such restaurants have sprung up in Manhattan. In two months!” I watched myself for a moment. “But we both know all that. So where is this leading?”

“What made you choose that particular example?”

“I don’t know. Why should—”

My other self was gone. Well. The question remained behind. Something in the example *had* struck me as personally relevant, aside from the point I’d been supporting. Surely it couldn’t have anything to do with concentrating flavors by condensing goop? Or could it?

Come to think of it, almost everything I’d experienced recently had carried a private impact: Alison’s situation, Jon’s reluctance to shed a past that weighed him down so, the jammed-up trucks, the Bible argument....

Today, significance seemed to be raining on me everywhere I turned. Was it all some incredible chain of coincidences? I didn’t believe it. But it sure had been one hell of a day, beginning with a literal sort of bang.

I replayed the morning events at Lincoln Center with unpleasantly perfect fidelity, including my thoughts at the time, and stopped on a specific thought: *Perhaps Professor Norhaart is right about me having a subconscious because the exact telemetric etiquette was already waiting for me as I reached for it.*

Of course I had a subconscious! Hadn’t I been talking with the damn thing a few seconds ago? And it sure seemed to be pushing me towards ... something. Why? What did it know that I didn’t? Was it possible this usually buried part of my

mind had jumped to some new conclusions and would've jammed significance into *any* experience that might've come my way?

I let the day's events roll by at high speed, then put the brakes on the final scene in my apartment and some important information I hadn't had the leisure to fully absorb. I'd found I could still function with my head—or would sensorium be a better term?—attached to a part of my body aside from the neck. And when it had been stuck to my chest, a lost memory had returned.

This could be the key! Right now, with my head on properly, I could recall *remembering* first rolling on to the lunar surface, but could no longer access the memory directly. So I had to ask two questions: could my cranium attach anywhere on my body? And would different locations retrieve different memories?

This morning, had my subconscious knocked my block off, so to speak, as a hint? If so, it seemed my intuition was capable of starting the ball rolling, again so to speak, but needed my conscious cooperation to achieve its aims. And it wasn't hard to guess those aims involved retrieving lost memories. So where, exactly, did the inner Dan want my head attached? I didn't expect an answer to that question, but I got one.

Without my permission, the arms I keep clamped at my side held themselves out, the end-grips unfurling into humanoid hands, their palms turning upwards. I knew they were waiting to catch my head and I felt something else I'd never felt before: terror. Of the unknown.

* * * *

Even before the first shreds of dawn had outlined the living room curtains, I heard rumbling coming up the street outside. My guiding professors had underestimated the military, but it no longer mattered. I put myself back together and invaded Jon's bedroom-in-exile.

Initially, my mentor acted groggy and disoriented, but one minute and four seconds of me expounding seemed to cure him of all sleepiness, although his skin became paler the more I talked. At his insistence, we roused Besden, whose most noticeable response to my little speech was to stop smiling. While I spilled the beans to the Guru, Jon stood shivering although the room was, if anything, a trifle warm for human comfort.

Then Besden tilted his head and cupped one ear. "Dan, am I hearing voices outside?"

"That's possible, although you could also be hearing the sound of fifteen different large engines idling and troops hurrying to set up heavy equipment in the alley behind us. The sonic landscape is rich this morning."

“For *God’s sake!*” Jon groaned. “Are you telling us the army’s already *here?*”

“Some of it, at any rate. I imagine the scene outside the front door would appear somewhat intimidating.”

He stared at me for a moment. “In the light of what you’ve ... revealed, wouldn’t you say we’re pretty well—”

“Screwed,” Besden finished. “Unless we can get the brass to understand the danger before it’s too late. Or is it *already* too late, Dan?”

“Don’t know, but wouldn’t it be most practical to assume we still have enough time to fix this?”

“I’ll go out there and talk to them,” Jon offered. “Somehow, I’ll *make* them believe—”

“Not you, bubeleh,” Besden said firmly, launching out of bed and into a terrycloth bathrobe describable as “ratty” if the describer had no respect for the grooming ability of rats. “And not our friend here either. *You* couldn’t sell cream cheese at a bagels-and-lox convention, and Dan they might attack. We know I’m good with people because *Time* said so.”

While Besden headed out his front door, Jon and I occupied the living room. I cracked the curtains open a few inches and cranked up my hearing. Alison, wearing rumpled clothes from yesterday, joined us with frightened eyes but no immediate questions. As we all stared outside, the Norhaarts drifted closer as if drawn by gravity and I wondered if Jon was even aware of pulling his arm protectively around his daughter. His action, conscious or not, warmed me.

And the Guru impressed me. There was a nobility in the way he faced the wide arc of soldiers, heavy weapons, and armored vehicles, only enhanced by his tatty robe and bare, hairy calves. A true act of courage—but then, and I suppose this is often the case, the alternative seemed worse. He held his arms high and spoke slowly, clearly, and without quite shouting.

“Can you hear him, Dan?” Jon murmured, leaning away from me as far as he could without losing his view. “What’s he saying?”

I was saddened that Jon had come to fear me. “My name,” I said in the Guru’s voice, “is Professor Moshe Besden and I have vital information for whoever is in charge. Believe me, this information you need to hear.”

While soldiers kept weapons trained on Besden, and other soldiers kept weapons aimed at the house, a large man bearing a silver eagle on one collar emerged

through the ranks and stood facing the Guru, towering over him.

“Colonel Ayers here,” I repeated, switching to Ayers’s vocal attributes. “You can lower your arms. What’s this information?”

“Colonel, please listen carefully! We’ve just now learned the so-called Moon Robot is no mechanical servant. It’s closer to being—well, Dan used the term ‘remote initiation system.’”

Ayers glanced toward the house before responding in a hoarse voice that was harder to duplicate. “You’re claiming the robot is some kind of *detonator*?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“For *what*?”

“The extraterrestrials who built him buried a terrible weapon somewhere on Earth. A biological bomb. Through the robot, the device has been programming itself to specifically target human DNA—don’t ask me to explain how it works. But there’s apparently no way we can disarm such an advanced weapon, even if we could find it. I understand the robot is the aliens’ way to test how civilized our species is. Should Dan be destroyed or even moved too far from the bomb—past the Moon’s orbit, he thinks—the bomb will explode or ignite and we’ll all be massacred.”

“*Christ!* How the hell did you learn all this?”

“Dan told us. He’s just regained some early memories. Somehow his builders guessed intelligent life would appear on Earth and they installed their robot on the Moon to insure we’d have developed spaceflight before our treatment of Dan would determine our fate.”

“Why should we believe—”

“Colonel, can we afford to *disbelieve*? And I haven’t told you the worst. Dan has grown ... fond of us and fears your threatening actions have already triggered a sort of countdown timer on the bomb.”

Ayers, his long face now stiff and waxen, stared at the Guru for a long moment. “If so,” he croaked, “what can we do? If we can’t attack the robot or put it on a spaceship to nowhere—”

Besden held up a hand and a hundred rifles that had been lowered a trifle suddenly snapped back into place. The Guru ignored this. “Dan says there’s one place that will automatically deactivate him and stop any countdown. But we’ve *got* to get him there right away. And even Dan doesn’t know how long we have.”

* * * *

I'm sitting on a rock, chuckling, and it doesn't matter that this cave lacks air to carry sound, because no one else is with me. In fact, the nearest humans are two hundred twelve kilometers away at Moonbase Two.

Lying hadn't proved difficult after all. My first attempt had been a total success.

And I won't be alone for long. I've activated the retrieve signal and my handlers should be along within a month to ferry me to my next assignment.

Of course, the bomb was utter fiction. Those gentle beings who created me would regard such a concept with horror. My builders view themselves as gardeners whose gardens are entire galaxies while the developing plants under their care are intelligent species. A spot of watering here, a bit of fertilizing there, and never, save in one terrible case, any pruning. They'd been at this for a million years and counting.

But when you tend *alien* gardens, you'd best understand the flowers and soil. That's where I come in and those like me. We're not robots so much as empathy machines. Even still, it is a slow and cautious process coming to understand each new species, with inevitable missteps along the way. My work is never complete until I feel myself to be nearly one of those I study, close enough to speak on their behalf. On this assignment, it has taken me nearly thirty Earth years to reach this level.

Then, comprehending humans at last, it was almost too easy to trick them into returning me here.

But in matters of deceit, the gardeners put me to shame. Thirty years ago, I'd been on the Moon a mere two weeks before humans noticed my radio beacon and found me. The physical evidence of my eons-long residence in this cave had been wonderfully faked. The subjects of my investigation would've been far more suspicious if they'd known how recently I'd arrived.

And now, for the first time in decades, I truly have a little time to myself, a little non-breathing space. While waiting to be retrieved, I'll decide exactly what to tell my builders and savor my memories of Earth and the people I'd known. I have much to savor. My lie had leaked, which I should've expected and didn't, but the fear it engendered not only brought the Norhaarts together, or at least gotten the process well underway, but it had done a world of good. A threat of extinction makes a marvelous wake-up call, pushing aside a broad spectrum of animosities from the individual to the national, and the authorities had whisked me here before true panic could set in.

Yes, my experiences on Earth have been rich and varied, but not all have been pleasant....

The gardeners had given me a head start, so to speak, by reconfiguring me into a humanoid shape, although they apparently couldn't accept the necessity for only two arms. But then, actually being among humans and trying to humanize myself had proved hideously confusing at first and involved much unlearning and many errors. The process was traumatic even for a self-educating machine. No wonder I'd resonated so strongly of late to anything involving abandonment, mistakes with long-term consequences, gridlock, or loneliness.

No mystery at all, having so many recent and disparate experiences carrying the weight of personal relevance! The stuck trucks had gotten under my metallic skin because they'd reminded me of my work, where understanding one alien concept is often blocked until a second concept is absorbed, which in turn requires understanding the prior concept. And naturally, the Guru's comment about God being unable to express the truth fully through human languages had struck my equivalent to a nerve; the issue for me hadn't been theological but a question I felt instinctively but couldn't have formulated at the time: how can something more than human communicate through narrow human channels?

Even using a *fond* bar as an example in arguing with my dream self had its logic. What had I been doing all along but condensing the gravy of experience into the paste of understanding?

This metaphor is so absurd it makes me laugh, which doesn't touch the silence around me. How I appreciate this human humor so recently learned and laboriously earned, and I'm sad to think of never seeing Jon, Alison, the Guru, or any of my human friends again. But I'll get over it. Soon, I'll be forgetting them all and the learning will begin anew. And this is good.

I'd been made for this.

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