

DAWN, AND SUNSET, AND THE COLOURS OF THE EARTH

by Michael F. Flynn

A native and resident of Easton, Pennsylvania, and the grandfather of “three incredibly cute and talented children,” Michael Flynn makes his living as a management consultant in statistical methods and quality management. He is the author of the Firestar series and, most recently, the critically well-received novel, *The Wreck of the River of Stars*. His short fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, and elsewhere. Mike has been a Hugo nominee four times and won the Sturgeon prize for his *Asimov's* story, “House of Dreams” (October/November 1997). His next novel, *Eifelheim*, will be released from Tor in October. In his first story for us in nine years, Mike masterfully explores the after effects of a disaster that seems to swallow up the...

At six-thirty of an early fall morning, when the sun was just lighting the evergreens and new snow glistened atop Ranier, Motor Vessel *Hyak* left Pier 52 in Seattle, bound for Bremerton. A Washington State Ferry of the Super Class, longer than a football field, she grossed 2700 tons dead weight and drew eighteen and a half feet. She cast off with nearly a thousand souls aboard and motored into a fog in the center of Elliott Bay.

None of them were ever seen again.

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Chino Mendez

People say at first what business has a poor fisherman to speak of Jesus? I have no education, no clever words. I have nothing but the high school and many years of chasing the tuna. But then I thought: what better thing for a preacher than to start as a fisherman? There is precedent, no?

I will give my witness as I saw it, so you may believe with me.

Understand that I was a sinner before. This is important. I drank and I gambled and I had women. Oh, yes. Perhaps you do not think so to look at me, but women find me attractive. I have cut men in fights. Perhaps I killed a man in Miami, but this I do not know for sure.

I tell you this because you must understand what I was, so that you may understand what I am, and so understand what I say. If one as lost as me can be found, there is hope for all.

I was christened Ipolito, but my friends have always called me Chino, because of my eyes. Oh, yes, there were many Chinese brought to Cooba years ago and their blood runs in me. I have been a fisherman all my life, even before I fled Cooba. I fished the Gulf, and then the Keys, and then I came here to these strange, cold waters. *Capitan* Norris give me a place on his *Esmeralda* and he teach me the waters of the Sound and there were many very hard years, but never did I complain. Well, perhaps a little.

That morning we cast off and took our bearing on Duwamish Head. The dawn was behind us and the air shimmer like the rainbow. The horizon glowed red; the sky above me, blue; and all the colors ranged between. Oh, the salt tang of the sea! Oh, the cries of the gulls! They swoop in a great circle around the bay. Around and around. I look back now and I see how clear were all my senses that day.

We hear the horn of the ferry as she left the pier and for a time our paths run side by side, the great ferry and the humble fishing boat, but the *capitan* saw a fog is risen in the bay, so he turn the wheel a little to avoid it. The ferry, yes, had the radar and the global positioning, and so she sailed into the fog, her horn

booming. I hear the churn of her engines as she pass us, and I see the people who lined the railing. Some were reading of the newspapers. Some were watching the scenery. Some were talking to each other. There was one—a young girl near the quarter rail—who saw me watching. She was, I think, twelve. She smile and wave to me and I wave back and the *capitan* saw, and our boat's whistle shrieked and the little girl, she clapped in delight.

But the *capitan* was fight the wheel. There was a strong current where there been no current before. I had the mad fancy that our boat sat ... somehow ... on the lip of a waterfall. We struggled like salmon against it as it pull us into the fog, toward the ferry.

A collision with such a ship would destroy us, so Ngyuen and me—he is the other deckhand—we throw the bumpers over the side and stand by with the fending poles. When I look up again at the deck of the ferry, I see the little girl bathed in a golden-red light, such as one sees at dawn. The light came from out of the fog, you understand, and what sun has ever dawned in the west? It seem like all the ferry was aglow and I hear a great shout from on board. The foghorn was take on a sound like a train racing away. The little girl turn and face into the fog and her mouth drop open. Oh, it was a look of such delight! And she raise her hands to her face, and then the fog shrouded her, too, and everything—boat, foghorn, girl—vanished into silence.

I did not understand then what I had seen, but I have thought over it much since. The strange fog. The strange current. The great light and the shout. Even the birds that wheeled over the spot. How could such a large vessel vanish so completely and so quickly? I found the answer in the smile of a little child.

God had taken them all to Him, as a sign to the rest of us. That is why you will never find them or find the boat. That is why the girl smiled. All I was granted was the rainbow sign, but she had seen the pure light of heaven.

I have heard others say I must be wrong because there was nothing especially holy about the people on that ferry that day. Only a thousand ordinary people.

But don't you see?

That is the Good News.

* * * *

Able Seaman Jimmy Lang

The helicopter is already warming up when Jimmy and the crew scramble out to the pad. He doesn't know what the alert is all about, only that something happened to the Bremerton ferry. Liz Coburn doesn't know either. "But it's not good news," she says. They check the rescue equipment on board.

It's hard to talk over the steady whop-whop of the blades, which is just as well, because Jimmy doesn't have much to say. He can never find the words when he needs them. He'll rehearse them in his head, and run through them over and over until he is sure they are the right words; but by the time they're ready to come out, the moment for them has passed.

Three frogs trot across the pad, already in their wet suits but carrying their flippers in their hands. Jimmy and Liz help them into the helicopter and Jimmy gives the high sign to the pilot.

He slides the cabin door shut and the chopper tilts and rises. The frogs are checking the air tanks and Jimmy tells them he already done that, but they just look at him and continue checking. Jimmy turns to the window and watches the water race past below them. A container ship is working its way into the harbor and Jimmy cranes his neck to watch it. What he wants to do is ask Liz if she'd go to a movie with him

tonight, but what he says is, "Look how big that thing is."

"If that ferry's going down...." Liz tells him. "Oh, God, *Hyak* can carry two thousand."

One of the frogs tells them that ATN *Puget Sound* is putting out with the barge and they'll try to get people up on that. "That's a good idea," Jimmy says, like they asked for his approval.

The chopper cants suddenly and changes direction and everyone in the cargo bay dances to keep their balance. Liz falls against Jimmy and Jimmy puts his arm around her waist to steady her. They are friends, him and Liz. "My good bud," Liz calls him. He thinks she might mean more than that, but he has never gotten up the nerve to ask.

The morning fog has mostly burned off by now. Only a large puff remains, floating in the waters like an iceberg. It is shot through with reflected colors—green from the waters, blue from the sky, brown from the earth, white from the clouds, tawny red from the dawn. Jimmy thinks the water looks funny, too. The waves are all a-jumble, some lapping toward the fog instead of toward the shore. "Looks purty," he tells Liz.

But Liz just shakes her head. "Where's the ferry? Ain't no sign of 'er."

Liz is, in Jimmy's estimation, the most perfect woman on Earth, after his maw. She's smart, but she doesn't laugh at him like other women and treats him nice, though not half so nice as he would like her to. He has not yet kissed her, although he imagines what that must be like.

"Can a boat sink that fast?" Jimmy asks; but Liz just shakes her head, and it worries him that a smart gal like her doesn't know.

The chopper swoops suddenly toward the fog and Jimmy hears the pilot say bad words.

"Wind shear," the co-pilot calls out, explaining the swerve. The frogs ask if there's a fix on the ferry, but the co-pilot shakes his head. "Something's wrong. VTS got three radar fixes, but they're three different positions, and too far away." With the wind the way it is, he'll drop them as close as he can to the last visual position.

Jimmy calls out "Aye" to show that he heard and he and Liz ready the hoist. They clip a sling to the end of the cable to lift people out of the water and onto the ATN's barge. They pile flotation devices by the sliding door. The frogs pull on their flippers and test their air.

"Ready back here," the chief tells the pilot.

The chopper hovers and Jimmy heaves the door open. This is the part he likes best: standing in the open doorway above the waves, with the wind buffeting his face, with the tang of salt on his lips. The buzz of the rotors fills the cabin and the spray splashes onto the deck. A brisk breeze streams toward the fog, and Jimmy fancies the fog is somehow sucking air into it.

Liz waves to the frogs and they step forward and drop the few feet into the bay, one-two-three. She looks out the door. "Ain't nobody in the water," she says.

"The frogs are there," Jimmy points out what he thinks an obvious oversight on her part.

"But who they gonna rescue?" Liz is angry, and Jimmy thinks it is at him for correcting her.

The helicopter rises, banks, and, caught in another sudden wind shear, tilts to one side. The pilot cries out. Jimmy can hear the fear even over the noise of the rotors. Liz slips on a puddle and slides down the

canted deck and out the open door. Jimmy, who has been holding on to the hoist cable, reaches toward her as she slides past, but their fingers only touch before she is gone, and the last thing Jimmy sees is her scowl of annoyance.

He does not stop to think. "Man overboard!" he cries. The pilot brings the chopper around, and Jimmy readies the sling. Liz is a good swimmer, so he is not worried. He thinks they will laugh about it later, when the rescue is over.

He sees her swimming hard against a strong current. The pilot is fighting the turbulent winds and cannot get close enough for the hoist, so Jimmy unclips the flotation ring and throws it to her so that she does not wear herself out swimming.

He is a good thrower. He always wins when Group Seattle holds its Rescue Olympics. He puts the ring right beside her so that with two good strokes she grabs hold of it. She waves to him and Jimmy grins with pride as he waves back. He already thinks of the kind words she will say to him after she is pulled aboard. Maybe she will kiss him. Maybe ... He blushes at the anticipation of memories.

Once she has grasped the ring, the strange riptide takes Liz into the rapidly diminishing fog. There is not much left of the mist now: a few corkscrew streamers. Seen through the haze, the water looks different, darker and redder. Jimmy searches for Liz through the mist but does not spot her.

Even when at last the fog is entirely gone, there is no sign of her.

The chopper circles and circles and when finally it must return to base, Jimmy is crying like a baby.

Only one of the frogs comes back with them, and he does not say much of anything.

* * * *

Mitch Raftery

So.

If you're married to a bitch, a dockside bar can be a haven. When you order a bourbon and water, you call it "comfort food," which earns a short grin from the bartender. He asks no questions. He doesn't care *why* you drink.

"Get a job, get a job," you tell your bourbon. "And what's it matter if it's all the way to hell and Bremerton to get it." This is more than the bartender really wants to know, but he ventures that a good job is a good thing to have.

"Never said it was a 'good' job," you correct him. "Look at me. I got a degree, an MBA. So I should clerk at some two-bit operation?" You don't tell him about the truly skilled accounting work you've done, the kind that got you fired from your last job, or about your ever-loving's mountain of debt that drove you to it. He's got no Need To Know.

Better than nothing, the bartender suggests. I'm a BS in chemistry.

You hold up your now-empty glass. "Then how about some 'better living through chemistry'?"

Now you're talking his language. So, you drink a while and chat in a desultory manner. The bartender comments on the thick fog that has shrouded the harbor. You don't think fog at dawn on Elliott Bay is anything remarkable, but you remark anyway. Yes, that is the thickest and most unusual cloud of vapors ever known to mankind—excluding the cloud of vapors you gave your bitch-wife after the boss caught you with your hand in the till, although you don't share that particular tidbit, either. Sure, the firm didn't file

charges, but only because the partners didn't want to invite an audit. So who's the bigger crook?
"Everybody does it," you mutter.

Your wife would never have understood anyway. She would never have accepted the blame. Ask the boss for a raise. Tell the boss you need a raise. As if the boss *cared* what anyone needed. Was there a credit card anywhere on the face of the planet that was not maxed out? Was there an ATM anywhere in Seattle that did not hemorrhage cash as through a suppurating wound?

"Never marry a rich girl," you tell the bartender, and he tells you there's no danger of that, just as if you cared what *she* porked. Don't marry a pretty one, either, he adds, or other guys will always be sniffing around.

Yeah, and a rich pretty girl is the worst of both worlds. Too used to spendthrift wealth; too used to flattering beaus. What matter if *you* have to work late because you need the OT because her skinflint parents didn't approve of Little Precious marrying "down" and won't shell out dime one to help? No reason why that should hamper the good times or the club-hopping. No reason why *she* can't always have the best.

And her old man, he has to blah-blah-blah how *he* started with nothing, too, and how he *envies* you the same challenge. And what a sanctimonious, bullshit, self-righteous excuse for selfishness that is. Okay, maybe the old fart really had started poor, but then he hadn't married the National Debt, either. No, he had to beget that one, spoil it rotten, and pass it on to you.

"I'd've paid it back," you tell the empty glass in front of you. The way the markets were growing, the money should have multiplied like loaves and fishes long before the comptroller noticed the transaction. And it had. So you waited. Just a little bit more, just a little bit more, and the stock value went up and up and up until there was nothing left, and how could that much money evaporate like the morning fog?

Except this morning's fog is not evaporating. A deep, extended blast pierces the dawn and you start on your barstool because you know it's the ferry casting loose and you are supposed to be on that ferry heading for a job interview in God-forsake-us Bremerton. Oh, Honey-bun will ream you fair if you screw this one up.

You slap a president down on the bar top without even looking to see who it is and stagger out onto the sidewalk. Alaskan Way is nearly empty, as if everyone has stood aside to make room for your hopeless sprint to the pier.

By the time you reach Pier 52, winded and disheveled, the ferry is gone. You curse and shake a fist. Why is it that you *never* have any luck?

A score of people mill about dockside now, sharing their mutual ignorance of events. You hear something about the ferry vanishing and you turn and gawp at him. "You mean it sank?" He nods. Hundreds dead for sure; maybe more than a thousand. The crowd is buzzing now, approaching that critical mass where uninformed speculation implodes into a hard knot of impermeable belief. Stunned sorrow clashes with ghoulish wonder. The networks are coming! Oh, the networks are coming!

You shade your eyes against the dazzle of the waves and you see nothing. No boats. No one in the water. A lone frogman being hoisted into the 'copter. Words tumble from the lips around you: Tragedy. Catastrophe. Terrorists. Aliens. Sea Monster. But the one word that occurs to you, you do not voice, and that is Opportunity. And your rage evaporates with the last of the fog.

Poor Mitch Raftery! He has drowned with all the others. Your wife will think so; her parents will; your employers past and prospective will. Why, you have become as one already dead. You can hear the

drumming of the dirt on your coffin lid, the lying words of sorrow spoken over you by people who never gave a shit when you were alive. But your death is your salvation, for you can rise again—and not wait any three damn days to do it. You can be born again through the waters of this most peculiar baptism, cleansed of all past sins. You can start fresh, with a new name, a clean slate, hobbled no longer by a spendthrift wife, or skinflint in-laws, or hypocritical bosses. Without those shackles, how high might you soar?

It is a shining vision, and you stand there dockside stunned by the beauty of it. “By God,” you mutter, “I’ll have the life I deserve.”

So.

You slip anonymously from the docks, plans already whirling through your mind. There are ways to acquire driver’s licenses and ID cards. You know a few people. You can make a new start in a new city; you can live a new life.

You can become a new Mitch Raftery.

* * * *

Dolly Mannerheim

If beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, so at times does mere existence. Howard Mannerheim was a man so ordinary that he vanished into the wallpaper of the world long before he vanished from it.

Dolly Mannerheim, his wife, was a tall woman who managed somehow to appear stocky. It was something in her posture. She was embarrassed to be seen in public with her husband, who was shorter by a head, and so in consequence they did not go out much. Howard never noticed, which was part of the problem.

Her parents had named her “Medallion” for no better reason than a couple of tokens from an especially potent stash the night following the delivery. Dolly-the-child had thought her name Seriously Cool, but she was past forty now and it seemed now less cool than affected. “Dolly” was not much better—resonance of child, resonance of plaything—but she did not know what else she might call herself.

She saw Howard off that morning as she usually did. He was a consulting engineer working at a construction site outside Bremerton. Dolly thought it was an office complex or perhaps a dam—something which at any rate required a lot of wire and concrete and steel. It was also, *mirabile dictu*, a local assignment—which meant that Howard could actually come home each day, a circumstance not without its complications.

It was his habit to catch the six-thirty ferry, so Dolly would get up with sandpaper eyes and ensure a breakfast and a cab to take him down Queen Anne Hill to the ferry dock. “You take such good care of me,” he told her, sitting down to a bowl of soggy flakes drowned in milk. Perhaps he meant it—he was not a demanding man—but he always said the same thing, so perhaps he didn’t mean much. Howard was a creature of habits and she had learned (or had convinced herself) over the years that there was behind that compendium of tics and routines no genuine person. Were it not for clichés, he would sit dumb.

At the door, the cab already waiting, Dolly offered him her cheek and he gave it the usual perfunctory benediction before walking down the steps, where the cabbie, had he been listening, might have heard him mutter something about “dry sticks.”

Afterward, she just had time to shower and don a blouse and a pair of plain brown slacks before Rick

scampered across from next door. He always leapt the fence that separated their two back yards. He never came around to the front door. In part, this was respect for the proprieties (which made it a hypocritical act). In the other part, it was a display of prowess. (Which made it a cocksure act. It was a picket fence he vaulted.)

Dolly let him into the kitchen and he followed her to the bedroom, where they had sex. Some days they might have a drink or two first. In the beginning, she had always taken a few drinks, even before the discreet knock at the kitchen door.

When Rick was engrossed *in medias res*, she whispered urgently, “Howard's at the door! He must have missed the ferry!” And she laughed when he, for a moment, stiffened in alarm.

“I wish you wouldn't do that!” he said (for this was not the first time she had whispered wolf in his ear). But in fact, the possibility that Howard *would* miss his boat and *would* walk in upon her was the only excitement left to Dolly in the affair, which had progressed by stages from the unthinkable to the routine. While Howard's assignments had been out of town, she and Rick had enjoyed intimate clubs and fine meals and nights spent on satin in upscale hotels. There had been an electricity to it then. Confined now to the occasional morning or afternoon liaison, the flames had faded to coals, and coals to ashes.

Rick had no idea of this. He thought he mattered. But it had been the dancing and the dining and the shows, not Rick's qualities as a lover, that had led Dolly to him. He was no Adonis. As the world measured these things, Howard actually had the edge. Nor was he especially attentive or romantic. What he was, was convenient.

There were days when she *wanted* to summon Howard on his cell phone and bring him back on some pretext. She wanted something to happen. Anything. Even confrontation. If she could not have the heat of passion, she would have the heat of anger. Lacking either, she had gone cold. And yet, though she thought of it often, she could never quite bring herself to do it.

Later, in the front room, she served coffee, and that peculiar silence descended in which by unspoken consent she and Rick would not talk about what they did. Rick, standing by the front window, pulled the curtain a little to the side and remarked how empty the streets seemed with everyone off to work or school—as if some pestilence had caused humanity to disappear.

Dolly was sitting in her television chair. “I wish *Howard* would disappear,” she responded with sudden, quiet, and terrible sincerity.

Rick thought she meant so that they could drop the secrecy and be together openly, and he preened just a bit, for he desired above all else to be desired. But Dolly had not been thinking of him. In a way, she hadn't even been thinking of Howard; but afterward she could never quite convince herself that it was mere coincidence.

Rick started at the door chimes and Dolly, with malice aforethought, strode to the door as if to throw it open with him in plain sight; but she paused with her hand on the knob until she heard the kitchen door click closed. She smiled a little at that, at what it said about Rick, at what it said about her. Then the bell rang again, and this time she did open the door.

It was Lillian Gelberson from down the corner. Lillian was a young woman who wore glasses only for effect and operated a blog out of her home. Dolly (who had no idea what a web log was) had privately named her Miss Perky, by which she did not intend a compliment. Lillian had the irritating habit of beginning conversations in the middle. “Oh, Dolly! I'm so sorry,” she announced in a voice apparently intended to be sympathetic, but which sounded instead only cryptic.

"About what?" Dolly said, wondering if Lillian had seen or heard Rick's departure. Perhaps the woman was sorry that Dolly needed a lover, or that the lover was Rick, or that she herself had no hope of getting one of her own. Dolly was glad something had come along to shoo Rick away, but she was not especially glad that it had been Lillian.

"About what? Ohmigod! You mean you haven't heard? Ohmigod! The *Hyak*! It's gone! And then I thought, ohmigod, isn't that the ferry that your husband takes?"

"What do you mean *gone*?" Dolly asked in irritation. "Of course it's gone. It leaves at six-thirty."

"No, no. I mean *vanished. Disappeared*. Ohmigod, helicopters have been crisscrossing the bay and there's not a trace." She knew this because she had been following the breaking news on the web, uploading links to her blog, trading overwrought IMs. (Nothing is quite so invigorating to a certain turn of mind than the safe proximity of disaster.) Her window opened on a view of the bay, but it had not occurred to her to look out of it. The Web was All.

Dolly failed at first to understand. The words came at her too fast and all a-jumble. "Do you mean the ferry *sank*? How can that happen?" Ferries sank in the Philippines, ferries sank in Bangladesh. They did not sink in Elliott Bay.

"We don't know yet," Lillian told her. "The fog was in, and people down the harbor say the *Hyak* never came out the other side." Lillian continued to chatter hyperkinetic sympathy, but Dolly stopped listening after that.

"Disappeared...." she whispered. Perhaps Howard would not be coming home, after all. Rick would like that. Or would he?

She was sitting on the sofa with no recollection of having gotten there. Lillian was beside her, holding her hands. Go away, she thought at the woman. Go away. But the words never reached her lips. She didn't want company. She didn't want to be alone. "Two thousand, did you say?"

Lillian may have speculated on how full the vessel had been, but all she said to Dolly was, "It's Howard that matters now," which was not strictly factual, but which might have been paradoxically true. Howard *mattered* because he was no longer *matter*.

"Dolly, is there anything I can do?"

Images of Lillian Gelberson in scuba gear searching amidst the sunken hulk of M.V. *Hyak*, hoisting wreckage from the water, performing mouth to mouth resuscitation. *Do what*, Dolly wondered. "Be careful what you wish for," she murmured, but Lillian did not quite hear.

As the weeks followed and the media ran through their paradigm, her remorse grew ever more intolerable. Each time they showed one of the awkward snapshots on the evening news, she cringed. At meetings of "The Families of the Victims." (And of course there were such meetings. A regiment of grief counselors flew into Seattle to prolong the agony.) Dolly would avoid the other spouses and families and significant others, would not even meet their eyes. Everyone took this as profound grief. No one recognized it as guilt.

Perhaps a thousand wives had wished their husbands gone that morning. It was not beyond belief. But Dolly did not believe it. As nearly as she could estimate, the *Hyak* had vanished at the very moment when she had wished Howard gone. But the elves that grant the wishes oft have cruel streaks in them. She had never intended that a thousand others vanish with him. The weight of a thousand was as the weight of a single one. There was something about that in the Bible. Or in the Koran. Or in a fortune

cookie she had once read.

The media christened it *The Disappearance*. They early on capitalized the whole business and assigned the roles that everyone was to play. No one ever found any bodies. No flotsam ever graced the shores of Elliott Bay. Consequently, Dolly and the others like her were presented as grieving-but-ever-hopeful that their loved ones would somehow, someday come back. (Although from where, no one seemed quite sure.) And so, she must play Penelope to Howard's Odysseus.

For a time, Rick concurred. In the spotlight of publicity, his stealthy visits might seem unseemly; and so he abstained for a time out of respect for the dead and also out of a little self-interest. But he never did understand why, after the commotion had died and the cameras sought elsewhere for sensation, Dolly did not re-open that kitchen door. He's gone, he told her again and again. He's never coming back. (Not that it had ever mattered when he had.) Dolly could not explain it either, and, after a time, Rick found another neighbor or a co-worker or maybe even his ex-wife.

Dolly no longer needed a lover. Somehow, by vanishing completely, Howard had become ubiquitous, and occupied her life without the bother of actually being present in it. His absence was consequential in a way that his presence had never been. She was asked about him constantly: by friends and relatives, by interviewers for magazines and television stations. She appeared on Conan with a half dozen other bereaved and was applauded by the audience, as if the loss of her husband had been some sort of accomplishment on her part—as indeed she had convinced herself it had.

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Dinah Comfort

How bright and empty the bay looks from here. Not a cloud in the sky, not a bit of haze over the water. I can almost reach out past the headland and touch Seattle. They call it the Emerald City, but it all looks golden, somehow, in the sunset.

No boats out on the water. The pleasure craft cower in their marinas, for there is no pleasure in this sunset. The tankers and freighters huddle at dock or have scurried here to Bremerton. Even the Coast Guard cutter has put up. Everyone is afraid to venture out onto the Bay. The waters look so lonely.

He was always late, Ken was. That was his problem from the very start. Never home on time. Always working late, “plugging away at the office.” Plugging away, all right. Plugging a secretary, all legs and ass, damn him. Or hoisting a few with “the boys.” *Sorry, I lost track of the time*. And whatever happened to the man I married? He lost track of him, too, somewhere along the way.

He never went looking for love; it always fell into his lap and he never learned how to say no. He hadn't even stayed true to his secretary, the little skirt-hiking bitch. (And so she had forwarded all those e-mails. Treat your wife as you will; but *never* anger your mistress.)

Ken never thinks ahead, seldom behind. A narrow window around the present moment is all the reality he ever knows. He couldn't even understand why I was still angry with him after he said he was sorry. But that was the problem, wasn't it? He really was sorry—at that moment, at that time and place—and he really thought a few ritual words wiped away his sins. Inside his head, the whole affair was already Past History and it was somehow *my* fault that it was still an issue.

It's done. It's over. Let's move on.

No, Ken, it isn't that easy. I won't have it be that easy.

But just this once, Ken, could you please be late?

Okay, you had her for the weekend. Our little Cindi, our darling, our treasure. Little Cindi with the sunlight smile. I know you love her, too, in your own lunkheaded, irresponsible way. Dammit, you still love *me*, in your lunkheaded, irresponsible way. I know you like to see her. You're still her father, Ken. Oh, tardy, forgetful, flighty Ken. God, you were such fun to be with when responsibility didn't matter. I can still remember what we once had. I'll never take you back, but I feel sad that I never will.

Cindi looks forward so to these visits, and it doesn't make me jealous, not really. You pamper her too much, and I guess I can see why. You don't have her every day the way I do. You can afford to pamper, but I have to discipline, and that seems a little lopsided, because at twelve Cindi doesn't understand why I have to be mean when you never are. But it wouldn't be fair to ask you to discipline her when you can't even discipline yourself. You're only supposed to keep her for three days, and I know I've been bitchy before when you've kept her too long.

I forgot, you said. I lost track of the time.

Just this once, just this once, just this once, I hope you lost track of the time. I hope you overslept. I hope you got tied up in traffic. I hope you forgot my complaints. I hope you missed putting her on the ferry.

Twelve. Almost a woman. Almost a person instead of a child. Just beginning to feel the changes taking place inside her. Just beginning to realize the universe of possibilities lying in wait. But still a child. Still our little girl.

It's getting cold here. I should have brought a sweater with me, but who knew the wait would be this long? Who knows how long it will be?

The *Hyak* will reappear someday. That weird fog will roll in again. It will grow thick over the bay and coat everything with chill and damp. And the ferry horn will sound, and the *Hyak* will sail out of the mist as she sailed into it. Maybe she won't know why I'm crying, Cindi won't. Maybe for her only a moment will have passed. That's the way things happen in Faerie. I'll grow old, and she'll stay young forever.

It could be this very night. Or tomorrow. There's always a fog in the morning. Someone needs to be here when the ferry arrives. Someone needs to be here.

* * * *

Francine Humboldt Whistler, Ph.D.

Francie Whistler had lobbied hard to be appointed to the Board of Inquiry and was happy that the panel would finally meet. But she did not think it appropriate that the session be preceded by a reception, as if it were no more than an academic symposium. She registered at the desk in the Coast Guard building and the warrant officer checked his list and gave her a numbered name badge with her digital photograph already embedded and directed her to the pre-meeting function room.

She spent the pre-meeting chatting with the Coast Guard radar tech over cups of scalding coffee. Vehicle Traffic Service radars had reported three different locations for the missing ferry, and each location had been farther off than the vessel could possibly have been. The Task Force might need a physicist to make sense out of that. An unexplained fact within an unexplained fact. A hole inside a hole. It wasn't the real reason she had pulled strings, but it was a true reason and it would do.

The technician didn't have the answers and knew it, which made him wiser than many others in the room that Francie could overhear. Why did people come to an *inquiry* with answers? They were supposed to bring questions. The tech had come to give testimony, and that was all. "I'm glad I don't have to make sense out of it," he confessed. "I just follow the SOPs. But I know what I saw. I ran the diagnostics afterward and everything checked out. All the benchmarks were right on the money. What do you think

happened?"

Francie shook her head. "It's too early to say, Tommy. We don't have all the facts yet." Everyone was still treating the event as a marine disaster. Francie wasn't so sure. She didn't think the ferry sank. She thought something else had happened, only she didn't know what.

"All three bearings showed the ferry going *away* from the radar," the young man continued. "One going back toward the dock. One toward Duwamish Head. And one toward Queen Anne Hill. That isn't possible. Do you think it was a transient malf in the computer system?"

Francie flashed on a line from an old Firesign Theater album: *How can you be in two places at once when you're not anywhere at all?* Except in this case there were three places.

When Commander Randolph arrived, everyone shuffled into the meeting room. The room was long and wide and possessed no outside windows. Francie thought this intentional. There would be reminders enough of that tragic day in the testimony. A view of the scene would have been too oppressive. Chairs stood rank-and-file in military precision. Across the front of the room ran a long table with microphones and name cards, one of which bore her name. Francie took her seat at the far left of the table, next to the federal anti-terrorism expert from Homeland.

"We'll catch the bastards who did this," the man whispered to her as she adjusted her seat. His name card announced him Carl Gratz.

Francie had heard a similar assurance earlier from the marine engineer, only *he* had hoped to catch the design flaw that caused the boat to founder. She smiled at Gratz and said, "That's why the Task Force was formed," and he nodded as if she had agreed with him.

"You're the University representative," he said after a glance at her name card. "Ms. Whistler?"

"Dr. Whistler."

Gratz grinned. "Yeah, me too." He introduced himself.

There was a pad of paper at each place, as well as a microphone, a pen, a folder, a water glass, and the other inevitable accouterments of committee meetings. Francie tapped the microphone to see if it was live and heard nothing. In the back of the room, the sound tech was playing with his board. She shrugged and picked up the pen.

Turning the pad sideways, she wrote five words across the long margin: Autopsy, Type, Source, Location, and Time. Gratz glanced at what she had written. She underlined the word *location* and wrote under it *three places at once* and *heading three directions*.

"You think the VTS radars were malfunctioning?" Gratz asked her.

"I don't know what to think. It's possible." But they had *not* been malfunctioning immediately afterward, she remembered. That's what the Coast Guard tech had told her. Under *Time*, she wrote *no radar anomalies after* and *find out specific times*.

Commander Randolph struck the gavel and two dozen cameras in the back of the room chattered like cicadas, so it was clear what image would grace the front pages and web portals tomorrow.

Investigating Committee Opens Deliberations. She wasn't sure that these big, public autopsies ever solved anything. They were for assurance rather than investigation. Look, see, we are treating this tragedy with respect and importance! Posing for cameras outweighed posing questions.

Was that too cynical? The others she had spoken with during the pre-meeting seemed determined to get to the root of the matter, though they had different roots in mind; but what a committee did was often independent of what any of its members intended it to do. The moment had a logic of its own.

You're grieving, she told herself, as if she could have forgotten. She wondered whether others on the Task Force had lost a friend or relative with the ferry.

Work the numbers. Family, school chums, fishing buddies, neighbors, co-workers, merchants ... On the average, a person knows a thousand other people. So, if an estimated thousand passengers each had a thousand acquaintances, that made a million people, which, even allowing for overlap, covered a fair chunk of metro Seattle. Chances were a third of the people in this room knew someone who had been on the ferry that morning. And the rest all knew someone who did.

Jesus, no wonder everyone looks so bleak.

"This hearing is convened," said the commander of Group Seattle, "to learn the facts of what happened last Tuesday morning on Elliott Bay." He said more, most of it to give the news reporters a lead paragraph, but Francie relaxed a little in her seat. She had been afraid the Coast Guard would push to *Get Out There and Do Something* and implement a solution before they even knew the root cause. There was still a possibility of that. The Usual Suspects were already demanding to know why the Coast Guard had not prevented the tragedy, and she had heard that one law firm was ginning up clients for a class action suit against the Washington State Ferries.

No, the first order of business was to find out what had actually happened—to measure, as she liked to say, the size and shape of the problem. Her eyes dropped to the pad where she had jotted notes of her chat with the radar tech. He would testify later in more detail, using his logs and printouts, but the gist of it was already captured. Francie thought that what the tech had told her was important, perhaps even central to the problem, that it must be something more than an instrument glitch.

The Committee heard testimony all morning: from the dispatcher at the ferry dock, from the captain and deckhands of the fishing boat that had nearly collided with the *Hyak*, from the VTS radar technician, from the pilot and co-pilot of the Coast Guard rescue chopper and the surviving frogman and crewman, from the meteorologist for the Elliott Bay region, from the chief mechanic who had worked on the *Hyak*'s last repairs. No trace had been found: no bodies or body parts, let alone survivors. How could that boat have gone down so damned fast, and with no flotsam? With not so much as an oil slick?

The reporters drifted away during the testimony. It was boring and it was for the most part technical. Francie, on the other hand, quickly filled her sheet with notes. The current encountered by the fishing boat. The wind encountered by the helicopter. Times of departure and disappearance, the vessel's beam and length, her capacity, her speed, the distance from the dock to the estimated point of her disappearance, her three oddly contradictory bearings at the time of disappearance....

"Excuse me," she said, and then had to repeat herself after the sound tech turned her mike on. "Tommy," she asked the VTS tech, "do your records show when these peculiar readings began and when they stopped?"

A moment passed while the tech searched his records. There had been several freighters and an oil tanker moving on the Bay at the time, and VTS tracked all of them. He found several other anomalies, starting about half an hour before the *Hyak* left dock. Francie asked for a copy of the data and the tech handed the sheets to a committee clerk for photocopying. She compared the time to the meteorologist's report of when the fog first appeared.

Very curious, Francie thought. Gratz watched quizzically as she scribbled.

"How is any of that important?" he asked.

She reminded herself that he was still chasing terrorists in his head, and not yet gauging the metes and bounds of the problem. "I don't know that any of it is," she admitted.

"Once we locate the wreckage," Gratz said, "we'll know whether they blew it up from the inside or the outside."

She looked at him. "They."

He shrugged.

She said, "No one heard an explosion."

"No one *reported* an explosion," he corrected her. "The sound may have been muffled by the fog or the horns. Or the bomb was planted down inside the hull."

Francie turned once more to her list. There were any number of explanations. If this, if that, if the other thing.... Allow enough *ifs* and anything was plausible. They could spin theories until the cows came home. It could have been OJ or Elvis. It could have been little green men from Alpha Centauri. If you start with the conclusion, you can always imagine a trail that reaches it, but the *simplest* explanation for not hearing an explosion was that there had not been one. The proper place to start is at the beginning. Go from what you know toward what you don't. Don't start with what you *believe*.

Later, and because the media would tolerate nothing else but, the man from Washington State Ferries read the list of names that had been confirmed so far. There would be a wall or a monument one day. That was inevitable. In the meantime, there was some balm in reading aloud the names of the lost. "John Dunning, master," the man said. "Peter Jurgowitz, mate. James O'Grady, engineer. Karen Lewis-Nowick, assistant engineer..." And so on through the two oilers and the eight deckhands, the two Coast Guard frogmen and the seaman who had fallen from the helicopter. Francie wondered at the order in which the names were read and decided that it was the order in which their presence on the ferry—or in the aborted rescue—had been confirmed. Cindi Comfort, she heard. Howard Mannerhein. Dale Wingate. Mitch Raftery. Paul Latimer. Agnes, Becky, and Kyle Timmer. The names ran on. The litany was numbing. When the recitation reached "Donald Whistler," Francie jerked a little in her seat and the man from Homeland turned to her and said, "Your husband?"

"No, my baby brother." Well, he was twenty-five, but he'd always be her baby brother now, because he would never, ever grow any older. She could remember coming home from college and little Donny running to meet her at the door. *F'annie's home! F'annie's home!* And now, little Donny would never be there again.

Gratz gave her a handkerchief and she dabbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said.

The WSF official was still reading the list and everyone listened with long faces. A couple of times, Francie saw people in the meeting room react to a name. "We kept thinking he would call," she said at last. "Mom and me and Andy. Andy is the oldest. Dad's dead. We thought, maybe Donny caught the 5:10 and he was safe in Bremerton before the *Hyak* sailed. But he would have called to tell us that, once he'd heard the news. He would have called to tell us he was safe. But it's been nearly a week now, and there's been no word."

"That's the worst part," Gratz said. "There's no closure."

"Closure." She squared the pad in front of her; moved the pen to one side. She hated that word. "After a

while, you grow numb."

"I didn't know anyone on board."

Francie remembered that he was from DC. "Are you complaining?"

He shook his head. "No, just admitting that I can't know how you feel."

Maps of the bay were passed down the table. She took one and handed the last to Gratz. "I'm not sure that I know, either," she said. Key points were highlighted on the map. Pier 52. The normal ferry route. The location of the fishing boat, approximately correct because its skipper had taken a sighting on Duwamish Head only a few minutes earlier. The direction of the current they had fought. The direction of the wind-shear that had nearly brought down the 'copter. The positions of other vessels in the bay. And, marked with red crosses, the three contradictory positions for *Hyak*.

Always draw a picture of your data, her statistics professor had told her years ago. Francie took her pen and connected the crosses. *It was in there*, she thought. *Inside that triangle*. She looked through her notes on the VTS network and marked the location of the three malfunctioning radars, connecting the radars to the positions they had given.

"The three lines intersect," Gratz said. He had been watching her construction in silence. "Is that important?"

"I don't know." She used her name card as a straight-edge and projected the direction of the current that had caught the fishing boat. It, too, ran through the same locus. The back of her head began to prickle. She did the same with the wind direction. It missed, but by only a little, and the 'copter pilot had been too pre-occupied to take a more precise bearing. She added the other anomalous sightings, and each one had passed near or through that same point.

She studied her ad hoc plot with growing unease. *That was where it happened*, she thought.

Whatever *it* was.

* * * *

Taralyn Harrison

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: JJ Brannon

What the hell is all the fuss about the Hyak? Mix some drunk captain with a little fog and incompetent government flunkies who can't even properly read radar they were trained on. It's plain buggy software compounded by human greed and stupidity at fault. The divers will find the ship once the mud settles.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Pagadan

GMAB. This is Mother Nature striking back—and about time, I'd say. Who else could create fog, currents, and winds like that. And this is just the beginning. Did you read about the chasm on the way to Disneyland, the earth quake in that Texas oil field, the giant sink hole between Orlando and Tampa?

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Velvet

JJ, did you even read the report about the radar tech? It's a real, honest-to-God anomaly. Either time travel or a portal to an alternate Earth. I'd say a tractor beam used by an entity who couldn't quite handle it.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: JJ Brannon

All right, I saw that guy with the mini-sub interviewed on the 6 o'clock news. I admit those videos show no ferry down there in the mud. So I think it was Release 1.0 of some quantum-nanobyte experiment. Some of that crap probably got loose and the ferry fell apart in a zillion pieces and washed away. That's where all the steam came from, too.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: FIJAGDH

A buddy of mine out west says the Taos, NM, hum changed frequency the same day they lost that ferry. Which proves my theory about the Taos hum being part of some secret government experimentation with found/donated alien technology.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: IrishBet

JJ, have you forgotten the USS Eldridge? Teleportation could account for the anomalies at the time of reappearance. I've never believed they gave up that line of inquiry. SciAm ran an article about the practical possibilities of teleportation back in 1997. I'm betting a shiny new quarter the ferry will be back.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Tee-E

Dont you people listen to yourselves? It's not a game!! I lost my boy on that boat. Maybe if you had, youd look at things different.

Taralyn

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Les OneGuy

The only scientific fact that explains this is a teleportation experiment by the North Koreans, what else could they be doing with those reactors. It's people like you who hinder the advance of civilization with your moralistic superstitions, your sexual hangups, and your inability to see that all religions are a fraud based on the big people loading it over the regular ones. This will probably trigger a world-wide war ending in

nuclear conflagration, but I feel that in the end it will work out for the better and bring humanity to the stars, or at least those of us who can see it and prepare for it.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Kwakiutl1968

Have you ever been whale watching? Have you ever stood on deck and been fixed by those big, penetrating, accusing eyes? Whales know who we are, and what we've been doing to their kind for a thousand years. I don't know what they did to the Hyak, and I don't know how they did it, but the Hyak incident is only the beginning. The whales have finally decided to fight back.

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Tee-E

I dont know nothing bout no teleportation or time travel or althernate earths whatever that is. But I do know bout my son, Tiron. Maybe it mean something to you people, or maybe it dont. You think people just words on a screen cause you never ever see each other. But here I am doing the same, like my daughter showed me how, so maybe this is just something I need to do and if anyone read it or not, it dont really matter. So let me make the words flesh.

Tiron he was a fine boy. Big, like he could rest his chin on top my hed and long arms. Had to be long to rap all the way round his mama. Only twenny last march, but he was working hard and trying to save up money to maybe go to the communy college next year. He was always study hard in school. He wasnt smart like some, but worked at it way his daddy did. He use to tell me things like I never heard of before, all about enjins and that. He had a book about how stuff worked and he'd tell me about it ever chance he got. And sometimes he take apart stuff like my toaster or the telephone just to see you know what was inside? You should of seen his eyes when he talked mashines. He wanted to get one of those soshit degrees. Nobody in our famly ever got no degrees, so we was real proud of him for trying. I know his daddy would of been. His daddy was kilt in the Stan, and Tiron, he missed him something bad. He never cried much. You dont want to be a boy cries much in this naborhood. But he always goes how he wants to invent something and name it after his daddy.

Well he use to work little jobs at repair stores and stuff, like places where he got to play with mashines. And then last spring his name finly come up at the union hall and he got a job as oiler on the ferry boats. Oh he was so proud! He was so proud. He come home real greasy from those rides. Everbody like him and he like everbody on the boats. He was reel happy down there with the enjins and things.

It was just before it happen that Tiron told me he want to be a navel architek which is all about building boats. I didnt understand half what he said and I probly didnt spell it right. I know I dont spell so good. When I was a kid I didnt have the same chances as Tiron so I never mounted to much, tho I kept myself clean and honest even when it was hard. Tiron, he could of been somebody.

Whats hardest is that he wasnt supposed to be on Hyak that day but he traded with a friend who had to go see a doctor. That Keith is so twisted up over it. Half of hims sorry it was my Tiron went in his place, but the other half is happy it wasnt him. I dont hold it against him tho. Hes a nice boy and was good friend to Tiron.

Tiron he lef the house that day just like always and took his lunch with him and he kiss me on the cheek and say he wants my pulled pork for supper. Thats what I was cooking when I hear the news. Pulled

pork. Oh he did favor that some.

You never know when you say good-bye for the last time. You never ever know that. It seem just like ever other time, and later you wish youd of said something more or did something more but you dint

Was hard for me he called away like that so young. I dont know why the Lord wanted him but I guess he must got a reason. I just wisht he explain it to me, cause I dont want to think it just bad luck he be gone.

Taralyn

* * * *

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Come2Reven

I read an expose that the ship in question wasn't actually the U.S.S. Eldridge docked in Philadelphia, but the U.S.S. Philadelphia docked in Eldridge. No wonder the facts have been so hard to uncover, huh?

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: DANNISGR

Ch 7 is going to run a special with the guy who talks to dead people. It's about time science was brought in to solve the case!

* * * *

William J. Timmer, Ph.D.

Abstract: It will be shown that the well-known disappearance of *MV Hyak* is the result of a singularity in the dynamic field equations for rotating magnetic fields. The locus for this singularity will be shown to be unstable in the sense of Poincare and to be subject to aperiodic shifts in its locus due to endogenous factors. These shifts will be conceptualized by means of Thomian catastrophe surfaces.

Text: It is well known that the state of a dynamic system acting under a potential will move toward the nearest equilibrium point in its state space in such a way as to minimize the value of the potential function. The set of all such equilibria comprises a manifold over the parameter space known as the "attractor." If the manifold is "folded" or "pleated," loci exist in parameter space possessing two or more distinct equilibria. A system entering such a *bifurcation set* while at one equilibrium will snap to the other should it leave the set at the opposite boundary. From the reference frame of the original state, the object will appear to accelerate rapidly in a direction orthogonal to the sheet. Rene Thom [7] called this a catastrophe, although he did not mean a catastrophe in the colloquial sense, such as the loss of one's wife and children, but simply a sudden change from one equilibrium state to another.

The anomalous radar fixes in the case of the Seattle Event, each of which showed the ferry accelerating directly away from it, provide a good empirical fit to the model. The fit is further substantiated by anecdotal evidences; namely, the dopplering of the boat's horn and the red-shifted light reported by eyewitnesses. Clearly, the vessel accelerated along a dimension orthogonal to normal 3-space. It is suggested that the Elliott Bay Anomaly marks the edge of a higher dimension bifurcation set in space-time. One might call this colloquially a "drain-hole."

That a singularity must exist in certain dynamic systems is well known, but the locus of the singularity may be subject to random fluctuations. A comparison is made to the familiar topological problem of covering a billiard ball with hair. Such a cover must leave a gap, for example the "bald spot" that forms when men comb their hair flat. If the hair is combed differently, the "bald spot" will appear in a different position.

An analogous process can be applied to higher dimensional dynamic manifolds. While locally smooth, they cannot be globally smooth. Very little in life is globally smooth. Thom's Classification Theorem states that only seven stable catastrophes can arise from variations in the parameter space. These qualitatively distinct discontinuities arise from a combination of technical and geometric considerations involving the regions of parameter space where the catastrophes happen. It is suggested that the Elliott Bay Anomaly is of this nature. Anecdotal data suggests a former locus near the island of Bermuda. A hole being an absence (or is it the absence that leaves the hole?), it does not physically move; but a change induced on the manifold that closes a hole will inevitably cause another to open elsewhere. A conservation law is suspected. This will require additional research.

* * * *

We pause here and consider marriage as a dynamic system operating under a potential. It, too, is manifold and it is hypothesized that a wrinkle must necessarily exist in it, and that if one difficulty is resolved, another must inevitably take its place. A suitable stabilizing strategy might then be the introduction of a permanent difficulty. The truly destructive strategy is the expectation that there ought to be none.

However, the existence of these local catastrophes, which we may term "spats," depends on a combination of technical and geometric considerations involving the regions of the marital parameter space where the catastrophes happen. A million variables affect the emergence of form within the envelope of the marriage, all working to minimize its potential. These variables include genes, chemicals, environmental conditions, space, and time. At any given time, only one or two are likely to change in a discontinuous manner, arguing that while the phenomenon is global, the precise shape of the catastrophe may depend on local conditions. So may a hitherto-faithful spouse suddenly engage in a destructive affair for reasons of long, if obscure standing; or a sweet young boy alter into a surly adolescent. This being the case, the passage of time (and, with it, the alteration of the local conditions that precipitated the discontinuity) may rectify the anomaly.

Yet, to analyze the system in such dispassionate terms may earn the sobriquet of a "passionless little prick" lacking "any semblance of human feelings." Such a judgment would be mistaken, as it refers only to the expression of, and not the impression of, passion. The mousiest man may seethe with murderous rage; an undemonstrative man, with tender love. When once it is said, "I love you," no additional information is transmitted by endless repetitions. Logic teaches us that. Better to spend words on increasing the information content of the system, such as by noting that "we are out of bread" or "the car needs washing." Because a thought has not been spoken, it would be illogical to conclude that it has not been thought. Would the household be not short of bread were it unmentioned? Likewise, would a spouse be short of love were it not mentioned? The analogy is precise; the parallel, instructive. But the results have proven upon inspection wholly divergent, suggesting the applicability of chaos theory.

And now they are gone, Becky and little Kyle and Agnes alike, fallen into a hole that has no bottom, creating a similar hole in the author's life. Would it have made any difference if the author had said "I love you" at the pier-side? Would they be less completely gone? Perhaps. Perhaps she would have turned back at the words, as to a strange attractor, and stepped off the gangplank and into my arms as she once did when she and I and all the world were younger.

But time is the one asymmetric parameter governing the state space. Which is just another way of saying that there is "no turning back the clock."

Unless there is something on the other fold. It would be pleasant to believe that those who have "passed over" to the other sheet have found a new life there, but science tells us nothing, and nothing is little comfort.

God damn this paper and this conference.

* * * *

The author has found the preparation of this paper difficult. Select all. Delete.

Does that not sum up the entire phenomenon of the Disappearance? "Select all. Delete."

* * * *

Axel Moller

Scene: the living room of a small three room apartment in downtown Seattle. A hexagonal table covered by a green felt is situated in the center of the room but with only five chairs spaced around it. Four men sit at the table, one of them stacking poker chips of assorted colors. Behind them, the window looks out on tall, anonymous buildings, but in the gap between two of them lies a slice of Elliott Bay. It is dusk, just going on to evening.

Enter Axel Moller.

Axel: I brought the beer. I hope you have the cards. *(Places six-pack on the table. Removes jacket and tosses it on the nearby sofa.)*

Luis: Long as you brought money and an inclination to lose.

Axel: In your dreams, Luis. *(Sits.)* Hey, Beef, Gordo, Chen, how're they hanging?

Various hand-slaps and exclamations of masculine greetings.

Gordo: *(Gathers cards into deck, squares deck, begins to shuffle)* Seven card stud. Ante up, boys. *They throw chips into the pot and Gordo deals the cards.*

Gordo: We gotta jack showin.' Your bet, Chen.

Chen: *(Throws in another chip)* Five.

Beef: Sure you can afford it? *(The others match the bet and Gordo deals the next round.)*

Gordo: Hey, Axe, you plan on drinkin' all that yourself ?

(Axel breaks open the six-pack and hands out the cans. Then he sits staring dumbly at the sixth can, which he has just placed at the empty sixth side of the hexagon.)

Axel: Shit. Oh, shit. *(He turns away from the table.)* Damn.

(The others look at Axel, at the can, at the empty space, at each other. Axel goes to the window and leans his arm against the sash, staring out toward Elliott Bay. He rests his head upon his arm.)

Life's a bitch.

Beef: And then you ... *(He shuts up abruptly.)*

Axel: *(Without turning)* You think you get over it, but you don't, really. You forget for one little second, and some old habit pops up and reminds you.

Gordo: Paul was our friend, too.

Axel: Yeah. Yeah, I know.

Beef: (*Lifts his beer can in salute*) Absent friends. (*No one joins the toast. Beef shrugs and drinks alone.*)

Axel: I saw the fog come in yesterday. Another one of those “Bermuda” fogs.

Chen: (*Shakes head*) Bermuda Fog. In Seattle harbor.

Axel: And there's always some moron, he rows out or he swims out into it because he wants to visit another plane of existence.

Gordo: It's a helluva thing, all right. People got no sense.

Luis: No one ever come back and said where the “drainhole” goes—

Chen: If that's what it is.

Luis:—so why are they so freaking sure they want to go there?

Axel: (*With quiet vehemence*) What difference does it make what it is or where it goes or even if it “goes” anywhere at all? Paul's gone. They're all gone. And no one thinks they're ever coming back.

Beef: ‘Cept that loony-kazoony over in Bremerton, goes down to the dock every morning. Hey, remember how Paulie used to rig the big arc lamps when we worked night crew. And he'd aim them so's any gal walking past the site, the light would shine right through their dresses and you could see ‘em all like in silhouette? (*Laughs*)

Luis: He was a funny guy.

Beef: Sometimes what was under those dresses shouldn'ta been seen. Geez. Supersize those fries. That's why Paulie always was working out at the gym, pumping iron and firming up the old pecs.

Chen: Hey, Ax, that's where you met Paul, wasn't it? Down at the gym.

Axel: (*Turning from the window*) About a year ago. I was in physical therapy, for my ankle. We used to chat in the cardio room when we had treadmills side by side.

Beef: Bet he raced you. That's the kinda guy he was. Real competitive. Bet he cranked up the revs on that treadmill to see if you could keep it up.

Axel: (*Looks out window once more*) Yeah. He always wanted to see if I could keep it up.

Gordo: Hey, c'mon. St. Paul was the guy wrote all those letters. Paulie was a stand-up guy, but he wasn't Mr. Perfect. Blanche said—

Chen: Poor Blanche! I wonder if she's gotten over it yet.

Gordo: She sort of noticed that none of you guys come round any more.

Beef: (*Defensively*) Well, she wasn't the one playing cards, was she?

Axel: (*From window, but without turning*) You see her lately, Gordo?

Gordo: (*Sips from can, puts it down*) Yeah. Lately.

Beef: Comfortin' the ol' widow, Gordo? (*Winks to others; Chen turns away.*)

Luis: Look, can we play cards?

Chen: Hey, remember when our guys played Axel's team in the softball league and Paul—

Beef: Hey, Axel, you warehouse guys are pussies! You know what we do in construction?

Luis: Yeah, we make big erections. You tell that joke every time, Beef, and it wasn't funny after the first thirty-two times.

Axel: (*Turns a little toward Luis and smiles faintly*) Paul was good at that.

Luis: Axel, sit your ass down so I can like deal this hand?

Axel: You think it's really a drainhole like they say? (*He lingers by the window gazing out.*)

Beef: No, it's an asshole. That's why everyone on that boat wound up feeling like shit.

(*Axel takes two steps and grabs Beef by the shirtfront and yanks him to his feet. His biceps bulge and tremble under his tight-fitting shirt. He holds Beef for a moment as if he will shake him to pieces. The others look on with varying degrees of shock and surprise. Finally Luis and Chen stand and separate the two. Beef sinks back to his seat; Axel returns to his vigil by the window.*)

Chen: Like, who says it's a drainhole? I've heard a dozen theories. It's a wormhole to somewhere else in the universe. Or it's a doorway to another dimension—

Luis: That's the Twilight Zone, Chen. What the hell difference does it make? Look, the best way we can honor Paulie's memory is to drink a toast and play a hand. And maybe take up a collection for Blanche. Gordo's right. The girls have as much fun as us at the summer picnics and stuff. Why should Blanche be out of it now just because Paulie's dead?

Gordo: Don't bother. She's not exactly broke up about it.

Luis: Now that's a helluva thing to say.

Gordo: (*Shrugs*) Paulie and Blanche hadn't been in the sack together for a long time.

Chen: What, they were having a fight and ... ?

Gordo: No, it was the other way 'round. She was upset because he *wasn't* coming through in the husband department. So she figured he had a little something on the side and that pissed her off.

Luis: Paulie?

Beef: Well, he was always checking out the girls. You know. "Hey, get a load of that set." Maybe he just wanted a closer look.

Axel: (*To Gordo*) She say who Paulie was seeing?

Gordo: Nah. Blanche figured he was catting around until about a year or so ago, then he found someone steady. She didn't mind it *too* much when she thought he was playing the field, but she hated the idea that there was someone else special in his life. Some poker nights he wouldn't come home until way after the game broke up.

Axel: (*Slowly*) Maybe he thought he'd picked up a disease and didn't want to give it to her, and that's why he stopped sleeping with her.

Gordo: And so he's still St. Paulie? Excuse me if I quit the church. Blanche is a special lady and he treated her like she didn't even exist.

Beef: (*After a pause*) You seem to know a lot about how Blanche feels.

Gordo: (*Throws cards down on table*)

Luis: Christ ... ! You're porkin' Paulie's widow, aren't you?

Chen: She's not exactly his wife any more, Luis.

Gordo: And not for a long time, even before he died.

Chen: (*To Gordo*) You mean ... Before? Well, shit!

Gordo: What's sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose, isn't it? He wasn't having any of her, and neither me or her saw any reason to let it go to waste.

Luis: (*Drops his cards, too*) I don' feel like playin' no more.

Chen: Me neither. Jesus, Gordo. He was our pal. You don't go doing that to your buddy.

Gordo: How was I hurting him? If Paulie didn't want no one in bed with Blanche, he shoulda stayed there himself, 'stead o' running around trying to prove what a man's man he was. I didn't take a damn thing from him that he hadn't already tossed aside. Aren't I right, Axel?

Axel: (*By window, wipes cheek with sleeve, turns to face group*) Yeah. That's right. He was a man's man.

* * * *

The Adventure Club

There were seven of them and they all lived in the neighborhood except for Jimmy, so it was never any problem to get together after school. They usually met in Denny's basement because that was where they kept the club's flag and Denny's dad had helped set up a laboratory. They had racks of chemicals that they used to experiment with different rocket fuels, and an electrical bench where they worked on ignition systems. One time they had blown all the fuses in the house and Denny's dad had made them promise not to test a circuit until they had shown him the schematics and he had inspected their work. Mr. Collingwood worked at Boeing and knew all sorts of stuff about electronics.

But developing a rocket ship had taken a back seat to the Seattle Drainhole. They even held some club meetings down near the old ferry dock because they hoped to see the hole open up, which would have been seriously cool.

"But there's no periodicity to it," the twins said, after Denny had called the meeting to order and they were all sitting around the old table in the basement with cans of pop and a big bag of chips. Frank and Harry were identical twins, and no one was ever sure which one was talking. SciAm and the other science mags had reported the lack of periodicity, but the club's rule was never to trust authority. Frank (unless it had been Harry) had compiled a list of all confirmed events, starting with the initial tragedy. And Harry (unless it had been Frank) had analyzed the time series.

"It's a chaotic system," said Jimmy. "I knew it."

"Everybody knows it, dummy," said Red. "That Timmer guy proved it. It was in *Science News*."

"Besides," Denny said, "you can have irregular time series without chaos. Look at eclipses."

"Solar system *is* chaotic," said the twins. "Poincare proved it."

"Ah, screw you."

"Up yours."

"S'what are we gonna do about it?" Red asked. The others all looked at him.

"I dunno, Red," Jimmy said, scratching his head. "Get a really big freaking cork?"

Red's face illustrated his nickname. "Naw, I mean those people on the boat. Somebody's gotta get them outta the hole."

"You crazy, dude?" said Denny. "They're croakers, for sure. If the singularity didn't crush them, they've run out of food and water by now."

"Hey!" said Jimmy, with a nod toward Red. "Watch your mouth."

"Aw, shit, Red," the club president said. "You know I didn't mean nothing by it."

Red wiped his eye, which had gotten something in it. "I can deal with it."

"Your brother was a really neat guy," Denny insisted.

"I know that!" said Red. "But who's doing squat to rescue him?"

The club fell silent as each contemplated how a rescue might be achieved through a singularity. Finally, one of the twins broke the silence.

"What if it isn't? A singularity, I mean. Frank and I lurk on a physics usenet newsgroup out in dot-uni. It's the real thing, not dot-com crap. Anyhow, this one physicist named Janatpour, he said that physics ought to make sense, and singularities were just artifacts of the math, not real things."

"Oh, *that's* convincing," said Jimmy.

"No, he pointed out that sunspots are caused by differential rotation of the sun. The northern and southern hemispheres rotate at different speeds, and that sets up eddies in the electromagnetic field."

"You might have noticed," Jimmy pointed out, "that the drainhole is here on Terra, not on Sol."

"Sure," said Harry. "But Terra has a molten core. What if *that* has differential rotation? That could put twists into Terra's electromagnetic field, too."

"Umm," said Denny. "You saying the Drainhole is a *sunspot*?"

"Earthspot, dummy," said Red, who had recovered his composure.

"Well," said Frank, taking the handoff from his brother, "if Terra was a ball of plasma, it would be. But it's the same *kind* of thing. At least this Janatpour guy says so, and Timmer and Whistler both think he might be on to something."

"Those two are too emotionally involved," said Denny. "You need complete detachment to do science."

Red leaned forward and the card table rocked a little from the weight. "So, if the drainhole is a vortex, not a singularity...."

"...it's gotta open up somewhere else. Not on Terra, or we woulda heard something. But *somewhere*."

Visions of gateways, of alternate universes, of time portals danced in their heads. Denny's dad came to the head of the cellar stairs. "What are you kids up to?" he called.

A chorus of "Nothing," "Just talk," "We're cool, Dad," and "We're gonna rescue the Ferry People."

"Okay," Mr. Young replied. "Just don't run any experiments without my okay."

Another chorus of "okay" and then they all turned to Red.

"Whaddaya mean we're gonna rescue the people on the ferry?"

* * * *

If the Adventure Club had owned a submersible, they might have sent it into the drainhole. But their club treasury, Jimmy reported, could not take the hit. So they did the next best thing.

"If we can just get a message back from them," Red insisted, "the grownups would get off their butts and *do* something." He meant a message back from his brother Steve, but he didn't say that. The others, dazzled by the headlines they could read afterward, set themselves to planning.

First, they needed a lot of rope. And a container of some sort for the message. They needed a boat so they could get close enough to the drainhole when it opened to throw the container into it, and to give them a base to haul it back out again. That was conceptual engineering.

Details. They bought a lockbox with a combination lock on it so it wouldn't open up accidentally during transit. Red wrote a message to put inside, and they added extra paper and pens so the Ferry People could write an answer. Denny painted the combination for the lock on the outside—they left it at 0-0-0—so they could open it up at the other end.

How much rope would they need? How deep was the hole? "Deep' is the wrong word," Jimmy said. "The vortex goes along Kaluza-Klein dimensions, not up or down or nothing." They bought as much clothesline as the treasury could afford, nearly a thousand feet, and coiled it around a garden hose windlass so they could crank it back out. Denny was a Boy Scout, so he tied the ends of the different coils together with knots guaranteed not to come loose.

Jimmy's folks had money and had a big pond in their backyard in the suburbs. The club set up a target on the pond and practiced throwing the rope, using a weight tied to the end so they wouldn't damage the box. Jimmy's mom saw them and asked what they were up to and they all chorused, "Target practice," and she shook her head and went back inside. Denny and Red and Frank were most accurate, so they got the job of actually making the throw. They practiced winding the rope back in, too.

The twins borrowed their dad's fishing boat and paddled it into the bay one night and hid it under the pilings for Alaskan Way. Since the harbor was shut down, there was little traffic on the Bay or along the shore, but they did it in the evening and didn't start the outboard. They pretended they were infiltrating an enemy coast.

The next evening, Denny and Red took the windlass down and screwed it to one of the boat's seats.

After that, it was a matter of waiting.

* * * *

Since no one knew when the vortex would open, the club worked out a watch schedule. School hours were out, as was dinner time, and Jimmy could not always come into the city. They decided to have always two sentries in the boat, one of them to throw, the other to work the windlass.

In practice, they couldn't keep the schedule. There were unexpected chores at home, or school assignments. On weekends, the entire club would hang out near the pier, with binoculars and notebooks, and take turns in the boat. Once, some fishermen saw them climbing down to the water-level and warned them that it was dangerous "because of the Drainhole."

"As if we didn't know about it," Denny commented afterward.

The hole opened up twice while they were in school and one other time during breakfast. They could hear the hooting of the klaxon all over the city and, like everyone else, they stopped what they were doing, and didn't even speak until the all-clear sounded.

Finally, it happened while they were on watch.

* * * *

It was a weekend and Red and Denny were in the boat that hour. Jimmy and the twins were above, on Alaskan Way, pretending that they knew what girls were all about. There were only a handful of pedestrians about on miscellaneous mid-day missions. Jimmy had just said that maybe they should give up the vigils, when the hooting klaxon gave them a jump and they turned and crowded the guard rail.

"Hot spit," said Harry. "There it is!"

It was nothing more than a fog bank, but the siren was triggered by the VTS radar net, so they knew this was the real thing. The radars were seeing double again.

"It's like a lens," Frank said, pointing. "If we could see *through* the fog like radar, everything in line with the vortex would look farther away."

"There they go," said Harry.

The motorboat's outboard had started up and the craft putted out from under the pilings and toward the fog. Red was at the engine and Denny, in the bow, already had the rope coiled for throwing.

"Hope he doesn't get too close," Jimmy said, and Frank looked at him.

"They aren't stupid." He raised his binoculars and watched his chums' progress.

Red put the boat just at the edge of the fog and turned it broadside. Denny stood up and whirled the rope around his head. The message box on the end flashed every time it caught the sun.

A Coast Guard power boat sped across the Bay, giving the fog a wide berth. "Get off the water!" a voice boomed at the messengers. "These waters are dangerous!"

Denny let fly and the box tumbled into the fog. The rope drifted after it, then became taut and began to unreel from the windlass.

The idlers who had been walking along Alaskan Way had come to the rail, drawn by the novelty. "What the hell are those kids up to?" Frank heard someone ask.

"They're trying to send a message to the ferry," he told the man, with a mix of defensiveness and pride. Harry piped his agreement. Jimmy, on the other hand, remained silent and stepped away from the twins.

The windlass ran out to the end. The rope jerked and the boat began to drift into the fog.

"Oh, shit!" said Harry from the esplanade.

* * * *

Denny said later that the same thought crossed his mind. Red had kept the motor running "to maintain station," but he was working the windlass. Denny leapt past him to seize the outboard's handle and turn them away from the vortex. He revved the motor and the boat moved slowly away from the fog, as if dragging an enormous anchor. Then it slowed to a stop and began moving backward.

"I can't wind it in!" Red cried from the windlass. "It's like the box got really, really heavy."

"Cut it loose, cut it loose!" Denny's pants were wet and he hoped everyone would think it was from the water. He reached overboard to splash water on himself and felt a really strong current. The vortex was sucking in water and air and—pretty soon—him and Red. Overhead, the twisting magnetic fields were confusing the birds' directional senses and they were circling endlessly around the drainhole.

Then the whole windlass tore loose from the seat where they had screwed it in. It whipped overboard, hit the water, and skipped twice before it slithered at the end of the rope into the fog.

Red went over with it.

* * * *

"He got tangled in the rope," Denny told the twins while they waited for their parents to come get them from Coast Guard custody. "He was gone before I knew it. There was nothing I coulda done, guys." They were all crying and snuffling, sucked down by reality from their science fantasy, no less than Red had been sucked in by the vortex.

"He'll be with Steve now," Harry said. "He loved his brother."

"Yeah," said Frank, fingering his binoculars. "Denny, I was watching. Red didn't get tangled in the rope. He held on to it and didn't let go."

* * * *

Jennifer Doonerbeck

Early morning, chilly, going on toward autumn. A few fishing boats are tied up to the wharves along Alaskan Way, and the waves slap against hulls, pilings, palisades. Gulls laugh. A distant motorboat near the marina buzzes like a lawnmower. The lighting is indirect; a reluctant sun lingers behind the mountains.

Two joggers appear, side by side, their running shoes clapping nearly in time. Strangers, they have met by chance and have fallen in together on their run, and now they pace each other. An older man walking briskly past them in the other direction wonders if they are sisters. They are much of a type, similar in build and age and dress; young, but past the first rush of it; firm muscles and dirty-straw hair tied back with elastic sweat bands; braving the chill in gym shorts and halter tops. The fishermen breaking fast in a dockside café watch in frank admiration.

The breeze had been off the Bay, cool and with the bite of salt in it. Now it shifts, and a land breeze whispers out over the water. Flags snap and turn. A windsock at the end of one of the docks swings about. Gulls shear off with loud complaint. The breakfasting fishermen, swinging like windsocks themselves, shift their gaze toward the Bay. The joggers halt and stand with chests heaving and with

sweat dripping off their brows. One—she is by a fraction the taller of the two—rests a hand on a piling. They, too, study the Bay.

For a moment, an anxious silence: The scene is frozen. The fishermen hold their coffee mugs or silverware half-raised. The joggers gaze into the chuckling water to judge the run of the waves. Even the gulls coast on the soft winds with unmoving wings.

But ... no siren wails, and everyone relaxes, as if they had been suspended on strings now suddenly cut. Fishermen and waitresses chatter, and china and silverware clink. The cook hollers something from the back and the men laugh. The joggers bend into their cooling-down stretches, as if they have only just now remembered to do them.

The three fishermen sitting near the front of the café glance toward the empty piers that lend Alaskan Way its abandoned look. The ferries dock out past Alki Point these days and most commercial shipping and recreational boating put in elsewhere as well. The bearded man, the middle of the three, remembers how he and Pete Jurgowitz, the *Hyak*'s mate, used to sail the bay together as kids, but the thought is only reflex, the tear of memory remains unstarted, and he does not speak of it to his friends.

On his right sits a solid young man with hard muscles. He wishes that the drainhole would at least open and close on a regular schedule—"like that geyser thing out in Yellowstone." The previous week it had not opened at all, but the week before that it had stayed open for several days, disturbing currents and winds all the way out into the Sound. "No one knew jack when *Hyak* happened," he says, "but now with the buoys marking the place an' the radars watching for that 'pair of slacks'..."

"Parallax," says the bearded man, who watches the Discovery channel.

"...Anyone gets sucked in now," the younger man insists, "they *wanna* get sucked in, or they're just plain stupid."

The third man's attention has been drawn back to the joggers, whose lithe and graceful motions he greatly admires. He asks the waitress the name of the woman in the tan shorts, but the waitress, suspecting carnal thoughts on his part, pretends ignorance. But she herself spares a glance at the younger woman and remembers when she too possessed such a body.

The woman in tan is Jennifer Doonerbeck, a graduate student at the University. She is not conventionally pretty, but it's all in the presentation. She gives no thought to men's interest when she dresses, and it is this artlessness that becomes the greater art. The color of her jogging outfit is very nearly the tone of her suntan, and the third fisherman has discovered that when he squints his eyes a little she seems to be naked.

"Why are those men over there squinting like that?" Jennifer asks her companion.

The taller woman unbends from her stretches and glances at the café. "Sailors all get that look about them. The chop flashes from the sunlight, so they squint to cut down the glare." The explanation satisfies both the teller and the told, and the fishermen would have agreed red-faced had they overheard. It is not, in any event, a matter of great moment. Jennifer finds her companion staring out once more silently at the Bay and asks who she once knew.

It is not a question that needs an explanation. It seems as if all Seattle is known by who they once knew. Hello, glad to meet you, who did *you* know on the *Hyak*? Jennifer has heard of strangers pretending to such acquaintances, as if they *want* to have been touched by the tragedy, and feel a loss at having had no loss. It strikes her as a bit of theft to steal a bereavement to which they are not entitled.

The taller woman, whose name is Mack of all unlikely things—it is short for Mackenzie, and that is bad enough—admits to losing a colleague *and* a neighbor's boy, thus pulling rank on Jennifer, who has lost only a cousin.

"Do you think we're safe here?" Jennifer is watching the ring of buoys that delimit the danger zone. They are welded together by a rigid framework and are anchored to the floor of the bay so that they will not be drawn into the drainhole when it opens. A chain-link fence has been installed to prevent future tragedies like that high-school science club.

Mack is not sure, but thinks there is some reason why the anomaly can form only over water. Something to do with fluid motion, of which her jogging had been an example. "It used to be the Bermuda Triangle, you know," she says, repeating a tidbit of folk wisdom fast becoming consensual reality.

Jennifer has heard about the Bermuda connection, but she does not understand how a hole could cross the whole country without creating an Arkansas Triangle or an Wyoming Triangle or whatever along its path. Or did it travel *through* the Earth like a tunneling mole?

"My cousin grew up on a farm out near Spokane," Jennifer says, and Mack listens politely because that is what one does when a chance companion mentions her *Hyak* loss. "She was nice and we had fun when my folks took me out there in the summer, but I always thought she was like, you know, a dork?" *Nil nisi bonum*, the Romans had once said, but they hadn't had cousins from Spokane. "When she grew up and moved here to the city, she was always calling me and I was always making excuses and blowing her off, so I'm sorry now I was so rude to her."

Mack thinks that the *Hyak* has been the cause of more confessions than a hundred priests and a tent revival, but she is not about to withhold absolution. A native of Manhattan driven by ambition to abide a while in the Northwest, she does not tell Jennifer that from her point of view Seattle and Spokane are equally hick, and "the City" refers to one City alone on all the earth. "You didn't have an obligation to her," she tells the other woman.

"No," Jennifer says, "but I sorta wish I'd had." And that remark, more than anything Jennifer has said up till now, strikes Mack in the heart.

The fishermen have left the café and walk toward the pier where their boat is one of the few still mooring there. One calls a polite greeting and the joggers wave back. Jennifer notices the tight buns one of them boasts. Mack pays them no attention.

Mack's colleague had not been especially close to her, not even in the hypothetical way that Jennifer's cousin might have been. His office had been a few doors from hers, high up in one of Seattle's tallest buildings. They had worked together on a couple of projects and he had flirted with her a few times, but the dalliance had offered her no career advantage and she had not responded. The neighbor's boy, Dale, was another matter. He had been kind of sweet—young enough for a puppy-love crush on the "neighbor lady," and just old enough to make it flattering. His mother was a homebody, but seeing afterward how the woman had been emptied entirely of life, Mack wondered whether she herself, had she been a breeder, could have produced a boy half so engaging as Dale. But if she knew her own strengths, Mack knew her own weaknesses, too; and "mother" had never been her *métier*. Now she wondered whether she was diminished in some manner because she could never suffer a loss so keen as her neighbor had.

It was a day for hypotheticals. Cousins hypothetically helped. Children hypothetically born. Joggers hypothetically stripped naked. Vortexes hypothetically forming over land. In theory, that last would never happen. But in theory, Mack could still run after the three fishermen and have them all, each and severally, upon their coiled nets. It would not have been the most comfortable experience, fishnets being

what they are, and the fishermen would have known some disappointment that it had not been Jennifer to jump their bones. Still, it shows the limits of theory, because it just wasn't going to happen. A drainhole over dry land would remain theoretically impossible right up until the moment it happened. Then the brainiacs would punch some buttons on their computers and come up with a new theory.

* * * *

ATN *Puget Sound* motors out from Harbor Island, where the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has built its new facilities. The Vortex is neither oceanic nor atmospheric, but NOAA has somehow inherited ownership. The barge, borrowed from the Coast Guard, carries on it a vehicle a little like the Mars Rovers. Mack and Jennifer point it out to each other and speculate on its purpose.

A woman standing on the barge sees them and waves. The vehicle is called the *Odysseus* and the plan is to place it in the water and allow the Vortex, when it next opens, to suck it through to the Other Side while it sends data back through a miles-long umbilical of the lightest and strongest fullerene-tube optical cable. Every scientist in the world had begged a space on the platform for an instrument or experiment. Had all requests been granted, *Odysseus* would have shamed the *Queen Mary II*.

But with no clear notion of the environment awaiting it, the instrument package has been designed to roll, fly, and float, to withstand vacuum and pressure and heat and cold and heavy accelerations and hard radiation and, like any device manufactured to such contradictory specifications, it does none of these things well. Dr. Whistler—she is the woman standing on the barge—does not expect *Odysseus* to survive for long. She does not know if the umbilical will be long enough to reach the Other Side. She is not even sure that there *is* an Other Side. But she hopes for *something*, for a reading, for even a single picture. She is not so optimistic as to expect an answer, but it is her fondest dream to learn that there *is* an answer.

The diesels on a fishing boat power up, belching a cloud of black smoke, and the buff young man with the tight buns casts off. The boat gives wide berth to the buoys marking the locus of the Vortex. It isn't open, but there is no telling when it might. Jennifer recognizes them and waves, jumping up and down with a vivacity that five years of corporate ladder-climbing has sucked from the heart of her companion. The fishing boat toots its horn for Jennifer, but Mack is still gazing into the depths of the Bay, thinking about the boy, Dale.

"Dawn was theirs," she quotes, "and sunset and the colours of the earth."

Jennifer turns and says, Hunh? She was an English major, but does not recognize the line.

These hearts were woven of human joys and care,

Washed marvelously with sorrow, swift to mirth.

The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,

And sunset and the colours of the earth.

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