

# The Farewell Party

*Eric Brown*

GREGORY MERRALL HAD been part of our group for just three months by the time of the Farewell Party, though it seemed that we had never been without his quiet, patriarchal presence. He was a constant among the friendly faces who met at the Fleece every Tuesday evening, our confidant and king, some might even say our conscience.

I remember his arrival among us. It was a bit-ter cold night in early November and the village had been cut off for two days due to a severe fall of snow. When I saw him stride into the snug— an anachronistic figure in Harris tweeds and plus-fours—I assumed he was a stranded travel-er.

He buttressed the bar and drank two or three pints of Landlord.

There were nine of us gathered about the inglenook that night, and as each of us in turn went to the bar to buy our round, the stranger made a point of engaging us in conversation.

“There are worse places to be stranded in West Yorkshire,” I said when it was my round. “The Fleece is the best pub for miles around.”

He smiled. “I’m not stranded—well, not in that sense,” he said, offering his hand. “Merrall, Gregory Merrall.”

“Khalid Azzam,” I told him. “You’ve moved to Oxenworth?”

“Bought the old Simpson farm on the hill.”

I knew immediately—and I often look back and wonder quite how I knew—that Merrall would become part of our group. There was something about him that inspired trust. He was socially confident without being brash, and emanated an avuncular friendliness that was endearing and comforting.

I noticed that he was nearing the end of his pint. “It’s my round,” I said. “Would you like to join us?”

“Well, that’s very kind. I don’t mind if I do.”

So I introduced him to the group and he slipped into the conversation as if the niche had been awaiting him—the niche, I mean, of the quiet wise

man, the patriarchal figure whose experience, and whose contemplation of that experience, he brought to bear on our varied conversations that evening.

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IT WAS A couple of weeks later, and I'd arrived early. Richard Lincoln and Andy Souter were at the bar, nursing their first pints. Richard was in his early sixties and for a second I mistook him for Gregory.

He frowned at my double-take as he bought me a pint.

"Thought for a second you were Merrall," I explained.

"The tweeds," he said. "Bit out of fashion."

Richard was a ferryman and I'd always thought it paradoxical that someone who worked so closely with the Kethani regime should adopt so conservative a mode of dress.

We commandeered our table by the fire and Andy stowed his trumpet case under his stool. Andy was a professional musician, a quiet man in his late thirties with a trumpeter's pinched top lip. He conducted the local brass band and taught various instruments at the college in Bradley. He was the newest recruit—discounting Merrall—to our Tuesday night sessions. He ran a hand through his ginger mop and said, "So, what do you think of our Gregory?"

"I like him a lot," I said. "He's one of us."

Richard said, "Strange, isn't it, how some people just fit in? Odd thing is, for all he's said a lot, I don't know that much about him."

That gave me pause. "Come to think of it, you're right." All I knew was that he was from London and that he'd bought the old farmhouse on the hill.

Andy nodded. "The mysterious stranger..."

"He's obviously well traveled," Richard said.

That was another thing I knew about him from his stories of India and the Far East. I said, "Isn't it odd that although he's said next to nothing about himself, I feel I know him better than I do some people who talk

about themselves non-stop.”

For the next hour, as our friends hurried in from the snow in ones and twos, conversation centered around the enigmatic Mr. Merrall. It turned out that no one knew much more than Richard, Andy, and me.

“Very well, then,” said Doug Standish, our friendly police officer, “let’s make it our objec-tive tonight to find out a bit more about Gregory, shall we?”

Five minutes later, at nine o’clock on the dot— as was his habit—Gregory breezed in, shaking off the snow like a big Saint Bernard.

He joined us by the fire and seconds later was telling us about a conversation he’d had with his bank manager that morning. That provoked a round of similar stories, and soon our collective objective of learning more about our newfound friend was forgotten in the to and fro of bon-homie and good beer.

Only as I was wending my way home, with Richard by my side, did it occur to me that we had failed abjectly to learn anything more about Gregory than we knew already.

I said as much to the ferryman.

He was staring at the rearing crystal pinnacle of the Onward Station, perched miles away on the crest of the moors.

“Greg’s so friendly, it seems rude to pry,” he said.

A week later I accidentally found out more about Gregory Merrall and, I thought, the rea-son for his insularity.

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I ARRIVED AT the Fleece just after nine, tired from a hard day on the implant ward, but eager to tell what I’d discovered. The group was ensconced before the blazing fire.

Ben and Elisabeth—in their fifties now and still holding hands—both looked at the book I was holding. Ben said, “Tired of our conversation, Khalid?”

Andy Souter laughed, “If we’re all doing our own thing, then I’ll get my

bugle out and prac-tise.”

I smiled. Everyone turned my way as I held up the novel, my hand concealing the name of the author.

“*A Question of Trust*,” Samantha Kingsley said. “I didn’t know you were a great reader, Khalid.”

“I’m not. I was in Bradley today, and this was in the window of the bookshop.”

“So,” Richard said. “Who’s it by?”

“Three guesses,” I said.

“You,” Stuart Kingsley said. “You’ve retired from the implant ward and started writing?”

“Not me, Stuart. But you do know him.”

Sam cheated. She was sitting next to me, and she tipped her stool and peeked at the author’s photo on the back of the jacket.

“Aha!” she said. “Mystery solved.”

I removed my hand from the byline.

Richard exclaimed, “Gregory!”

“This explains a few things,” I said. “His expe-rience, his reluctance to talk about himself—some writers don’t like it known that they write.” I opened the book and read the mini-biography inside the back flap. ““Gregory Merrall was born in 1965 in London. He has been a full-time freelance writer for more than thirty years, with novels, collections, and vol-umes of poetry to his name.””

Five minutes later Gregory hurried in, hugging himself against the bone-aching cold. He crossed to the fire and roasted his outstretched hands before the flames.

He saw the book, which I’d placed on the table before me, and laughed. “So... my secret’s out.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Richard said, return-ing from the bar with a

pint for our resident writer.

Gregory took a long draft. "It's something I don't much like talking about," he said. "People assume a number of things when you mention you're a scribbler. They either think you're bragging, that you're incredibly well off—would that that were so—that you're some kind of intellectual heavyweight, or that you'll immediately start regaling them with fabulous stories."

"Well," Sam said, "you have told us some fascinating tales."

Gregory inclined his head in gracious assent. "It's just not something I feel the need to talk about," he went on. "What matters is not so much talking about it, but getting it done."

The evening unfolded, and at one point someone asked Gregory (it was Stuart, a lecturer at Leeds and something of an egghead himself), "How do you think the coming of the Kethani has affected how we write about the human experience?"

Gregory frowned into his pint. "Where to begin? Well, it's certainly polarized writers around the world. Some have turned even further inward, minutely chronicling the human condition in the light of our newfound immortality. Others have ignored it and written about the past, and there's a vast market for nostalgia these days! A few speculate about what life might be like post-death, when we take the leap into the vast inhabited universe."

Richard looked at him. "And where would you put yourself, Gregory?"

Merrall picked up his novel and leafed through it, pausing occasionally to read a line or two. "I'm firmly in the speculative camp," he said, "trying to come to some understanding of what life out there might be like, why the Kethani came to Earth—what their motives might be."

That set the subject for the rest of the evening—the Kethani and their *modus operandi*. Of the nine regulars around the table that night, only three of us had died, been resurrected on the home planet of the Kethani, and returned to Earth: Stuart and Samantha Kingsley, and myself.

I looked back to my resurrection, and what I had learned. I had become a better human being, thanks to the aliens, but in common with everyone else who had been resurrected and returned to Earth, I found it difficult to recall precisely what it was I had learned in the Kethani dome, quite how I had become a better person.

At one point Andy Souter said, “I read a novel, a couple of years ago, about a guy who was real-ly a Kethani disguised as a human, come among us to change our ways.”

Gregory nodded. “I know it. *The Effectuator* by Duchamp.”

“I’ve heard rumors that that happens,” I said. I shrugged. “Who knows?”

Sam lowered her pint of lager and asked Gregory, “Do you think that happens? Do you think the Kethani are amongst us?”

Gregory considered. “It’s entirely possible,” he said. “No one has ever seen a Kethani, and as they obviously possess technology far in advance of anything we know, then passing themselves off as human wouldn’t pose that much of a problem.”

Andy said, “But the morality of it... I mean, surely if they’re working for our good, then they could at least be open about it.”

“The Kethani work in mysterious ways...” Sam said.

Andy went on, “We take them for granted... we assume they’re working for our good. But we don’t really know, for sure.”

Six pints the worse, I turned to Gregory and said, “Well, you write about the... the whole thing, the Kethani, death, and revival... what do you think?”

He was some seconds before replying. He stared into the fire. “I think,” he said, “that the Kethani are the saviors of our race, and that whatever they have planned for us when we venture out there—though I don’t presume to know what that might be—will be wholly for our good.”

After that, talk turned to how things had changed due to the coming of the Kethani. I said, “The change has been gradual, very gradual. I mean, so slow it’s been hardly noticeable.” I looked around the table. “You’ve all felt it; it’s as if we’re treading water, biding our time. It’s as if a vast sense of complacency has descended over the human race.” I’d never put these feelings into words before—they’d been a kind of background niggle in my consciousness. “I don’t know... Sometimes I feel as if I’m only really alive among you lot on Tuesday nights!”

Richard laughed. “I know what you mean. Things that once were seen as important—every-thing from politics to sport—no longer have that... vitality.”

“And,” Stuart put in, “England is emptying. Come to that, the world is. I don’t know what the figures are, but more and more people are staying out there when they die.”

And with that thought we called it a night, departed the cozy confines of the snug, and stepped out into the freezing winter night.

The Onward Station was like an inverted icicle in the light of the full moon, and as I made my way home a brilliant bolt of magnesium light illuminated the night as another batch of the dead were beamed up to the waiting Kethani starship.

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A COUPLE OF weeks later the conversation returned to the perennial subject of the Kethani, and what awaited us when we died.

Richard Lincoln posed the question: would we return to Earth after our resurrections, or would we travel among the stars as the ambassadors of our alien benefactors?

Gregory looked across at me. “You returned to Earth, didn’t you, Khalid? Why, when all the universe awaited you?”

I shrugged, smiled. “I must admit... I was tempted to remain out there. The universe... the lure of new experience... it was almost too much to refuse. But—I don’t know. I was torn. Part of me wanted to travel among the stars, but another, stronger part of me wanted to return.” I looked across at Richard Lincoln, who was the only person I had told about the reasons for my suicide, and my return to Earth. “Perhaps I feared the new,” I finished. “Perhaps I fled back to what was familiar, safe...” I shrugged again, a little embarrassed at my inarticulacy under the penetrating scrutiny of Gregory Merrall.

He turned to Stuart and Sam. “And you?”

The couple exchanged a glance. Stuart was in his mid-forties, Sam ten years younger, and they were inseparable—as if what they’d experienced, separately, in the resurrection domes on that far-off alien world, had brought them closer together.

Stuart said, "I hadn't really given much thought to my death, or resurrection. I naturally assumed I'd come back to Earth, continue life with Sam—we'd been married just over a year when I had the accident—go back to my lecture-ship at the university. But while I was in the dome, I... I learned that there was far more to life than what I'd experienced, and would experience, back on Earth."

"And yet you returned," Gregory said.

Stuart looked across at his wife. "I loved Sam," he said. "I was tempted... tempted to remain out there. But I reasoned that I could always return to the stars, later."

Sam said, looking at Gregory almost with defiance, "Two days after Stu died, I killed myself. I wanted to be with him. I couldn't live without him, not even for six months." She stopped abruptly and stared down into her drink.

"And?" Gregory prompted gently.

"And when I got up there, when I was resurrected... I mean, I still loved Stu, but something... I don't know—something was different." She smiled. "The stars called, and nothing would be the same again. Anyway, I decided to come back, see how it went with Stu, and take it from there."

I said, "And look what happened. 'Happily ever after,' or what?"

"We both felt the same," Stuart said. "It was as if our love had been tested by what we learnt out there. We considered going back, but... well, we fell into the old routine, work and the pub..."

He laughed and raised his pint in ironic salutation.

"That's very interesting," Gregory said. "I've done some research. In the early days, only two in ten who died and were resurrected chose to remain out there. The majority opted for what they knew. Now, out of every ten, seven remain. And the average is rising."

"Why do you think that is?" Ben asked.

Gregory pursed his lips, as if by a drawstring, and contemplated the question. "Perhaps we've come to trust the Kethani. We've heard the stories of those who've been to the stars and returned, and we know



there's nothing to fear."

"But," Elisabeth said, with a down-to-earth practicality, "surely the draw of the familiar should be too much for most of us, those of us who want to return and do all the things on Earth that we never got round to doing."

But Gregory was shaking his head. "You'd think so, but once you've experienced resurrec-tion and instruction by the Kethani, and gone among the stars—"

Stuart interrupted, "You sound as if you've experienced it first-hand?"

Gregory smiled. "I haven't. But I have inter-viewed hundreds, maybe even thousands, of returnees from life among the stars, for a series of novels I wrote about the Kethani."

"And?" I said.

"And I found that the idea of a renewed life on Earth, for many, palls alongside the promise of the stars. And when these people experience life out there, they find life on Earth well-nigh impossible." He smiled. "'Provincial' was the word that came up again and again."

We contemplated our beers in silence.

At last I said, "And you, Gregory. What would you do?"

He stared at us, one by one. "When I die, which I think won't be long in happening, then I'll remain out there among the stars, doing whatever the Kethani want me to do."

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A FEW DAYS later I received a package of books through the post. They were the *Returnee* trilo-gy, by Gregory Merrall, sent courtesy of his publisher in London.

That week at the pub, I found that every one of us in the group had received the trilogy.

"I don't know what I was expecting," Stuart said, "but they're good."

"More than good," said Elisabeth, who was the literary pundit amongst us. "I'd say they were excellent, profoundly moving."

Gregory was away that Tuesday—visiting his publisher—so we didn't have the opportunity to thank him. That week I devoured the books and, like Stuart and Elisabeth, found them a heady experience.

He had the ability to write about ideas and the human experience in such a way that the one complemented the other. His characters were real, fully fleshed human beings, about whom the reader cared with a passion. At the same time, he wrote about their experiences in a series of philosophical debates that were at once—for a literary dunce like myself—understandable and page-turning.

I canvassed Stuart's opinion on the following Tuesday. I wondered if he, as an intellectual, had been as impressed by Gregory's books as I had. He had, and for an hour that evening before the man himself turned up, all of us discussed the Returnee trilogy with passion and something like awe that we knew its author.

At one point, Stuart said, "But what did you all think about the finale, and what did it mean? Gregory seemed to be saying that life on Earth was over, that only humankind's journey among the stars was what mattered."

Ben nodded. "As if Earth were a rock pool, which we had to leave in order to evolve."

At that point Gregory came in with a fanfare of wind and a swirl of snowflakes. We fought to buy him a drink and heaped praise on his novels.

I think he found all the fuss embarrassing. "I hope you didn't think it a tad arrogant, my hav-ing the books sent."

We assured him otherwise.

"It was just," he said, "that I wanted you to know my position." He smiled. "And it saved me giving a lecture."

Elisabeth asked, "What are you working on now, Gregory?"

He hesitated, pint in hand. "Ah... well, I make it a rule never to talk about work in progress. Super-stition. Perhaps I fear that gabbing about the book will expend the energy I'd use writing it."

She gave a winning smile. "But on this occa-sion..."

Gregory laughed. "On this occasion, seeing as I'm among friends, and I've almost finished the book anyway..."

And he proceeded to tell us about his next novel, entitled *The Suicide Club*.

It was about a group of friends who, dissatisfied with their routine existence on Earth, stage a farewell party at which they take their own lives, are resurrected, and then go among the stars as ambassadors of the Kethani.

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OVER THE COURSE of the next few weeks we became a reading group devoted to the work of one writer, Gregory Merrall.

We read every novel he'd written, some fifteen in all. We were enthralled, captivated. We must have presented a strange picture to outsiders—a group of middle-class professionals continually carrying around the same books and discussing them passionately amongst themselves. We even arranged another night to meet and discuss the books, to spare Gregory the embarrassment, though we didn't forego our usual Tuesday outings.

Only Andy Souter absented himself from the reading group. He was busy most nights with his brass band, and he'd admitted to me on the phone that he'd found the novels impenetrable.

One Saturday evening I arrived early and Stuart was already propping up the bar. "Khalid. Just the man. I've been thinking..." He hesitated, as if unsure as to how to proceed.

"Should think that's expected of you, in your profession," I quipped.

"You'd never make a stand-up comedian, Azzam," he said. "No, it struck me... Look, have you noticed something about the group?"

"Only that we've become a devoted Gregory Merrall fan club—oh, and as a result we drink a hell of a lot more." I raised my pint in cheers. "Which I'm not complaining about."

He looked at me. "Haven't you noticed how we're looking ahead more? I mean, at one point we seemed content, as a group, to look no further than the village, our jobs. It was as if the Kethani didn't exist."

“And now we’re considering the wider picture?” I shrugged. “Isn’t that to be expected? We’ve just read fifteen books about them, and the consequences of their arrival. Dammit, I’ve never read so much in my life before now!”

He was staring into his pint, miles away.

“What?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Reading Gregory’s books, thinking about the Kethani, what it all might mean... It brings back to me how I felt immediately after my resurrection. The lure of the stars. The dissatisfaction with life on Earth. I think, ever since my return, I’ve been trying to push to the back of my mind that... that niggling annoyance, the thought that I was treading water before the next stage of existence.”

He looked up at me. “You said as much the other week.”

I nodded. After Zara left me, and I killed myself and returned to Earth, I withdrew into myself—or rather into my safe circle of friends—and paid little heed to the world, or for that matter to the universe outside.

The door opened, admitting a blast of icy air and the rest of the group.

For the next hour we discussed an early Gregory Merrali novel, *The Coming of the Kethani*.

Around ten o’clock the door opened and a familiar figure strode in. We looked up, a little shocked and, I think, not a little embarrassed, like schoolkids caught smoking behind the bike shed.

A couple of us tried to hide our copies of Gregory’s novel, but too late. He smiled as he joined us.

“So this is what you get up to when my back’s turned?” he laughed.

Elisabeth said, “You knew?”

“How could you keep it a secret in a village the size of Oxenworth?” he asked.

Only then did I notice the bundle under his arm.

Gregory saw the direction of my gaze. He deposited the package on the table and went to the bar.

We exchanged glances. Sam even tried to peek into the brown paper parcel, but hastily with-drew her hand, as if burned, as Gregory returned with his pint.

Maddeningly, for the rest of the evening he made no reference to the package, stowing it beneath the table and stoking the flagging conversation.

At one point, Stuart asked, “We were discussing your novel—” he indicated *The Coming of the Kethani*, “—and we wondered how you could be so confident of the, ah... altruism of the Kethani, back then? You never doubted their motives?”

Gregory considered his words, then said, “Perhaps it was less good prophecy than a need to hope. I took them on trust, because I saw no other hope for humankind. They were our salvation. I thought it then, and I think so still.”

We talked all night of our alien benefactors, and how life on Earth had changed since their arrival and the bestowal of immortality on the undeserving human race.

Well after last orders, Gregory at last lifted the package from beneath the table and opened it.

“I hope you don’t mind my presumption,” he said, “but I would very much like your opinion of my latest book.”

He passed us each a closely printed typescript of *The Suicide Club*.

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Two DAYS LATER, just as I got in from work, Richard Lincoln phoned.

“The Fleece at eight,” he said without preamble. “An extraordinary meeting of the Gregory Merrall reading group. Can you make it?”

“Try keeping me away,” I said.

On the stroke of eight o’clock that evening all nine of us were seated

at our usual fireside table.

Stuart said, “I take it you’ve all read the book?”

As one, we nodded. I’d finished it on the Sun-day, profoundly moved by the experience.

“So... what do you all think?”

We all spoke at once, echoing the usual plati-tudes—a work of genius, a brilliant insight, a humane and moving story...

Only Andy was silent. He looked uncomfort-able. “Andy?” I said. He had not been part of the reading group, but Gregory had posted him a copy of the manuscript.

“I don’t know. It made me feel... well, uncom-fortable.”

A silence ensued. It was Sam who spoke for the rest of us, who voiced the thought, insidious in my mind, that I had been too craven to say out loud.

“So,” she said, “when do we do it?”

Andy just stared around the group, horrified.

I tried to ignore him. I wondered at what point I had become dissatisfied with my life on Earth. Had the ennui set in years ago, but I had been too comfortable with the easy routine to acknowledge it? Had it taken Gregory Merrall’s presence among us to make me see what a cir-cumscribed life I was leading now?

Sam and Stuart Kingsley were gripping each other’s hands on the table-top. Sam leaned for-ward and spoke vehemently, “Reading Greg’s books brought it all back to me. I... I don’t think I can take much more of life on Earth. I’m ready for the next step.”

Beside her, Stuart said, “We discussed it last night. We’re ready to... go.”

They turned to look at Doug Standish, seated to their left.

He nodded. “I’ve been treading water for ten, fifteen years. Unlike you two—” he smiled at Sam and Stuart “—I haven’t been resurrected, so I’ve

never experienced that lure... until now, that is. I'm ready for... for whatever lies ahead."

He turned to Jeffrey Morrow, on his left. "Jeff?"

The schoolteacher was staring into his drink. He looked up and smiled. "I must admit I've never much thought about my own leaving. I've had all the universe, and all the time in the uni-verse, ahead of me—so why rush things? But... yes, it seems right, doesn't it?"

Beside him, Richard Lincoln said in a quiet voice, "Earth holds very little for me now. I suppose the only thing that's been keeping me here is—" he smiled and looked around the group—"the friendship of you people, and perhaps a fear of what might lie ahead, out there. But I feel that the right time has arrived."

Ben and Elisabeth were next. They glanced at each other, their hands locked tight beneath the table. Elisabeth said, "We're attracted to the idea. I mean, you could say that it's the next evolution-ary stage of humankind—the step to the stars."

Ben took up where his wife had left off. "And we've noticed things on Earth... the apathy, the sense of limbo, of waiting for something to happen. I think by now it's entered our subconscious as a race—the fact that life on Earth is almost over. It's time to leave the sea."

A silence ensued. I was next to give my view.

"Like Sam and Stuart," I said, "I experienced the lure while on Kethan. And like Ben, I've noticed something about the mood on Earth recently, as I said a while back." I paused, then went on, "And it isn't only that more and more resurrectees are electing to remain out there—increasing numbers of people are actually ending their lives and embarking on the next phase."

Sam said, smiling at me, "You haven't actually said, Khalid, if you want to be part of this."

I laughed. "I've been your friend for twenty years now. You're a massive part of my life. How could I remain on Earth when you're living among the stars?"

I paused, and turned to Andy. "Well... what do you think?"

He was rock still, silent, staring down at his pint. He shook his head.

“I’m sorry. It’s not for me. I... there’s a lot I still need to do, here. I couldn’t possibly contemplate...” He stopped there, looking around the group. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Stuart spoke for all of us. “We are, Andy. Of course we are.”

Sam nodded. “There... that’s it, then. I suppose the next thing to do is discuss how we go about it?”

Andy retreated into his pint.

Richard said, “Perhaps we should ask the man who initiated all this, Gregory himself?”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “Don’t you think he might be horrified by what he’s started?”

Stuart was shaking his head. “Khalid, remember what he said a couple of weeks ago—that he was ready to go? And he wrote the book that endorses the group’s decision, after all.”

I nodded. Richard said, “So... tomorrow we’ll buttonhole Greg and see what he says.”

We fell silent, and stared into our drinks. We were strangely subdued for the rest of the evening. Andy said goodbye and left before last orders.

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THE FOLLOWING DAY on the ward I could not concentrate fully on my work; it was as if I were at one remove from the real world, lost in contemplation of the future, and at the same time remembering the past.

It was almost ten by the time I arrived at the Fleece. The others were ensconced at our usual table, illuminated by the flames of the fire. It was a scene I had beheld hundreds of times before, but perhaps it was the realization that our Tues-day nights were drawing to a close that invested the tableau with such poignancy.

Significantly, Andy Souter was conspicuous by his absence. No one commented on the fact.

The contemplative atmosphere had carried over from the previous evening. We sat in silence for a while, before Richard said, “Odd, but I was



thinking today how insubstantial everything feels.”

Jeffrey laughed. “I was thinking the very same. There I was trying to drum the meaning of metaphor in Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* into a group of bored fifth years... and I couldn’t help but think that there’s more to exis-tence.”

“I feel,” Sam said, “that we’ll soon find out exactly how much more.”

I voiced something that had been preying on my mind. “Okay, I know you’re going to call me a hopeless romantic, but it’d be nice... I mean, once we’re out there, if we could remain togeth-er.”

Smiles and nods around the table reassured me.

Before anyone could comment on the likeli-hood of that, Gregory Merrall strode in. “Drink up. I seem to recall that it’s my round.” He stared at us. “What’s wrong? Been to a funeral?”

Sam looked up at him. “Gregory, we need to talk.”

He looked around the group, then nodded. He pointed to the bar.

While he was away, we looked at each other as if for reassurance that we did indeed agree to go ahead with this. Silent accord passed between us, and Sam blessed us with her radiant smile.

“So,” Gregory said two minutes later, easing the tray onto the table-top, “how can I help?”

We looked across at Sam, tacitly electing her as spokesperson.

“Gregory,” she began, “we were all very affected by your novel, *The Suicide Club*. It made us think.”

Gregory smiled. “That’s always nice to hear. And?”

“And,” Sam said, and hesitated.

Gregory laughed. “Come on—out with it!”

“Well... we’ve come to the conclusion, each of us, independently, that there was something lacking in our lives of late...” She went on, neat-ly synopsis-ing what each of us had expressed the night before.

She finished, "So... we've decided that we need to move on, to make the next step, to go out there."

Gregory heard her out in silence, a judicial forefinger placed across his lips.

A hush fell across the table. It was as if we were holding our breath in anticipation of his response.

At last he nodded and smiled. "I understand," he said, "and to be honest I've been thinking along the same lines myself of late." He looked around the group, at each of us in turn, and continued, "I wonder if you'd mind if I joined you?"

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THE PARTY WAS set for the first Saturday in February, which gave us less than a fortnight to settle our affairs on Earth and say our goodbyes. I resigned my internship at Bradley General and told my colleagues that I was taking a year's break to travel—which was not that far removed from the truth. I had no real friends outside the Tuesday evening group, so the farewells I did make were in no way emotionally fraught.

I considered contacting Zara, my ex-wife, and telling her the truth of my going, but on reflection I came to realize that she was part of a past life that was long gone, and almost forgotten.

I put my affairs in order, left instructions with my solicitor for the sale of my house, and bequeathed all I possessed to Zara.

Gregory Merrall insisted that he host the rarewell party, and it seemed fitting that this should be so.

I would attend the party along with Sam and Stuart but, as we had died once and been resurrected, we would not take part in the ritual suicide. I wondered what I might feel as I watched my friends take their final drink on Earth.

On the evening before the party, the doorbell chimed. It was Andy Souter. He stood on the doorstep, shuffling his feet, his ginger hair aflame in the light of the porch. "Andy. Get in here. It's freezing!"

He stepped inside, snow-covered, silent, and a little cowed.

“Coffee?” I asked, uneasy myself.

He shook his head. “I won’t stay long. I just...” He met my gaze for the first time. “Is it true? You’re all planning to... to go, tomorrow night?”

I showed him into the lounge. “That’s right. We’ve thought long and hard about what we’re planning. It seems the right thing to do.”

Andy shook his head. “I don’t know. I have a bad feeling about it.”

I smiled, pointed to the raised square of the implant at his temple. “But you’re implanted, Andy. You’ll go when you die...”

He smiled bleakly. “I know, but that’s differ-ent. I’ll die of natural causes, or accidentally. I won’t take my life at the behest of some stranger.”

I said, “Gregory’s no stranger, now.”

He stared at me. “Isn’t he?”

“You don’t like him, do you?”

“I don’t know. Put it this way, I’m not wholly convinced.”

I laughed. “About what, exactly?”

He looked bleak. “That’s just it. I don’t know. I just have this... feeling.”

I said, “Look, we’re going to the Fleece at nine for a last drink. Why don’t you come along, say goodbye.”

He shook his head, “I’ve said goodbye to everyone individually.” He held out his hand. “Take care, Khalid.”

\* \* \* \*

THE FOLLOWING EVENING Richard Lincoln knocked on my door, and I left the house for the very last time. We walked in silence past the Fleece, through the village and up the hillside toward the beckoning lights of Merrall’s con-verted farmhouse.

Our friends were already there, armed with drinks.

There was, unlike our last few nights in the Fleece, a party

atmosphere in the air, a *fin-de-siecle* sense of closure, of new beginnings.

We drank and chatted about the past. We regaled Gregory with incidents of village life over the past twenty years, the emotional highs and lows: the break-up of my marriage, the res-urrection of Ben's father; the going of Father

Renbourn... It was as if, with this incantatory summoning of the past, we were putting off the inevitability of the future.

Then we ate, seated around a long pine table, a lavish meal of roast beef and baked potatoes. Conversation turned to the Kethani, and our mission as ambassadors among the stars.

A little drunk, I laughed. "It seems impossible to reconcile my life so far, the insignificance of my existence until now, with what might happen out there." And I swung my wine glass in an abandoned gesture at the stars.

Gregory said, "We will be taken, and trained, and we will behold wonders we cannot even guess at."

Beside me, Sam said, "I wish Andy was coming with us."

A silence settled around the table as we pondered our absent, skeptical friend.

We finished the meal and Gregory poured the wine. He went around the table, clockwise, and tipped an exact measure of French claret, laced with cyanide, into each glass.

Sam, Stuart, and I sat together at the end of the table. I felt a subtle sense of exclusion from the act about to take place. Later tonight we three would report to the Onward Station, would be beamed up in the same transmission as our friends, and begin our journey to the stars.

I was aware of my heart thudding as I watched my friends raise their glasses and Richard Lincoln pronounce a toast. "To friends," he said, "and to the future!"

"To friends, and to the future!" they echoed, and drank.

I watched Richard Lincoln relax, smiling, and slump into his seat, as if asleep, and I reached across the table and gripped his hand as if to ease his passing. I looked around, taking in the enormity of the fact that my

friends of so many years were dead, or dying... Jeffrey leaned forward, resting his head on his arms; Doug Standish sat upright, a smile on his stilled face; Ben and Elisabeth leaned toward each other, embracing, and died together. At the head of the table, Gregory Merrall slumped in his seat, his head flung back in death.

A silence filled the room and I felt like weep-ing.

Someone was clutching my hand. I looked up. Sam was staring at me through her tears.

We stood and moved toward the door. Already, our friends' implants would be registering the fact of their death. In minutes, the ferrymen from Onward Station would arrive to collect their bodies.

I took one last glance at the tableau of stilled and lifeless remains, then joined Sam and Stuart and stepped into the freezing night.

Stuart indicated his car. "We might as well go straight to the Station."

I said, "Do you mind if I walk?"

I sketched a wave and set off along the foot-path that climbed across the snow-covered moorland to the soaring tower of the Onward Station in the distance.

Their car started and drove away, and soon the sound of its engine died and left a profound silence in its wake.

I strode across the brow of the hill, my boots compacting snow, my head too full of recent events to look ahead with any clarity.

At one point I stopped, turned and looked down at the farmhouse, dark against the snow. The lights glowed in the windows, and it remind-ed me of a nativity scene.

I was about to resume my march when, from the corner of my eye, I saw movement at the back door. At first I thought it was a ferryman, arrived early—then realized that I had heard no car.

I stared, and caught my breath in shock.

A figure stepped through the kitchen door and strode out into the graveled driveway, and in the light of the gibbous moon I recognized the

tweed-clad shape of Gregory Merrall.

At that moment I felt very alone. I wanted Sam and Stuart beside me, to affirm that I was not losing my senses.

As I watched, he stopped in the middle of the drive and stared up at the stars, and my mind was in chaos.

Why? I asked myself... Why had he—

And then the explanation came, falling from the heavens.

Gregory raised his arms above his head, as if in greeting or supplication, and from on high there descended, across the dark night sky like the scoring of a diamond point across a sheet of obsidian, what at first I thought was a shooting star. The vector it took, however, was vertical. It fell like a lance, heading for the farmhouse below, and I could only gasp in wonder, breathless, as it struck Gregory Merrall.

He vanished, and the light leapt up and retraced its course through the night sky, heading toward the waiting Kethani starship.

My face stinging with tears, I set off toward the rearing obelisk of Onward Station. I thought of Andy Souter, and his suspicion of Gregory Merrall, and his decision not to join us... and I wondered if Andy had been right to turn his back, this time, on the new life that awaited us.

I was sobbing by the time I reached the Station. I paused before its cut-glass perfection, this thing of supernal alien beauty on the harsh Yorkshire landscape.

I wondered whether to tell Sam and Stuart that we had been lured to the stars by an... an impostor. Did it matter, after all? I tried to marshal my emotions, decide whether what Merrall had done could be considered an act of betrayal, or of salvation. I wondered if I should go ahead with what we had planned.

I turned and stared out over the land that had been my home since birth, a land slowly emptying due to the ministrations of a mysterious alien race. Then I looked up at the stars, the million pulsating beacons of light, and I knew that there was only one course of action to take.

I hurried into the Station, to join my friends and to begin the new life that awaited me out there among the beckoning stars.

