

CALL BACK YESTERDAY

by Nancy Kress

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Nancy Kress has three books appearing in 2008: *Nano Comes to Clifford Falls and Other Stories*, a collection from Golden Gryphon; and two novels, *Dogs* (Tachyon) and *Steal Across the Sky* (Tor). All of those concern genetic engineering in one way or another, but the following story deals with a much older and more mysterious idea: what changes time can, and cannot, make in human lives.

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This morning the bathroom mirror shows only a lone person—besides Caitlin herself, of course. Caitlin's hair is dirty and there's no time to wash it before Group, which starts in seven minutes. Time is always a problem for Caitlin; she's not good at it. She washes her face, brushes her teeth, and tries the effect of pinning her dirty hair on top of her head. She looks like a dork. More of a dork.

The woman in the mirror ignores Caitlin. Another person, the pre-adolescent boy, wanders out of the gray mist from wherever they live when they're not in her mirror. The woman and the boy also ignore each other. They always do.

"Fuck off," Caitlin says experimentally. They don't look at her, but the woman frowns and the boy grins at empty space. That's the most that Caitlin has ever been able to affect any of them: the odd cuss word or the funny one-liner. Not that she's any good at jokes, or at cussing. She will never be Seená.

Usually Caitlin avoids looking in mirrors at all in the morning because a crowd of people that early is just too hard to take. But two people seem ... if not manageable, at least bearable. She studies them both through the toothpaste flecks.

The woman is maybe thirty-five. Too heavy but not really fat, dressed in wide-leg khaki pants and a yellow sweater. She carries an infant on one arm and may or may not be pregnant with another. Her hair is cut in a 1940's style, side-parted with a wave falling over one eye. The boy wears what appears to be purple garbage bags strung with tiny glowing wires. His eyes are startlingly, aggressively blue, bluer than any sky Caitlin has ever seen. Otherwise, he looks like—

“Group in five minutes,” calls Hardin, rumbling down the hall like a snow plow. “Josh, Caitlin, Seena, five minutes.”

“Screw you,” Seena calls back from her room. That’ll lose her ten points, maybe even risk a session in the time-out room, but Seena won’t care. Caitlin drags the comb once more through her hair and tries tucking it behind her ears. No better.

“Four minutes,” Hardin brays, plowing back in the other direction.

Time. *“Had we world enough and time...” “Time is money.” “You can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”* Quotations slide through Caitlin’s head, like pearls on a string. Where do they come from? How does she know all this stuff ?

She scrubs a spot of toothpaste off her sweater and picks at a hangnail. Briefly, for just a second, the woman with the baby on her hip looks outward and her gaze meets Caitlin’s. The woman shows no recognition. The boy in the purple garbage bags has disappeared, but a man in a silver brocade waistcoat, knee breeches, and elaborately tied white cravat strolls into the mirror, calling over his shoulder to someone hidden in mist.

“Caitlin!” Hardin bellows.

“Coming!”

She turns her back on the mirror just as the maternal woman and the knee-breeched man pass through each other like ghosts.

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“Let’s review what we know about Cathcart Syndrome,” Dr. Jensen says, and everybody groans.

“*Again?*” Josh says. “Like we don’t already have this stuff coming out of our asses?”

“Language,” Dr. Jensen says mildly. She’s a tiny, middle-aged woman in a white doctor coat. Caitlin, lying in bed at night, can somehow never picture Dr. Jensen’s features. Along with so much else she can’t picture.

Josh drawls, “Are you asking what language ‘ass’ is?”

Dr. Jensen ignores this, saying, "Let's review the information for Seth," and everybody looks at Seth, who blushes.

Caitlin feels sorry for him. He can't be more than thirteen, skinny and pimply and scared, with ears that stick out like mailboxes. He only arrived on their floor yesterday, when Michael was transferred to another ward, and Caitlin knows what lies ahead for him. Roth, that fat prick, is already sharpening his talons. To make it worse, Seth is sitting next to Josh, blond and green-eyed Josh, who is probably the hottest guy Caitlin has ever seen. The contrast is painful.

Dr. Jensen says, "Who wants to start the review?"

"I will," Pam says. Of course. Seena rolls her eyes: *Suck-up*. Caitlin grins.

Group is held in the lounge, a light-green room as windowless as all the others in the Manhattan Institute for Adolescent Behavior. A glass wall separates the room from the corridor where Hardin, three hundred pounds of fat and muscle, lounges on duty. Dr. Jensen perches on the edge of a chair as if she's about to take flight. Her head tilts to one side. The eight teenage patients—*four of each sex*, Seena said once, *like we're going to hold a fucking prom*—sprawl on sofas and arm chairs whose stuffing peeks from various slashes. Seena sits on the floor, her bones jutting sharply from her shoulders, wrists, cheeks. Caitlin wishes she looked like Seena, but the only way she could get that slim would be to vomit up absolutely everything she eats, and she can't even bring herself to stick her fingers down her throat. Also the staff might hear her puking and put her in time-out, and she can't take that chance.

Pam, her eyes feverish with the desire for praise, recites carefully. "Cathcart is a brain disorder. People think they see reflections of people who aren't really there, who may be projects of—"

"Projections of,'" Dr. Jensen corrects gently.

"Yeah, *projections* of parts of the person's personality. Parts that they, uh, like are rejecting."

Seth looks even more scared. Dr. Jensen says, "Very good, Pam." Seena mimes barfing.

Roth sneers, "It would be even better if she had the slightest idea what any of that means."

"I know what it means!" Pam says. Her face reddens.

"Yeah? What?" Roth gives her the nastiest smile Caitlin has ever seen from him, which is saying something. Roth is a pig, but he's smart. "Explain narcissistic projection to us, Pam."

"That's enough, Roth," Dr. Jensen says.

"Yeah, Crotch, that's enough," Seena says. She's told Caitlin that her goal is to get Roth to blow up in Group so that Hardin will take him down. So far this has not happened.

Roth says to Seena, "Your attempt at wordplay is pathetic beyond belief."

"Better than your crotch play." Just last week, Seena caught Roth masturbating. "Now *that* was pathetic."

"Enough, both of you!" Dr. Jensen says. Seena grins at Caitlin. Roth clenches his fists. He's not as big as Hardin, but his fists remind Caitlin of bananas curled into the fetal position. "Pam, have you seen any of your projections since our last Group?"

"Just the old lady in the hop skirt."

"Hoop skirt," Caitlin says, before she can stop herself. Pam's bestial stupidity irritates Caitlin, although she knows it's not poor Pam's fault. Pam is a born butt, dithery and moronic and terrified of pissing off anybody in power. How did Pam ever survive on the streets before she entered the Institute? How did Caitlin? If she *was* on the streets, if that's what really happened. There's so much she can't remember. Since she came here time has folded up on itself like one of those Mobius strips she learned about ... where?

Dr. Jensen says, "Anybody else see any of their projections? Josh? Sam?"

Josh, who sees his people in standing liquid, saw The Boy Who Talks To Dogs in his breakfast milk. Dr. Jensen's bird-flat eyes sharpen. Caitlin has noticed that some "projections" interest the doctors and therapists more than others. Josh says, "He had this big dog with him, a Bernese Mountain."

"Are you sure of the breed?" Dr. Jensen says.

"Yeah. I remember from ... before." Josh's handsome face spasms, as it

always does when he mentions Before. Sometimes Caitlin thinks she can *feel* his attempts at recall, reflections of her own vain efforts. Yet some things are perfectly clear. History. Physics. Literature. “*A rose red city, half as old as Time...*”

“And what do you think the boy talking to the dog represents?” Dr. Jensen’s eyes are less sharp now. *Less invested*, Caitlin thinks.

Josh says doubtfully, “Memories I’m rejecting about dogs?”

“Could be. We’ll talk about it in the one-on-one.” She smiles at him. Caitlin hates that Josh smiles back. “Anybody else?”

Jasmine, a tiny black girl with the features of a movie star, saw The Pirate in a corner of her room. Roth has seen a few kids on bicycles. Sam shakes his head. He never talks in Group, not a word, although he must say something in one-on-one, or surely Dr. Jensen would ride him harder? Sam is a tall half-Chinese kid, older than the rest, maybe even twenty. Muscles ripple along his arms. There’s a look in his black eyes that makes everybody leave him alone, even Roth.

“And our scholar?” Dr. Jensen says. “Caitlin?”

“Nothing,” Caitlin says flatly. Seena grins.

“Are you sure, Caitlin?” Dr. Jensen says gently, almost pityingly: *You can be one of us if you just cooperate.*

“I’m sure.”

“I saw something,” Seena says. “I saw a naked black guy with this incredibly huge—”

“That’s enough, Seena!”

“Don’t you want to know about my projections, doc? They’re a lot better than brown-nose Pam’s.”

Pam says, “I’m not—”

Seena says, “Sure you are. You give the fucking jailers whatever they want. A clear case of Stockholm Syndrome.”

“Stock ... I thought it was Cathcart Sindom?” Pam says, bewildered, and

Roth whoops with laughter.

“God, you’re dumber than a bucket of hair!”

Pam starts to cry. Jasmine puts a tentative hand on her arm. Dr. Jensen starts to say something but it’s drowned out by Roth, who howls, “Even dumber than Jasmine is dirty!” Jasmine, who does hate to shower although nobody knows why, looks up and her pretty face crumples. And then all at once Sam is flying through the air, landing on Roth with both hands around Roth’s fat neck.

People scream. Hardin barrels through the door, tries to pull Sam off Roth, fails. Dr. Jensen yells, “Security!” and pushes buttons on her handheld. Seth crawls behind the sofa. Pam goes on screaming long after everybody else has stopped. Josh takes advantage of the chaos to dash toward the locked front door. Two more orderlies rush in and grab Sam.

Seena rolls on the floor in helpless laughter, her anorectic bones revealing knobs like misaligned gear heads. “Sam is in love with Jasmine! Who knew!”

Caitlin slips out of the room after Josh. She’s smiling but she also feels the need to get away. Another crazy day at the crazy farm, growing wild weeds. Josh has already been collared by Security. In the girls’ bathroom, Caitlin gazes into the mirror. She sees a black man dressed in rough brown wool, a ringleted child in a white dress and heavy brown shoes, and the boy in the wired purple garbage bags. He seems to look directly at Caitlin. She scowls at him, and after a moment he shoots her the finger and turns away.

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Caitlin sits across from Dr. Covell in one-on-one. He says, “Why won’t you admit that you see any of your projections, Caitlin? You’re the smartest patient here, by far, and older than the rest except for Sam. You test with an IQ in the genius range, so I know you’re intelligent and educated enough to realize that the first step toward getting well is admitting you have a disorder.”

He—all of them—always make it sound like some transient condition from outside: *You have a cold, you have the flu, you have a disorder*. Something that can be rooted out with proper medication and bed rest. Caitlin looks away from him. He’s fairly young, with dark hair and long thick eyelashes and a great body. Could Dr. Jensen actually be stupid enough to think Caitlin would respond to this man just because he’s a hottie? Maybe Dr. Jensen is that stupid ... never underestimate the stupidity of the desperate.

Desperate. Now why did she think that about Dr. Jensen?

She says, "I don't see any projections."

"Then why do you think you're here, Caitlin?"

"I can't remember why." This is true. *Teen runaways*—that's what they were all told they were. Maybe so, although the term seems far too daring, too adventurous, for what Caitlin knows herself to be.

Dr. Covell says, "What were you wondering about just then?" His eyes scratch at her face.

"I was wondering why there's no TV anywhere here."

"No, you weren't."

"And no windows, either."

"Both bring in more of the outside world than you're ready to deal with," Dr. Covell says.

"Bullshit," Caitlin says, surprising herself.

"I think, Caitlin, you may have been hanging out too much with Seena."

Fright takes Caitlin. They could transfer Seena, as they transferred Michael. Caitlin can't survive in this alien place without Seena.

The weakness of confusion must show on her face because Dr. Covell abruptly attacks. "When you said 'Fuck off' into the mirror this morning, who were you talking to?"

Caitlin stares at him. The bathroom is bugged, maybe even has cameras. Have they watched Caitlin shower, pee, shit? Her face grows hot. But she's proud of her level tone when she says, "I think you may have a civil-rights lawsuit on your hands."

"I said you were intelligent." His tone is admiring. She hates him.

"I'm intelligent enough to know you must have informed all our parents

that we're here. How come nobody has visited any of us?"

"We can't locate relatives for anyone in your ward. Your fingerprints aren't on file anywhere and, remember, you couldn't even supply your own names. 'Caitlin' is a name you chose for yourself when you arrived."

This is true. Caitlin has harrowed her brain looking for her real name, her real self, but found nothing. Dr. Covell gazes at her. She senses that he is smarter than Dr. Jensen, and so more dangerous. She leans back in her chair, pretending nonchalance, knowing that he recognizes the pretense. Her heart hammers. "My former name is irrelevant to me."

"And are your projections 'irrelevant,' too?"

"I don't see any projections."

"Then you were talking to yourself in the mirror?"

"Yes. I don't like my looks. I wish I looked like Seena or Jasmine."

For a nanosecond he looks uncertain. What she said could plausibly account for that "Fuck off," to the mirror, since her statement is completely accurate. She'd give anything for Seena's elegant boniness, for Jasmine's petite femininity. Dr. Jensen's plan, if that's what it was, has been turned against itself. *This* man would never underestimate the value of physical beauty.

"You're a pretty young woman," he says with a therapist's combination of prim decorum and professional reassurance.

"Can I go now?"

"Yes." But he suspects that he's been played, she can sense it from his face, and his need to control the situation reasserts itself. He says, "It would just be better if you spent less time with Seena."

She nods, shrugs, leaves. She grips her hands together as tightly as Sam gripped Roth in Group. Seena is her only friend here. Seena, who takes chances on everything, including befriending Caitlin. Caitlin would never have made the first move. And it is Seena who gives her the strength to keep silent about the people in the mirror, to keep at least that for herself in a place where nothing else is private. She cannot lose Seena, too.

The glass window on Dr. Covell's office door reflects Caitlin's face as she leaves. Her face, and the woman with the baby on her hip.

* * * *

Caitlin awakes in bed, in total blackness, to find a hand over her mouth. Terror swamps her like a long rolling wave, but before she can bite the hand or scream around it, Seena says, "It's me, don't scream! Slide over."

Completely disoriented, Caitlin moves toward the wall and feels Seena's body fit close to hers in the narrow bed. Caitlin whispers, "What happened to the lights?" The Institute is always at least half-lit. "And how did you—"

"Dunno. Maybe some kind of power blackout. I just crawled along out of sight to your room. Come on, we're getting out."

"What?" Now Caitlin can hear people in the hall, calling to each other. Hardin bellows something unintelligible. Even before her door opens, Seena has slid over Caitlin, toward the wall, and dropped soundlessly behind the bed. A flashlight shines into the room and someone says softly, "Caitlin?" She lies still, eyes closed, her breathing as regular as she can make it. The door closes.

"How—"

Seena says, "All the power is off, cameras and e-locks and all their prison shit. Come on." In the blackness she fumbles for Caitlin's hand. Caitlin doesn't move. Seena says, "What the ... you *want* to stay in here?"

"No." But she's terrified to leave, to act. Still, all she has to do is follow Seena.

She yanks the blankets up over her pillow and rounds them like a body. Seena pulls her along, but not toward the door ... if the door is indeed where Caitlin thinks it is in the total blackness. Where are they going? The first thing Hardin would do is barricade the door to the ward. All at once she realizes: the closet. It's no more than a doorless alcove with a clothes pole but no hangers—can't give mental patients anywhere to hide or anything to hurt themselves with—but in the ceiling is a panel with an e-lock.

She whispers to Seena, "Don't try to climb on the clothes pole. It's not strong enough."

“I know. Get down on all fours. Quick!”

Seena climbs on Caitlin’s back. Despite Seena’s height, she can’t weigh more than ninety pounds. Wood creaks faintly as she pushes open the panel. Caitlin thinks, *She’ll get up there but I can never do it.* ... She is too heavy, too stiff. Seena climbs down and whispers, “It’s open. Stand on me and go up.”

“But I—”

“Just the fuck do it!”

Caitlin feels with her foot for Seena’s bony back. Under her bare toes it feels like walking on sharp pebbles. Her hands grope wildly for the edge of the opening in the ceiling. She finds it, but there’s no way she can haul herself that far upwards....

“I’m here,” a voice says softly from above. Josh.

For a second she’s so dizzy that she actually thinks she might fall. Then his groping hands find hers and pull. Caitlin gives a little jump on Seena’s back—oh, God, what if she *breaks* it?—and Josh hauls her over the edge like a beached whale. He shoves her aside and reaches down for Seena, so much lighter, so much fitter.... Caitlin feels Seena land beside her and hears the panel close.

She can smell Josh, a masculine odor that sends blood rushing into her face. She’s never been so close to him. Her most fervent hope is that he never figured out how often she dreamed of this, never saw her eyes tracking his every gesture, never caught the longing she tried with every tendon to hide from him. You had to hide love. If you didn’t, you opened yourself up to terrible humiliation. Caitlin doesn’t know how she knows this, but she does.

A small light blooms, and Seena says admiringly, “Where the fuck did you get *that*?”

“Stole it.” A flashlight, sending a single swaying beam as Josh swings it, like a pale yellow crayon stroke across the cramped world.

They are jammed together in some sort of horizontal service shaft made of plastic lattice. As the beam strikes her, Caitlin shrinks inside her blue cotton pajamas. Seena wears a red T-shirt and skimpy black panties, Josh a white tee and boxer shorts incongruously printed with golf clubs. Caitlin’s glad when they crawl ahead of her. All she has to do is follow.

To where?

The other two don't know, couldn't ever have seen these plastic passages before, either. But evidently Josh, in the lead, has a good sense of direction because he crawls quickly, decisively. "Keep up!" Seena hisses over her shoulder, and Caitlin does her best.

The passage ends in a wall of insulation and vertical beams, with another panel beneath them. Josh opens it, swings his mini-light around, and drops through with a thud that makes Caitlin gasp. But no one comes. Seena follows Josh. "Caitlin! Jump!"

It's maybe eight feet down to what looks like the narrow landing of a staircase. She'll tumble down the stairs, break something, make an ass of herself....

"I'll catch you!" Josh says, and Caitlin slides clumsily over the edge. His arms break her fall, hold her as she steadies. It seems to Caitlin that he holds her longer than necessary. A lance of ... something shoots through Caitlin's body, all the way from just behind her eyes to her knees, which turn watery. But Seena is already tugging her down the dark stairwell.

Voices sound somewhere above. How many floors are there to the Institute? Which one have they been on?

The second, apparently, because one floor down Josh's light shines on red lettering: EMERGENCY EXIT. ALARM WILL SOUND. "Not today, it won't," Seena says and reaches for the door handle.

"Wait!" Caitlin says. "It's winter out there!"

Josh says, "It's winter?"

"I asked Dr. Jensen. And this is *Manhattan*." Winter in New York means cold and snow, and the three of them are wearing almost nothing.

"Fuck that," Seena says. "I'd rather freeze than—" The lights go back on.

Immediately alarms begin to sound. Seena hurls herself at the door, which adds one more alarm to the clamor. They run through—and stop dead.

“*What...*” Josh. He falls silent.

They huddle outside a brick-and-steel building, facing a jungle. Enveloped in it, almost engulfed by it, even with the solid building behind them. Vines thick as a man’s body twist from trees soaring above them, and from the vines shoot out smaller vines interlaced, thick with strange green leaves pulpy as soft fruit. The heat forms a second medium of its own, a dense humid pool thick as water, and the smell...

Footsteps pound down the staircase beyond the open door behind them. “Come on!” Seena cries and plunges into a hole in the dense jungle. Caitlin hangs back until Josh grabs her hand, and then something that isn’t reason or logic or even choice takes her, and she lets him push her after Seena, crawling as if her life depends on it, and the thought comes to her, finally, that maybe it does.

In just a few minutes they’re past being located by anyone brave enough or stupid enough to follow. They squeeze through *this* small opening instead of *that* one a dozen times; each opening swishes softly closed behind them. In some places Caitlin crawls over real grass, but the grass seems dead. Noise ceases the deeper they go, except for their own breathing. Dim green light suffuses everything from above, no brighter than Josh’s flashlight but uniform. The smell is neither good nor bad but very strong, the musky odor of something like mushrooms, underlaid with a sharp, not unpleasant spice that tingles in her upper nose.

“Okay, stop,” Seena pants. “They can’t ... get us ... here.”

Caitlin puts her head between her knees. They crouch in a sort of small clearing, except it isn’t “clear.” Vines blot out the sky, twine across the jungle floor, sway all around them. It’s like being inside a writhing ball of yarn.

“What *is* this?” Josh says, and, at the question, Caitlin feels her mind steady. She clings desperately to logic as the only thing she recognizes about herself, or the situation. What have they done? The Institute was at least safe, at least known. While *this*...

“It’s supposed to be February,” she says rapidly. “This isn’t February in Manhattan. So either this isn’t Manhattan or it is and ... and something happened. When we were taken.”

The word surprises her: *taken*. Yet that seems right, and all at once Caitlin has an image of herself in a deep cellar, a room with no windows and shelves lined

with jars and a fruity smell like jam ... the image vanishes.

Josh and Seena stare at her, but not with complete incomprehension.

Seena says slowly, "I remember being ... taken. Some of it, anyway." Her voice speeds up, vomiting out the words as if it were breakfast. "I was gaining weight at the Institute and I hate that so I stopped eating and they made me, so I puked it up and that's when my memories started to return. It's like they put something in the food to *make* us forget!"

"As part of the treatment for Cathcart Syndrome?" Josh says.

"There is no Cathcart! There never was! Ask Caitlin! She's the smart one!"

Josh turns to her. "You never see any projections?"

Caitlin is suddenly aware of danger: She might get Josh angry at her. She might damage the improbable bond between her and Seena, based solely on their agreement about the so-called "Cathcart Syndrome." Worst, she might have to be honest, which always made you too vulnerable, almost as vulnerable as love. She can't take that chance.

But ... Josh's green eyes reflect all the green around them. The vine-jungle is so soft, so thornless, that nothing ripped his tee, but in places soft green pulp smears it, looking like guacamole. His blond hair falls over his forehead, which glistens with sweat from the incredible heat. His clothes cling to his gorgeous body. He gazes directly into her eyes.

"I see projections," she says slowly. "I just told the doctors I didn't."

"Why?" He sounds genuinely puzzled, and the wave of reluctance in Caitlin's mind crests into a tsunami. If they are all runaways, why should Josh trust the authorities at the Institute so much? Why would he be so puzzled that Caitlin doesn't?

She says, "I didn't tell Dr. Jensen because I wasn't really sure. I only ever saw my ... my projections just after I woke up, and I thought they might just be dreams. I'm still not sure."

He gazes at her steadily. They both know she is lying.

Seena says peevishly, "Isn't anybody interested in what I just

remembered?”

“Of course we are.” Caitlin turns to her in relief.

“Okay. I was living in this little city in Virginia, Suwaquahua, and sleeping in a, like, abandoned tunnel or something near the highway. It was a good squat. Then I was woke up by this flash of light and I thought—fuck me, I really did—that somebody dropped a bomb. And I thought, ‘Okay, this is me, dying in a nuclear blast, big deal,’ and then I started to cry—”

Caitlin tries to picture Seena in tears, and fails. Seena—tough, bony Seena, with that edge that Caitlin envies and covets, the edge that lets you take risks and damn the consequences—Seena, crying in a tunnel either because she was going to die or because she wasn’t. And Seena now, sitting cross-legged in this impossible jungle, her red tee a spot of color among the green and her bikini panties negligently exposing as much as they covered, bringing out the memory as if it were just another day of Group, of one-on-one, of in-facility school and bells for bedtime.

“I crawled out of the tunnel an hour after the big light. Maybe longer, I dunno. And everybody was *gone*. Almost everybody. I saw somebody a block away in front of the bakery, but he saw me and just ran. So I run around going, ‘What the fuck! What the fuck!’ and then the buildings, they ... they...”

“What?” Josh says. His eyes are now fastened on Seena, and Caitlin feels jealousy uncoil in her stomach.

“The buildings start to crumble. Yeah, crumble into some sort of powder but not all at once, just getting softer at first and flaking off like dandruff. So I run into this open area full of weeds and broken glass and shit, and I stay there where nothing can fall on me and watch Suwaquahua just ... just...”

Josh puts his hand on Seena’s arm. She shakes it off and glares at him. He says, “Sorry. Go on.”

She shrugs, once more the Seena that Caitlin knows. “Ain’t any more ‘on.’ I stayed there until the city was gone and the sky was full of planes and helicopters and fuck-all, and goons in hazmat suits picked me up. And then the assholes at the Institute made me forget all of it.”

Caitlin considers Seena’s story. A whole city that just crumbled away ... some sort of advanced terrorist weapon? Is that even possible?

None of this is possible.

Josh says to Seena, “And your projections? You always made up stuff, nothing real.”

Seena’s glare deepens. “Why the fuck do you care about my projections?”

Josh smacks one fist into his other hand, a gesture so violent that Caitlin jumps, backing into a thick, looping vine. Josh shouts, “We have to survive out here or go back—don’t you get that? Any information at all might help! How the fuck do I know what information we need to understand this mess?”

“Okay, okay, don’t come in your shorts! Jeez! I see the same four people, that’s all. An old lady in a rocking chair, two kids dressed real old-timey, and a man carrying a shovel. He’s dressed like some dumb history play, too. Now tell me how that’s going to help us!”

“I don’t know,” Josh says. “Like I said, I don’t know what will help. But we need to figure this thing out. I told in Group what my projections are. Caitlin?”

His green eyes gaze at her, but not angry as they were with Seena. Josh is gentle again, his face beseeching. Something turns over in Caitlin’s chest.

He takes her hand.

Danger.

She says, “I only saw my projections once, just as I woke up, and I think they were just dreams.”

“What dreams?”

“How can dreams help us?”

“We don’t know that yet.” Still gentle but still just out of reach, tantalizing her. Suddenly Caitlin is angry. He is just one more of the million things in the universe that she can never have.

She says, “Only two people, a boy in jeans and sweatshirt and a woman with a baby. Maybe the woman was my mother.”

Josh drops her hand.

He says, “We’re either still in Manhattan or we’re not, so—”

Seena interrupts him with “No way this is Manhattan!”

Josh doesn’t answer and Caitlin sees the moment that Seena gets it. Seena says, “You mean this is what Manhattan turned into, that it got nuked just like Suwaquahua.”

“We don’t know,” Josh says.

Caitlin doesn’t think there had been any nuke, but she keeps quiet, having nothing better to offer. Despite the heat, her hand that Josh dropped feels cold. He says, “I think our best bet is just to crawl in a straight line until we get out of whatever this jungle is. To someplace that isn’t jungle.”

Seena says, “How are we gonna keep to a straight line?”

Josh shows them the tiny compass set into the head of his flashlight.

Seena shrugs. “Okay. I guess it’s a chance.”

For what? Caitlin thinks but doesn’t say. She wants to be back inside the Institute. She wants Josh to hold her hand again. She wants this day to begin over. “*Call back yesterday, bid time return....*”

She follows Seena into the jungle.

* * * *

Hours later, hours of crawling under vines, climbing over vines, pushing aside vines, exhausts all of them. They escaped from the Institute after dawn but before breakfast, and by now it must be late afternoon. Caitlin’s stomach rumbles with hunger.

“Too bad that gizmo of yours doesn’t have a machete, too,” Seena mutters. “We’re resting now, macho man.” In two minutes she’s asleep.

Eventually Josh sleeps, too. Caitlin hears him snore, surprisingly deep and loud. She can’t sleep. Every muscle aches. She lies on her back, looking up at the layers and layers of vines and branches and soft pulpy leaves, and all at once she

wonders why they haven't just climbed as high as they can to see how far the jungle extends. Why hadn't Josh suggested that?

Why didn't she?

Seena moans in her sleep. Josh snores louder, flat on his back. Then rain starts, pattering softly on vegetation, and Caitlin sits up. She rolls a leaf into a cup, waits for it to collect several dozen drops, and drinks. The leaf unrolls. On its wet, glistening surface, Caitlin sees the man.

Only it's not a man. It's ... something else.

She bites her tongue to keep from crying out. The image, wavery and green from the leaf behind, is the head and bust of a pale creature with two eyes, no nose, and a siphon where a mouth should be. The head rises to a single horn like a rhinoceros, but the eyes are not those of a beast. Large, pink, with dark pupils flecked with green.

Fingers trembling, Caitlin shreds the leaf. The rain keeps falling. She closes her eyes, picks another, and holds it so it will coat with water.

This time the image is more blurry, a smear of green-tinged color, but by turning the leaf this way and that she can make it out: the man in eighteenth-century knee breeches and silver brocade waistcoat. He's partly turned away from Caitlin and she can't see his expression. She blinks to focus her vision, and when she opens her eyes again, Josh is staring at her.

"This leaf," she says, holding it out to him, "do you think it's edible? I'm so *hungry*."

"Don't risk it," he says softly. "We don't know if it's poison. Caitlin, come with me ... please?"

He's up and worming his way through the vines. Caitlin follows; she can't help herself. No more than ten steps and the thick curtain of vines hides Seena. Josh stops in another clearing, much smaller than the first, and sits. There's barely room to fit both of them. He says, "I've been thinking about what Seena told us."

"Yeah?" She can smell his sweat, his hair. She feels dizzy.

"What if we aren't in Manhattan but they brought us to Suwaquahua ... to what Suwaquahua became after the people mostly vanished and the buildings

crumbled and this bloom started.”

Bloom. The word makes Caitlin think of roses in a June garden. But Josh means something else, more like deadly algae on the ocean. She says, “Why would the government put a mental institution for kids right in the middle of the bloom?”

“I don’t know.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I guess not. Nothing makes sense. Caitlin ... I don’t want to die.”

She doesn’t want to die either, but says nothing.

“I especially don’t want to die a virgin.”

She goes still. More still—she thought she was motionless before but this is something much different, a halt in time itself, a caesura in the universe. Rain, filtered through leaves and vines and spiced air, patters on her bowed head.

Josh reaches for her.

Gently he pushes her onto her back, undoes the buttons on her soggy pajama top. Caitlin closes her eyes. If she looks at him, she will shatter. If she stays quiet, she will shatter. So she whispers, “Seena ... she’s so beautiful...”

“It’s you I want. Oh, Caitlin...”

He slides down her pajama bottoms, wads them beneath her ass. His fingers touch and probe her but very gently, and for a long time, until she feels warmth and wetness where they have never been before. When he slides into her, there is only a brief second of pain and then pleasure again. Later, after he’s finished, he doesn’t stop touching her until the pleasure crests and Caitlin cries out, clinging to him, tears flowing from her still closed eyes.

She can’t believe this is happening. Not to her.

He cradles her as they lie together. She wishes he would tell her ... what? About himself, how someone who looks like him could still be a virgin, how he knew to ... but Josh’s mind is still on the bloom. He says drowsily, “If this *is* Suwaquahua ... if Cathcart Syndrome ... God, I wish I had more information. For

instance, why you don't see any projections at all, sweet Caitlin?"

"I don't know."

"You really really don't?"

"No." She doesn't want to talk about this. She wants him to say he's in love with her, or at least that he liked sex with her. Instead, he falls asleep again.

Well, she's read that men do that after making love. *Making love*—the phrase seems so adult, so much something she never thought would be connected with her. She wants him to want her again. She wants to please him and is terrified that she won't, that he won't continue to want her. She will do anything to keep his arms around her, anything.

"Josh," she whispers, "I think I took AP science courses. I remember a lot of physics."

He doesn't stir. When he wakes, she will tell him. About her projections, about spacetime, about the theory that has been growing in her mind. She and Josh and Seena might die here, and this is all she has to give. In the rainy green light, even his profile is beautiful, sharp and strong as a Roman statue, an Egyptian god.

Caitlin knows she's being sentimental but she doesn't care.

Ten steps away, Seena screams.

By the time they reach her, Seena has gone rigid on the jungle floor. Her eyes are wide open, staring upward. Her body looks like concrete. Josh, who got there first because Caitlin took seconds to put her pajamas back on and all he had to do was pull up his shorts, kneels between Seena and Caitlin. He is shining his miniature flashlight inside her mouth. "Got to keep her from swallowing her tongue!"

It doesn't look to Caitlin as if Seena could ever swallow anything again. But after a few moments Seena's body relaxes. Josh withdraws the flashlight. Seena moans, twitches, opens her eyes.

"You're okay now," Josh says. He stands.

Seena scowls. "'Now?' What happened?"

Caitlin says, "You had a fit."

"I don't have fucking fits!" Seena is furious at the mere suggestion. She gets to her feet, glaring at them both. Darkness starts to gather.

"It's okay," Josh says soothingly. "Maybe you just cried out in your sleep."

"I don't do that either, asshole!"

"Yeah, I know. You're one tough chick." He says it so comically, in such mock terror, that reluctantly Seena laughs.

"I am. And don't you forget it."

"No chance. So what do we do now, tough chick? Your call."

Seena considers. The greenish light is almost gone. "Can't do anything until tomorrow, except sleep some more. Shit, I'm so hungry. Caitie, you okay?"

"Yes," Caitlin says. She wants to sleep beside Josh, their hands touching, their thighs pressed together. But he says "Bathroom break," and vanishes into the bloom.

Seena grumbles, "How can he piss when he hasn't drunk anything? God, I *am* tired. Still."

She lies down. So does Caitlin. When Josh returns, he curls up as far from both of them as he can get in the little clearing, and Caitlin lies in the total, impenetrable dark feeling her heart split along its seam.

It is hours, years, eons before she can sleep.

* * * *

Josh and Seena are gone.

The jungle is still dark and silent. No insects, no birds. Time stretches like taffy. But eventually Caitlin sees the thin beam of light, hears them creep back into the clearing. Josh whispers something, unintelligible. Seena gives a muffled laugh. Her voice is louder than his: "...terrific in the sack, Josh."

Caitlin says, "I'm awake."

They both pause.

Caitlin says clearly, "Seena, what happened when you were first taken to the Institute?"

Seena says, "*What?*"

"You heard me. When you were first taken to the Institute, where were you and what did you see?"

"Caitie, what's wrong with you, girl? You know none of us remember that shit!"

Caitlin looks at Josh. "It was in the flashlight, wasn't it? The flashlight you just happened to have when there just happened to be a black-out. The flashlight with a compass and enough of that drug to keep the patients from recalling too much, because they go catatonic when they do, right? Like Seena did, like all those ones you doctors lost when you first started messing with our so-called 'projections' —"

"He's no doctor, he's a patient like us!" Seena says. "What the fuck is *wrong* with you?"

"He's no patient," Caitlin says. "But you're right, he's no doctor either." She feels almost like two people, one watching the other with astonishment, eyeing this Caitlin who can talk in such a dead-quiet voice even as her guts collapse in her belly. "What are you, Josh? An actor, a pro? Playing the role of a patient, and willing to do anything for a certain kind of information. Including sex with both of us." Caitlin might have been a virgin, but she read books. Josh's control, his intimate knowledge of how to make a girl ready....

Seena makes a strangled noise.

"Why is it so important that Seena and I tell you our projections? What do you suspect we see that you haven't been able to get out of Roth, or poor stupid Pam, or Seth, or any of the others rotting away someplace before you found a drug that blocked memory?"

"Caitlin," Josh says, and then all at once his voice changes. He stops shining the flashlight on Caitlin and switches it off. She can still see his outline, gray against

gray-green; dawn is beginning. “You’re a smart girl, aren’t you? All right, yes. They were walking a very narrow line here between losing you survivors and getting information out of you. Your minds somehow got altered when the bloom happened and nobody knows how. Too much memory and you collapse. Too little and they couldn’t learn anything. It was a—”

“So you convince us we’re all mentally ill and destroy us that way? In the name of science?”

“In the name of—”

Seena suddenly shrieks, “I’m nobody’s lab rat!” and launches herself at Josh.

He’s not expecting it; he was focused on Caitlin. Seena knees him in the balls and he shouts in pain. Her nails rake his face, and then she points two fingers and goes for his eyes.

Caitlin deflects her barely in time. Caitlin doesn’t even think first; she just launches herself at Seena and her greater weight takes them both down, crashing into the wall of soft swaying vines. Josh is doubled over in pain. Seena scrambles off the ground before Caitlin can recover from the fall. She dives at Josh again.

All Caitlin has—all she has ever had—are her words, her mind. She says quickly, “I know what the jungle is, Seena! I know how to save ourselves!”

It works. Seena slows, glances back, kicks Josh once in the stomach, and turns toward Caitlin. “How?”

“Not in front of him.”

Seena nods. She jerks Caitlin upright—how can that skinny starved body be so strong?—and half-drags her away from Josh, bleeding and gasping on the ground. Caitlin says, “Will he—”

“He’ll live, the asshole. Come on!”

Caitlin snatches up Josh’s flashlight and lets Seena lead her on. The light brightens; the jungle seems less dense here, or at least walking is easier. Something glints through the trees, disappears, glints again. Abruptly they emerge on the banks of a river, vines trailing in the water and crowding a tiny island a hundred yards from shore, an island that is mostly exposed rock rising in three

regularly spaced humps.

Seena gasps, “I know this place! That’s Carson Island, this is where the Blackwater hits Suwaquahua Creek—we’re in *Suwaquahua*! But where’s the factory? Mallory’s? The Old Blue? They’re all gone—what the fuck *happened here*?”

She doesn’t remember what she told Josh and Caitlin earlier, before Josh re-medicated her. But she will remember, and so will Caitlin, and then—how much time do they have? Time—it’s all about time.

Caitlin goes still. She can’t do this.

Yes. She can. She has to.

“Come on, Seena. Down to the river.”

“What the fuck—”

“Just do it!”

The river is still and gray, a dawn mirror. Caitlin lowers herself to the very edge and peers down. Different people are there, people she hasn’t seen before, wandering in and out of the gray mist: black men in nothing but rough brown loin cloths, men in red or green British regimentals, an Indian in deerskin, one woman in a white muslin hoop skirt and another in a fringed knee-length dress with long ropes of beads. That one, laughing, waves a cigarette holder. Her lips are painted scarlet. She steps daintily away from the river, as if onto a dock, in her high heels.

“Seena, what do you see in the river?”

“Have you gone —”

“*What?* Tell me!”

“Nothing. No fish, no garbage, nothing. Just water.”

“Where did you see your people? Not the ones you made up for Jensen and Covell—the real ones?”

Seena squats beside her. Her tone is unexpectedly gentle. “You’ve flipped out, you know that?”

Caitlin hauls her gaze away from the river just as the boy in purple garbage bags shows up. She grasps Seena's bony wrist. "Please, Seena, it's important. Who did you see and where did you see them?"

Seena looks away, says, "Only in other people's eyes. The old lady in the rocking chair, the two kids dressed mega-retro, the guy with the shovel. And a few dudes in even weirder stuff ... why?"

"Dudes in weirder stuff ? Like purple garbage bags with lighted wires?"

"Yeah—how did you *know*?"

"Look in my eyes now. Tell me what you see."

Seena clearly does not want to do this. But she doesn't pull her wrist away from Caitlin, and after a moment she leans close. She smells of sweat, sex, and the spicy mold of this new jungle.

"Oh my God!" Seena jerks away so fast she nearly tumbles into the river. The boy in purple garbage bags looks up, annoyed. And behind him, materializing from the mist, is what Caitlin knows Seena has just seen in Caitlin's eyes: the jungle-pale creature with pink eyes, no nose, and a horn on its head.

"What's *that*?" Seena demands. "Caitie..."

"I think it's part of this jungle. Or will be." She can hardly believe she is saying this.

"Make sense!" Seena, who always becomes angry when she's frightened, is getting furious now. Caitlin doesn't want that anger turned against her. Seena's hands are balled into spiny fists.

"I think we see the past, Seena. Ever since the ... since Before ended. That's why all the hoop skirts and slaves and British soldiers and 1940's dress and all of it. Whatever destroyed the human city also changed the minds of everybody left alive, everybody underground at the time—it changed the electrical field or something..." This sounds totally inadequate, but Caitlin has no time to relate to Seena her analogy of consciousness folding and warping, the way spacetime folds and warps in physics. "Anyway, we see the past that lived on this spot. This place was probably a river town for a long time."

“You’re full of shit! That’s impossible!”

“In physics I once learned ... no, please, Seena, don’t go, just listen to me for a minute ... spacetime is like a loaf of bread.” At the mere mention of bread Caitlin’s stomach growls, but at least Seena is listening. The river shines silvery as the sun rises.

“You can think of each minute as we experience it like a slice of bread. Everything that happens at, say, six in the morning on February 10 is on one slice. But the whole loaf is there all the time, past and present and future. Now imagine slicing the loaf at an angle.” Caitlin illustrates this with gestures in the air. Her stomach growls again. “The slices are all different. Our six in the morning on February 10 is on the same slice as, maybe, 1784 or 1942.”

Seena says suddenly, “Suwaquahua was founded in 1787.”

Caitlin hadn’t expected Seena to know anything like that. “Yeah. And Mr. Armstead—” the name jumps out of nowhere into her mind “—my physics teacher, he said there might be other dimensions, too, and time might run even more different there.”

“So I’m seeing people from other times and other *dimensions* just fucking popping up in your eyes? Get real, Caitlin!”

“Well, you come up with a better explanation!” Caitlin shouts.

“I can’t! Shit...” Seena sinks onto the riverbank. “What if you’re right? Then what’s that thing I just saw?”

“I don’t know.”

“But what do you *think* it is? You’re the brain, I’m just a dumb ho that—”

“No, you’re not.” All at once Caitlin starts to cry. It’s too much, and she’s so scared, and hunger gnaws at her insides like a rat. She unscrews the end of Josh’s flashlight to see the tiny flask of yellow powder. That’s all that kept Seena from going catatonic when she remembered Suwaquahua crumbling into powder. And memory was now returning to them both. How much powder to keep their minds here, in the present? And how long would the flask last?

“Stop crying,” Seena says, “or I’ll pound you to jelly. I mean it.”

She does mean it. Caitlin checks her sobs. The sun rises above the far end of the river.

“So aliens are slicing our bread differently,” Seena says. Her voice has the high, rapid breathiness of someone fighting panic. “And after they did this jungle-shit to Suwaquahua, we can see that. Shit, that’s why we were in the Institute ... the government wants to know what we see and why we see it. To figure out the future. But why not just ask us? Why the drugs and ‘Cathcart Syndrome’ and all those lies?”

“I don’t know,” Caitlin says.

“I know. Because the doctors are shithead assholes.” This answer satisfies Seena, who moves on to her next anger. “But the aliens—why did they do it? Why wreck Suwaquahua and make this creepy jungle? No, don’t tell me—they want to live here themselves. This is their idea of, say, a luxury condo, and the hell with humans. Hey!” she suddenly screams at the top of her voice, “Hey, shitheads, we were here first! It’s our place! Ours!”

“Not like that,” Caitlin says, and gets to her feet. All at once she understands, and gasps aloud. “*Not like that.*”

“Not like what? Caitlin, what are you—”

“They don’t *know.*”

Caitlin wades into the river. For a moment she thinks her legs won’t hold up, but they *have to*, just as she has to finally take the risk of action instead of thought. The water is warm as a bathtub. Ripples move away from her in concentric circles but they settle as she stands very still, waist deep. Overhead, a helicopter drones into view.

Seena says, “They’re looking for us!”

More likely, Caitlin realizes, belatedly, they’re responding to some sort of tracker on Josh’s flashlight. But she has no time for that.

“*The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things—*”

As the water returns to glassy smoothness, the people reappear. There are a surprising number of them to have ever stood in or on three feet of water; maybe the river has shifted over time. Caitlin ignores them, as they once ignored

her, until the alien form again appears out of the mist. She fixes her gaze on it, says, "I'm here. I'm here. I'm *here*."

Nothing.

She gazes harder, silent now but bending her mind forward, concentrating it on that one spot in the water, that one point on a slice of time that includes both her and this strange creature who wants her planet.

No response.

"Seena, get in here and look in my eyes!"

Seena does. Something about Caitlin has compelled her, although Caitlin cannot imagine what. She has never been compelling. But here Seena is, and after the water settles she squats down to look up into Caitlin's eyes as Caitlin looks down into the water. Now there are two of them taking action.

Seena makes a soft noise, undecipherable.

I'm here, I'm here, I'm here....

Slowly the creature mirrored in the river turns its head. Its eyes move in some strange way, and the horn on its head waves in some unknowable pattern, and then it is standing on the river bank not five feet from them and Caitlin can feel its astonishment as if it were her own.

I'm here.

We didn't know.

No, not that, because there were no words. But Caitlin feels it, even as she feels her body start to go rigid and her mind slide away from her. She fumbles for Josh's flashlight but it's gone, maybe dropped into the river. But that's okay. The creature does something and there are more of them on the bank. Something is lifting Caitlin and pulling her gently, invisibly, to the shore. The helicopter sounds closer. Seena is thrashing in the river, screaming, "Caitlin! Caitlin!"

But she is not Caitlin. Her name is Amanda, and she was visiting aunt Jane in Suwaquahua when—but none of that matters. Amanda knows she will be all right. She knows because nothing is what she thought, not Josh nor herself nor the future. But there will be humans in the future, in Suwaquahua, because nobody in

the past or present dresses in purple garbage bags wired with tiny lights. That boy will stand on this place one day, alongside whoever else will be/is/was there, alien or human. And with them will be/was/is Amanda, because that bad-tempered boy in purple has—except for his artificially blue eyes— her face, her gestures, her lank hair the same color as Amanda’s when she was his age. Son, grandson, clone ... it doesn’t matter. He will stand on the banks of the Suwaquahua along with—

“Time heals all wounds...”

—the aliens who have remade it, and—

“Hot time in the old town tonight....”

—so will she, because she saw it in the mirror, timeless, the same place she saw the image of Caitlin/Amanda. Herself, who can do whatever she has to.