

THE BEST MONKEY

by Daniel Abraham

How do men choose the women we're attracted to? How do we fall into bed with one girl and not another? It feels like kismet. Karma. Fate. It feels like love. Is it a particular way of laughing? A vulnerability in their tone of voice? A spiritual connection? Something deeper?

All the studies say it's hip-to-waist ratio.

The mayor of mow-gah-DEE-shoo said today that she will no longer TAH-luh-rate the -

"Jimmy?"

Harriet stood in the doorway, beanstalk thin and world-weary. I put down the keyboard. My back ached.

"Herself wants to see you," she said.

"I'm transcribing next hour's blinkcast for - "

"I know. I'm on it. Go."

I shrugged and clicked the icon that transferred my work environment onto her screen. My work shifted sideways, my personal defaults - email, IM, voxnet, and a freeware database spelunker that had been the hot new thing a year ago and was now hopelessly outdated - falling into place behind it. I closed the notebook with a snap. Harriet was already gone. I heard her keystrokes as I passed her office.

Herself's office was the largest on the floor, ten feet by twelve with a window that overlooked the alley. The desk was Lucite neo-futurist kitsch. When I was young, we really thought the world was going to look like that. Now they manufactured it to poke fun at an old man's childhood dreams. My greatest comfort was that forty years down the line, their kids were gonna do the same to them.

The latest Herself looked up at me. Sandy hair swept up past her eyes. She wore the latest style in businesswear. It looked to me like something my grandmother would have worn, but with a self-tailoring neural net about as smart as a cockroach.

Herself was young enough to be my kid even if I'd started late. She was also my boss, and on her way up past people like me and Harriet. I sat in the cloth mesh visitor's chair. The air smelled like potting soil and plastic.

"Jimmy," she said. "Good. Look, I've got a new project. Top priority stuff. You in?"

Depends, I wanted to say.

"Sure," I said.

"Unpack Fifth Layer," she said.

One of the things I'd come to hate was the constantly changing jargon. Every six months, it was a new Him- or Herself spouting whatever the bleeding edge had been saying when they graduated college. As if *unzip* or *'rize* or *infodump me* were somehow better than *tell me what you know*.

"Fifth Layer's a constellation of fleshware and financial firms," I said. "In some trouble for anti-trust violations, but rich enough not to care much. World leader in paradigm shifts. I don't know more than anyone on the street."

"Roswell hypothesis?"

"I don't buy it," I said.

"Reverse engineering alien tech not clicky enough?"

Clicky meant interesting this month.

"Not plausible enough," I said. "But you don't pay me to believe things. I can write it that way if you want it."

"No, that's good. Vid this."

She mimed a few keystrokes, the computer interpreting what they would have been had a keyboard existed. A section of wall off to my left turned on, a video playback buffering up. I leaned back, the mesh beneath me accommodating my lower spine.

The recording was poor, jiggling like Dogme 95. A bar. Black wood and brown leather. I recognized the woman sitting in the booth before we were close enough to hear her. I'd have known her voice too.

"Three people," Elaine said. "Jude Hammer, Eric Swanson, and you. We should give you all medals."

"You're drunk, Elaine," the swarthy man across the booth from her said.

"Yes, I am," Elaine said, then turned to smile up above the camera at whatever servista had been wearing the camera. Her hair has gone white like snow, and her smile cut deeper at the corners of her mouth. "I am drunk. Very, very drunk. And I am very, very rich."

"Can I get you anything?" the servista asked, his voice made low by contact with the mic.

"No, I have everything," Elaine said. "Thanks to Jude, Eric, and Safwan, I've got it all."

"Elaine."

"Except discretion," Elaine said with a little bow.

The playback stopped. I looked over at Herself.

"Elaine Salvati," I said. "Head of something or other at Fifth Layer."

"Being indiscreet," Herself said.

"The other one? The guy in the booth?"

"Safwan Cádír," Herself said. "Works for Fifth Layer. Mathematical modeling. Biometrics."

I shrugged.

"Okay," I said. "You want it transcribed?"

"I want it explained. No one else has the file. We're going to be the point of origin on this one. We're taking the site up from accretor to source."

We're going to start producing news rather than just filtering it, and we're going to start with a scoop by following up on what appears to be a telling mention of names in a public place where even Fifth Layer's pet lawyers can't argue an expectation of privacy.

"Investigative journalism," I said and whistled low. "I didn't think people did that anymore."

"I'm old-school," Herself said. "Still in?"

I sat in silence for a few seconds.

"I used to know her," I said. "When we were about your age. You know that I used to know her."
"It's why you're here," Herself said.

* * *

Go back thirty years. Put the ice sheets back in place. Resurrect a couple billion people and a few hundred million species. Price milk about the same as gasoline. And there we were, in a different bar. Different people. My hair was black, Elaine's was dirty blonde. I was a sociology major, she was political science with an eye on law school. The television was still a countable number of individually streamed channels. Summer sun peaked in at the windows, throwing golden shadows across the walls.

Another woman sat just down the way, something clear and dangerous-looking in her glass. My eyes kept shifting to her, the way her dress clung to her, cupping her breasts. I wanted to listen to Elaine, but I couldn't stop watching the other girl. Some things don't change.

"So they used steroids," Elaine said. "So what?"

"You mean apart from it's cheating."

"Why is it cheating?"

"Because they have a bunch of rules and one of them is don't use steroids?"

Elaine waved the comment away.

"It's a stupid rule. They're athletes. It's a business where they're paid to be stronger. There's a way to get stronger. They do it. What's the problem?"

The woman shifted, her skirt riding a few inches up her thigh. I took a deep breath and tried to remember the question.

"Apart from rectal bleeding, unpredictable rage, and shrunken testicles?"

"That's a tradeoff," Elaine said. "They also make more money in a season than you and I are likely to do. More than someone who doesn't use steroids, for damn sure. They're grownups. Let them decide if it's worth it."

"You're not serious."

"I am," she said, slapping her hand against the bar. "Why is it okay to make yourself stronger by lifting weights, but not by injecting steroids? We're paying these guys huge money to push for excellence, just don't push too *hard*?"

I drank the last of my bourbon, ice cubes clicking against my teeth, and waved at the bartender for another. A slick young man in a suit slid up to the bar at the woman's side. Her sudden smile lit the room.

"So what?" I said. "Take off all the restrictions? Just let anyone do anything they want?"

"It would be a real contest then," Elaine said. "You want to see the limits of human excellence? Then pull out the stops and see what happens. It'd be a hell of a show."

"They're using *drugs*," I said.

"So are we," she said, lifting her glass. "Theirs make them strong. Ours make us careless. Seriously. Look at the argument. Saying you need to get a girl a little tipsy in order to get her into bed is just like saying you have to shoot steroids in order to get into the major leagues."

"I don't need to get girls drunk," I said, too loud. The new man glanced over at us. His lover had her hand on his knee. I looked away, and then back. She was still beautiful. It never hurt just to *look*. Elaine caught me, followed my glance, rolled her eyes.

"You might want to try it," she said. "But think about it. We take a sick person up to normal, and that's good, but we take a well person up past normal into greatness, and that's bad?"

"I don't want to see chemists competing on the ball field for who has the best juice. I want to see something from the players," I said. "Those records? They aren't from inside the person. They're from outside."

"It doesn't matter where it comes from," she said. "Just if it works."

The way she spun the words brought me to realize she was coming on to me. I was always a little thick about that particular negotiation.

That was the first night we slept together, both too intoxicated to recall it clearly in the morning. A week after that, we were lovers. Six months after that we were friends. Thirty years later, I sat on the bus, notebook open as the afternoon traffic slid silently along the street. The windows were canted back, and the gentle breeze held nothing of the windstorm predicted for that evening. Elaine, who had never gone to law school, was the operations manager of Fifth Layer's research arm. I was what passed for a journalist, filtering stories from primary sources and translating them into in-house phonetics for hourly blinkcasts and daily drop feeds.

I spooled through the précis of Fifth Layer. Concatenating data was what I did all day, every day. I was pretty good. Breakthroughs in encryption. Computing. Basic physics. Engine design. Prosthetics. Everything they touched turned to gold, but the consensus was that it was a strange gold. There was something common to all the inventions, patents, breakthroughs. The Fifth Layer Look. It wasn't something that the peer reviews could identify, except that they seemed subtly wrong. They were elegant solutions, they were functional, and they were ugly.

And thus the Roswell Hypothesis.

It doesn't matter where it comes from, Elaine said. Just if it works.

The bus lurched, servos whirring almost louder than birdsong. It occurred to me that I was probably riding on Fifth Layer designs. I shifted in my seat and squinted out, trying to judge how long before we reached my stop and I could try walking the kinks out of my back. Or, failing that, how long before I could get home and take a couple pills for the pain. Ten minutes, I guessed. High to the north, thin clouds scudded fast in the upper atmosphere, the only sign of trouble coming.

Jude Hammer.

Eric Swanson.

Safwan Cádír.

Fifth Layer was the most innovative, off-center, powerful corporate intelligence in the world. And if Elaine was to be believed, it was all because of a mathematician, a choreographer, and a pedophile.

* * *

"Come in," he said. "Who did you say you were with?"

I explained who I worked for, that we were moving into primary source and out of accretion, and didn't talk about Fifth Layer or Elaine. Not to start. While I filled the air with my preprogrammed noise, I tried to make sense of the apartment.

Eric Swanson's place was small, even by the standards of the city. Two blankets were neatly folded on the back of a couch that clearly pulled out to become his bed. The kitchen was too small for two people to stand in. The smell of old coffee and shaving cream danced at the back of my nose like a sneeze that wouldn't come. The windows were laced with wire against the flying debris of the storms; deep gouges in the plastic caught the light and threw rainbows the shape of scars on the far wall. The only art was an old poster, lovingly framed, of a dance performance at Carnegie Hall from a decade and a half ago. The woman whirling on the print was beginning to yellow.

I had the sense that there was something wrong about the place - the couch placed poorly on the wall, the print too close to the corner. Functional, but ugly. Fifth Layer Look or poor decorating. I couldn't tell.

I came to the end of my prepared speech and smiled.

"And you're starting off with a piece on mid-level landfill reclamations?" he said, his arms crossed. "That's all I do these days. Reclaim refined metals from last century's dumps."

"Dance history, actually," I said. "Turns out American dance history is an emerging fetish market in Brazil. We're aiming for it."

"Well," he said. "Keep moving. I haven't been part of that scene in forever."

"That was one of yours?" I asked, nodding to the print. Something softened in the man's eyes. He looked at the poster fondly, seeing the past.

"Yeah," he sighed. "The last good time."

"Want to tell me about it?"

Eric's store of liquor was better than I expected. He gave me vodka so cold I could have poured water in it to make ice. He mixed in a little gin and leaned against one wall while he talked. The scene, he called it. Room enough in the world for two or three top-level choreographers who weren't slaved to pop-star porn gods or translating children's programming for live performance or - worst of all - second in command to a theatrical director. Only two or three who could do their own work with the best talent and unfettered by anyone else's vision. He moved his hands when he spoke; he smiled. It was like watching a man remember being in love.

He was a little drunk. And, I hoped, a little careless.

"I was King Shit after the Carnegie show," he said. "Seriously, I pissed rosewater. All the top tier were scared out of their minds of me."

CAR-nah-gee. SEAR-ee-us-lee. ROSE-wah-ter. It was a habit.

"Must have been great," I said.

"It was like doing cocaine for the first time, only it never wore off and your heart didn't pop."

"So what happened?"

"Gloria Lynn Auslander," he said.

"Another choreographer?" I asked, and when Eric snorted derision, "A lover?"

"A great fucking rack," he said, bitterly. "I never even met her. I just watched her tryout tapes. I'd been dancing professionally for fifteen years, and training for eight before that. I *knew* bodies. I *understood* them. There was no mystery for me, but there was something about this one fucking girl. I mean here I am, a professional, and all I can do is stare at her tits. It was humiliating. And the time pressure. And the performance anxiety. Look, I know how it seems from here, but back then, it really mattered. I was at the top of my game, and the whole world was watching me with sharpened teeth. The follow-up had to be better. Bigger. Perfect. I had to show I wasn't a one-shot. And I was looking at this girl trying to decide if she was the right one for the part, and I couldn't *tell*."

"So what did you do?"

He raised an eyebrow and swallowed half a glass worth of liquor at once.

"I changed my mind," he said.

The process cost the equivalent of a year's work, lasted a long weekend at a clinic in Mexico, and ended Eric Swanson's career. It should have been simple.

"It wasn't turning off my cock," Eric said. "It was just damping out that link between my visual cortex and Little Eric, you know? Take off the sexual response. Get rid of that little kick you get when you see a perfect face."

"Or a perfect rack," I said, and regretted it immediately. I put down the vodka, resolving not to drink anymore. Eric barely heard me.

"I can't tell you how excited I was. I was going to see pure movement. None of the distraction, just the form and the sweep. The power and the glory. It wouldn't even keep me from having a sex life, it was just that looking at women wouldn't turn me on. They'd have to touch me or talk dirty or, God, whatever. I didn't care. It was a small tradeoff."

"So what went wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "It worked perfectly. I was euphoric. I didn't cast Auslander. She was good, but her left ankle wobbled. And I was high as a kite. I'd never understood how much I'd suppressed sexual reactions until I didn't have to work at it anymore. And the bodies. Ah, God. It was like seeing for the first time. I was working twenty-hour days. The poor bastards in the troupe wanted to kill me. It was the best, most innovative, most interesting thing I'd ever done."

"It tanked," I said.

"Sank like a stone in the ocean," he said. "No one liked it. That's all it took. I had a couple more gigs after that, but it was gone. Dance is apparently all about sex. When you take it out, there's nothing left."

I left the apartment half an hour later with a few anecdotes about the scene that I would never use in any story. I'd brought up Fifth Layer twice, and been met with a blank incomprehension that didn't surprise me. If Eric had been there at the birth, he wouldn't be eking out a living digging through our ancestors' trash. He wasn't a conspirator; he was a symptom.

Back at my own apartment, I sat on my own blue couch and stared out at the sunset. My system played Duke Ellington remixes and boiled a bowl of deep yellow rice. I didn't drink anymore liquor. I was done being careless for the day.

I wondered whether the secret of Fifth Layer's success could be that simple. A cadre of semi-castrated researchers toiling away without looking down the bar at someone. And the long human tradition of

dance was only about sex. Not even sex and something more; just sex. Ballet, tap, jazz, everything was just one long primate fan dance. Take away the dirty thoughts behind it, and it all fell apart.

I didn't buy it.

* * *

"Hello?" I said, not entirely sure why I was speaking.

"Wake up, Jimmy," Herself said. "There's a problem."

I turned on the bedside lamp. It was a little after 2:00am. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

"What's up?" I asked. I expected her to say that the blinkcasts were down or someone had called in sick.

"The clip of Salvati popped up on a server in Guam. I had it shut down, but there may be other copies. Someone's pirated us. Are you anywhere with it?"

"Yeah," I said. "I don't know where yet, but I've got something. There's a clinic in Mexico. I'm trying to track it's funding, maybe a staff listing, but so far - "

"This is top priority," she said. "I need you on this now."

My bedroom seemed small in the darkness. Like the world outside was squeezing it.

"Okay," I said. "But I'm human. I've got to sleep."

"I'm sending over some sweetener," she said. Sweetener meant amphetamines this month. I recognized the tone in her voice. She was speeding. That couldn't be good. "This story's not going to take more than a week is it?"

Sleep when you're finished or I'll find someone else to do it. Someone who wants it more.

Fuck off, I wanted to say. It's my fucking liver you're playing with.

"Not even a week," I said. "I'm on it."

The system made the near-subliminal chime of a voxnet connection dropping. I got up, got dressed, bathed. I was too old to start a new career, and Herself was right. Accretors could sleep. Reporters did what they needed in order to get the story. I was starting to resent my promotion.

The amphetamines arrived by courier, a kid in his twenties with perfectly cut muscles, jittering eyes, and a bicycle built for a war zone. He looked like shit and radiated heat like he was burning. By the time I'd signed for the package, he was twitching to get moving again. I figured he was probably pretty good at his job.

The train took me south and east on a soft cushion of electromagnetic fields. I was a hundred miles from home before the eastern sky paled, the drugs humming in my veins. I felt like a million bucks. I felt smart and sharp and young. I felt like someone else, and I didn't like it. I stared at my notebook, but my mind was moving in ten different directions. Induced ADHD. Great plan.

I knew it would end with Elaine. Herself knew too, or she wouldn't have tapped me for the job. Now, with time short, I was tempted to go straight to the source. I pretty much knew what the pedophile was going to be now. He'd had his mind changed too, and been cured hallelujah, amen. Might as well let him go free, because he wasn't that man anymore. I had nothing to learn from him.

I could go to her now. Her or Safwan Cádír. Confront them. Get them to crack. The confidence came from the speed, and knowing that made me careful, made me not skip steps. Made me go see the pedophile.

Sex. Beauty. Elaine. Alien technology. The Fifth Layer Look.

There was something there. A rant she'd had, back in the day. I closed my eyes, my mind leaping around in my skull like an excited monkey, and tried to remember.

* * *

"You have to have beauty," she said.

"Yes, I do."

She cuffed me gently on the head.

We were at her place. The boxspring and mattress were on the floor, nestled into a corner. We were nestled in it. Christmas holidays, and she'd be going back to her family in a couple days. I lay against her, our skin touching, and the soft afterglow of sex fading like the last gold of sunset.

"I don't mean *you* you," she said. "I mean *we* you. You have to have a sense of beauty or you can't be . . . I don't know. Alive. You can't function."

I sighed and sat up. Our clothes were strewn on the thin brown carpet, my jeans and her blouse still twined around each other. Elaine pulled the blanket up over her breasts and stared at the ceiling, shaking her head.

"Still thinking about the art history final?" I asked.

"I should've just said that we have to *have* a sense of beauty. I mean not from a woo-woo spiritual it-makes-your-soul-better perspective. I should have gone all cognitive science on him. I should've said that ants have to have a sense of beauty. It's basic."

"Yes, because placing the aesthetic impulse in insects with eight neurons would make you a lot of friends in art history," I said. We were early enough in the affair that my sarcasm was still charming. It wouldn't always be.

"I even know the example," she said. "Wait a minute."

She got up, dragging the blankets with her. The cool air stippled my body, but I didn't get dressed or move to cover myself, and before long, she was back with a wide yellow legal pad and a black pen and the covers and her warmth. She dropped back to the bed, and I snuggled in while she wrote on the pad. Her skin was soft. That afternoon, I felt like I could have lived with my head against her thigh.

"Here," she said, giving me the paper.

1, 12

"What's next in the series?" she asked. I looked at the numbers. We were early enough in the affair that her intellectual gamesmanship was still charming. It wouldn't always be. I took the pad and pen.

123

She smiled.

"You think the rule is list out the numbers," she said.

"Isn't it?"

She took the pen back.

1, 12, 144

"The pattern could be multiply the last value by twelve."

1, 12, 23

"Or add eleven."

1, 12, 122

"Or just tack on another 2 each time. That one's not as pretty, but it's just as possible."

"Okay," I said. "Got it. It's a trick question. You can't pick the right answer."

She smiled.

"You can't pick a wrong one either. They're all right. And almost nothing we do has a right answer. Do you have pasta for dinner or a chicken sandwich? It's not like you can work it out logically, but you have to make a decision. Same for an ant. If there's two grains of rice, and it has to pick one of them up and haul it back to the colony, it's got to decide. If there's not a logical way to choose, there has to be something else."

"An illogical one."

"An aesthetic one," she said.

"So you think the ant picks the prettiest one?"

"What else would you call it? Making decisions between logically equivalent options is as good a definition of life as anything else I've heard. And beauty is the basis of making those decisions. And art is the exploration of beauty. I could have aced it. Instead, I talked about the fucking Etruscans. I'm fucked."

"You say it like it's a bad thing."

She dropped the pad of paper and leaned against me. The wall was chilly. The heater kicked on, whirring and wheezing like an old man.

"I need to get an A in this class," she said. "The competition for law school is . . . I *need* this to be an A."

"You'll be fine. You're brilliant."

"You're horny."

"You're beautiful."

"I'm naked."

"Same thing," I said.

* * *

How do women pick the men they fall for? Is it the bad boy charm? The good heart? Is it the way a man listens, the way he talks about his mother, the way he treats kids? Is it the size of his cock? The size of his wallet? What *really* makes a man handsome?

All the studies say it's height.

"I'm sorry sir," Jude said. I hadn't had a chance to speak yet.

The facility squatted on the edge of a newly planted forest. The meeting room looked out on thin, pale stalks hardly more than ten feet high that would someday become oaks. Jude - a huge man with a close-shaven skull and a canary yellow jumpsuit - sat across the table from me. When he'd been led in by the guards, his sneakers had squeaked on the linoleum. Now, he looked at me with wide, blue, sorrowful eyes. A basset hound made human.

"You're sorry?"

"Whatever it was I did to bring you here, I'm sorry for it," Jude said.

"What do you think brought me here?"

The eyes didn't harden so much as die. I could have read self-loathing or satanic pride or anything else into his expression, but I only wondered how many times you'd have to sit through confrontations like this before it just became a routine.

"I did something bad to a kid," he said. "Maybe your kid, maybe your grandkid. Maybe someone you know. I can't speak to that part. But you're here to tell me what I done was wrong. And sir, I'm here to listen."

"Actually, that's *not* why I'm here," I said. "I wanted to talk about the ways you tried to stop." It took him a few seconds. I watched the parade of emotions - surprise, confusion, distrust - play out in the shapes of his mouth and eyes. It ended with a slow, slitted reconsideration of me.

"I'm not sure what you're askin'," he said. The sir was gone. His voice had changed, contrition souring into distrust.

"You tried to stop," I said. "Maybe even before the first time, certainly after it. You didn't like where your mind was taking you. You tried to change it."

"That's so."

"I'm here to talk about how," I said.

We were silent for almost a minute. I was pretty sure we were going to stay that way for the whole half-hour visitation. Outside, birds danced between the small trees, their wings dark against the sky.

"They don't all, you know," he said. "They don't all try and stop. Most of the guys in here, they've bent their heads all up so it's okay. The kids had it coming or it don't really hurt 'em or God said they could or whatever. Ain't one in ten who can look it in the face."

"You did."

"I did," he said, and the tone was mournful. "I tried cutting my pecker off with a straight razor once. That the kind of thing you're looking for?"

PEH-kur off. STRAIT RAY-zer. Jesus Christ, what was I doing here?

"No," I said. "I want to talk about what they did to your brain in Mexico."

Jude leaned back, his plastic chair creaking. The ghost of a smile touched his lips and vanished.

"That one," he said. "Yeah. I remember that one. Made me sign all kinds of things, swear up and down not to talk to nobody about it."

"Well," I said, "maybe you shouldn't say then. Might get you in trouble."

He guffawed, and I smiled. I was in. We were friends now. Rapport, they called it.

"Well, hell," he said. "That would have been just after my second turn in the state pen. They didn't know about the kids when I was in regular prison. You don't talk about it there. Every man jack in there'll kill something like me. You just keep quiet and make up shit about the girl back home, same as everyone else. Anyway, I got out and back on the street, and I knew there was trouble coming. There was this site they gave me. Anonymous, they said, and maybe that was true. Anyway, I talk to this lady there, and she refers me off to this other site for folks with sexual problems. And they put me in touch with this research fella."

"You remember his name?"

"Too long ago."

"Cádir?"

"Nah. It was a white fella. Idea was I'd sign all this paper, and they'd put me in this trial group down in Mexico. Make it so I didn't see them like that anymore."

"Them?"

"Little ones," he said. "I wouldn't see them like that. I didn't have much choice, did I? Had to try something. So I signed up and they took me down. It wasn't much, really. Put me in one of those good brain scanners and showed me some pictures to see what was firing in my head. They didn't even have to go inside me to cut nothing. Just zapped me with a microwave. Had a fever for a couple days, but that was all."

"What happened?"

He paused, his fingers laced over his belly, his mouth pursed. Slowly, he shook his head.

"You know what the good thing is about bein' thirsty?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"If it gets bad enough, you die. That other thing. It can feel like bein' thirsty, but it just goes on and on and on. Never lets you go. I . . . well, I won't go into that. But it didn't work."

I leaned forward as the amphetamines shot a spike of rage through me. This wasn't the breakthrough I was looking for. Where was the cure? The victory? Eric Swanson had put himself under the knife, and it destroyed him. Jude Hammer it only didn't help. This couldn't be what Fifth Layer was based on. We were misinterpreting Elaine's drunken comments. We were seeing it wrong. I was hopped up on my boss's drugs and six states away from home for nothing.

When he spoke again, I was almost too wrapped up in my own mind to hear him.

"It changed me, just not the right way."

A pause.

"Yeah?" I said.

"You want to hear about that too?"

"I do."

"All right. It's your quarter. It used to be there was a particular kind of kid I was into. After they did what they did to me, I could look at . . . well, at a kid who I knew in my head was my type, if you see what I'm saying. All the things that used to get me going. But now they looked just like everyone else."

"That didn't help?"

"Nah. The pressure built up, just like always. And there were others started looking tempting. I don't like to talk about that. Them Mexico doctors didn't change what I do. They maybe switched who I was doing it to. That's all."

Something was moving in the back of my head, shifting like an eel in muddy water. The Roswell hypothesis. The Fifth Layer Look.

"Elaine Salvati," I said. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Hell, yes. Sounds like salvation, don't she? I thought it was a sign."

"She was in Mexico? At the clinic?"

"Yeah, sure. She was one of 'em. She can't help you, though."

I blinked.

"Help *me*?" I asked.

"I know why you're here, friend. You're looking to stop it. You're looking for a way to turn it off."

"No," I said. "No, it's not like that. I'm - "

Jude lifted a hand, palm toward me, commanding silence. He had huge hands. Strong.

"You don't have to convince me of nothing," he said. "Just let me tell you one thing, all right? There's only two ways to stop it. You get yourself put in someplace like this or you blow your fucking brains out. If you want my recommendation, I'd say the second one. And sooner's better than later."

His eyes weren't soft anymore. They weren't dead. They were the blue of natural gas. They were monstrous.

"Folks like you and me," he said, "I don't know what we are, but we ain't human."

* * *

She sounds like salvation.

There are some men who never drop an email or screen name, a phone number or voxnet node ID. In among their contact lists is the hidden history of their sexual lives. Every lover is retained there, even if they're never called or contacted. Whenever an impulse for simplification overwhelms them, those names

are spared from the purge. Just in case, without ever being more specific. *Just in case.*

I was one of those. Elaine's information was still on my system.

I sat in my hotel room, the video file looped. She laughed. Except discretion, she said. Voices came from the corridor. Children whining with exhaustion. A woman's laugh. The air smelled like artificial cedar and sterilizer. The crap I'd put in my blood wouldn't let me sleep. I had two messages from Herself queued and waiting to tell me, I was certain, how important this was, and how little time I had to get it right.

It was all going to end with Elaine, because somehow it all began with her. I wondered what it would be like, seeing her again. She'd climbed through the world, become someone important. I'd burned through a couple of marriages and ended in a dead-end job. She'd experimented unethically on human brains through an unregulated foreign clinic and released a known pedophile into the wild as part of an experiment. She'd had the most beautiful mouth.

There were a thousand ways it could go. I could call her; tell her that I knew, that I had Fifth Layer over the barrel. She could beg me to keep it quiet, and I could relent, and we could strike up our affair where it had ended half a lifetime before. I could say it was wrong, and that I was going to see it published, and she could send out a cleanup squad to disappear me. Or buy me off. Or laugh at me for thinking I mattered. My fingers hovered above the keyboard, waiting for me to hack off some limb of the decision tree.

I had all the data I needed to connect the Mexican clinic to the early R and D staff of Fifth Layer. I had the notes from my meetings with Eric Swanson and Jude Hammer. I had an idea what it was all about.

A quote. I'd tell her I was looking for a quote. Then we'd see what happened. Play it by ear. Get it done before anyone else could. Write it up, swallow some downers, and get to sleep before my brain turned to slag.

My fingers descended. I requested the connection. Every means of contact I had bounced back. Nothing worked. The Elaine Salvati I'd known wasn't there anymore.

* * *

No one from Fifth Layer returned my messages. I thought about cutting out the amphetamines. But at this point, I'd be sleeping for three days once I came down. I had to get it done before the crash. Before someone else saw the file and put it together.

I spent half of my savings to get a new suit. Black businesswear, pinstripes with RFID chameleoning that would automatically coordinate the colors with whatever shirt and tie I wore. A tailoring neural net more advanced than Herself's dress and complex enough to have its own sense of beauty.

I sat at the bar, alternating soda water with alcohol, keeping one eye on the door and another on the chemical hum in my bloodstream. Investigative reporting was a younger man's game. It wasn't the work I couldn't handle. It was the drugs. Toothless corporate jazz soothed and numbed the air around me. The servistas kept their distance from me. The murmur of conversations between the rich and powerful rose and fell like the tide.

I waited.

She came in Thursday night, Safwan Cádír on her arm. I could tell from the way they stood that they were lovers. She didn't see me, or if she did, she didn't recognize me. If I was right, it was more than time and age that would have changed my appearance.

I waited until they were seated, then until their drinks came. And then their food. I finished my drink, picked up my system, and headed over.

Safwan Cádír looked up at me. He was younger than I expected. His eyebrows rose in a polite query. Can I help you? I ignored him. Elaine saw Cádír react, followed his gaze, considered me for a moment with nothing behind her eyes. Then, a few seconds later than I expected, her mouth opened a millimeter, her cheeks flushed, her eyes grew wider. There was something odd about it, though. I had the eerie feeling that the movements were stage managed to appear normal, the product of consideration instead of emotion.

"Jimmy?" she asked. "Is that you?"

"Elaine," I said, and something in the way I spoke her name killed the pleasure at seeing me.

"What are you doing these days?" she asked.

"Investigative reporting," I said.

Cádír stiffened, but Elaine relaxed, rocking back in her seat.

"I know what you did," I said. "I know the secret of Fifth Layer's success."

Cádír's frown could have chipped glass. Elaine chuckled, warm and soft. Familiar and strange.

She gestured to an empty chair.

"Join us?"

* * *

How do people recognize beauty? What makes one face compelling and another forgettable? Why does one actor flash a smile that makes the world swoon, while a thousand others struggle to be noticed? Why will a baby stare at the picture of one face instead of another?

Why will people of all ethnicities, all backgrounds, all nations, come to the same conclusions when asked to rank people according to their attractiveness? What is the nature of beauty itself? All the studies say it's symmetry.

"It's supposed to be a measure of genetic fitness," I continued. "Whoever grows up with the fewest illnesses, the lowest parasite load, all that. They wind up closest to perfect symmetry. Back in the Pleistocene, we didn't have cosmetic surgery or makeup, so it was a pretty good match. And so our brains got wired for it. We love it."

"That's been established for decades," Cádír said.

"It generalizes, though, doesn't it?" I said. "We like symmetrical flowers, but we're not trying to mate with them. We like our artistic compositions to be balanced, because it fits that same ideal. It got selected for because of genetic fitness, but it affects how we see *everything*. People. Dance performances."

They were silent. Cádír's steak was getting cold. Elaine's pasta was congealing.

"Physics," I said.

Safwan Cádír muttered something obscene, rose, and stalked away. Elaine watched him go. There was something odd in her reaction. Something insectile.

"Poor bunny," she said. "He hates it when I win."

"When you win?"

"Go on," she said. "I'm listening."

Her eyes were on me, her mouth a gentle smile.

The romantic visions I'd conjured were gone. The memories of my time with this woman, with the body there before me, seemed like a story I'd told myself too many times. My skin had a crawling sensation that might have been speed and alcohol in physical battle or else my simple, drug-scrubbed primate mind reacting to something wrong in the way she held herself, the way she smiled.

"The Mexico research," I said. "You were trying to dampen sexual responses, but instead you killed the preference for symmetry. Swanson, after he went through the process, he was still experiencing beauty. He was doing things with his choreography that excited him so much he barely slept. But no one in the audience had gone through the procedure, so they literally weren't seeing what he was seeing. It was lost on them."

"I've watched the recordings of it," she said. "It was brilliant work."

"And the others. Jude Hammer. The pedophile. He was still attracted to children. But the profile of his victims changed. It's because he doesn't react to symmetry anymore. The Fifth Layer Look. Everyone knows it's there. It's an artifact of looking at an asymmetric design with a brain that isn't wired to like it."

"You *have* to have beauty," Elaine said, as if she was agreeing. "If you get rid of the default, you find something else. A different way to choose between logically equivalent possibilities. Symmetry blinds us. Leads us down the same paths over and over. There are so many other avenues of inquiry that could be explored, and we overlooked them because our brains were trying to pick the best monkey to fuck."

"Can I quote you on that?"

Her laughter took a second too long to come.

"Yes, Jimmy. Feel free. I'm sure it won't be the only thing I'm condemned for when you publish this."

She took a bite of her pasta, chewed thoughtfully, then pushed her plate away. I folded my arms. The suit shifted to release the strain at my elbows.

"You aren't upset," I said. "He is, but you aren't."

"He's trying to protect me," Elaine said, nodding in the direction that Cádír had gone. "When this all comes out, I will be the villain. You can count on that. He thinks it will bother me. But it has to be done."

"Why?"

A moment later, she smiled.

"You can quote me on this too. It has to be done because unless Fifth Layer loses its competitive advantage, the corporation won't be pressed to the next level. There are any number of other ways in which the human mind can be manipulated to appreciate pattern. There's no way to guess what we still have to discover once we can make ourselves into the appropriate investigative tools. For the sake of the future, our monopoly must expire. End quote. I'll probably be fired for that."

Questions clashed in my mind, each pushing to be the next one out of my mouth. Is Fifth Layer really willing to bonsai people's minds to keep a competitive edge in research? How much of this have you done to yourself already? Did you get drunk that night in order to get careless and have this leak out? Who are you?

But I knew all the answers that mattered.

It doesn't matter where it comes from, just if it works.

And maybe.

You want to see the limits of human excellence? Then pull out the stops and see what happens. It'd be a hell of a show.

"Does it hurt?" I asked. "Do you miss anything?"

That odd, inhuman pause, and then:

"There are tradeoffs."

I nodded, reached into my pocket, and turned off the recorder. Elaine nodded when she saw it, as if confirming something she'd guessed.

"Thanks," I said. "It was good seeing you again."

"You were always a rotten liar, Jimmy."

* * *

The Roswell Hypothesis, I wrote, says the successes of Fifth Layer stem from their access to alien intelligences. That's not entirely wrong.

AY-lee-un in-TELL-uh-jen-sez. en-TIRE-lee RONG.

The train hummed beneath me. The beginnings of a headache haunted the space behind my eyes; the first sign of the coming amphetamine crash. I almost welcomed it. Outside, the moon set over the dark countryside. It was going to be a great story. It was going to move the site from accretor to source. It was going to change my job and Harriet's. Herself would get the promotion she wanted. It was going to change the nature of humanity. Which was Elaine's point.

You have to have beauty, I wrote. It's basic. Even ants have it. Even good suits.

I was going to need hours of solid sleep. Days. I didn't want to think about how I would feel when I got home. When I woke up. I couldn't guess at the damage a speed jag like this would do to a body as old as mine. My liver might not be the problem. My heart might be the thing to go first. And still, it had gotten the job done. You had to say that for it. I worked for a while on the last line before I was happy with it.

It may be that any sufficiently advanced modification is indistinguishable from speciation.

in-dis-TIN-gwish-ah-bull. spee-cee-AY-shun.

I checked it all over once, sent a copy to Herself, and deleted all Elaine's old contact information from my lists. And then her new information too. She wasn't there anyway.

I lay back in my seat, closed my eyes, and tried like hell to sleep.