

FOUNTAIN OF AGE

NANCY KRESS

STORIES

Hugo and Nebula Award

winning author of

Beggars in Spain

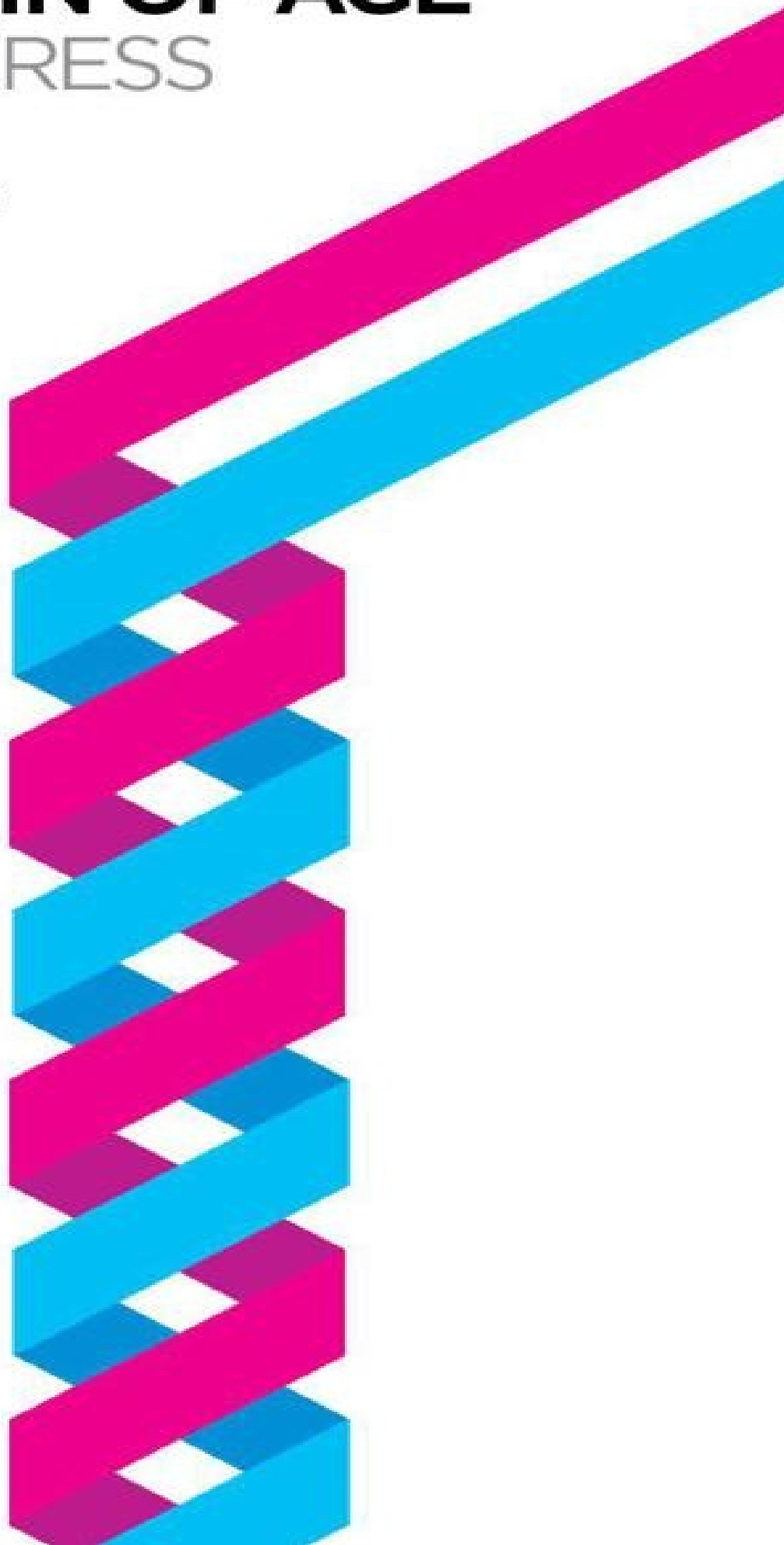


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FOUNTAIN
OF
AGE

stories

NANCY KRESS

Small Beer Press
Easthampton, MA

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed
in this book are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

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THE ERDMANN NEXUS

“Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow,
He who would reach for pearls must dive below.”
—John Dryden

The ship, which would have looked nothing like a ship to Henry Erdmann, moved between the stars traveling in an orderly pattern of occurrences in the vacuum flux. Over several cubic light-years of space, subatomic particles appeared, existed, and winked out of existence in nanoseconds. Flashes of transitions tore space and then reconfigured it as the ship moved on. Henry, had he somehow been nearby in the cold of deep space, would have died from the complicated, regular, intense bursts of radiation long before he could have had time to appreciate their shimmering beauty.

All at once the “ship” stopped moving.

The radiation bursts increased, grew even more complex. Then the ship abruptly changed direction. It accelerated, altering both space and time as it sped on, healing the alterations in its wake. Urgency shot through it.

Something, far away, was struggling to be born.

ONE

Henry Erdmann stood in front of the mirror in his tiny bedroom, trying to knot his tie with one hand. The other hand gripped his walker. It was an unsteady business, and the tie ended up crooked. He yanked it out and began again. Carrie would be here soon.

He always wore a tie to the college. Let the students—and graduate students, at that!—come to class in ripped jeans and obscene T-shirts and hair tangled as if colonized by rats. Even the girls. Students were students, and Henry didn’t consider their sloppiness disrespectful, the way so many did at St. Sebastian’s. Sometimes he was even amused by it, in a sad sort of way. Didn’t these intelligent, sometimes driven, would-be physicists know how ephemeral their beauty was? Why did they go to such lengths to look unappealing, when soon enough that would be their only choice?

This time he got the tie knotted. Not perfectly—a difficult operation, one-handed—but close enough for government work. He smiled. When he and his colleagues had been doing government work, only perfection was good enough. Atomic bombs were like that. Henry could still hear Oppie’s voice saying the plans for Ivy Mike were “technically sweet.” Of course, that was before all the—

A knock on the door and Carrie’s fresh young voice. “Dr. Erdmann? Are you ready?”

She always called him by his title, always treated him with respect. Not like some of the nurses and assistants. “How are we today, Hank?” that overweight blonde asked yesterday. When he answered stiffly, “I don’t know about you, madam, but I’m fine, thank you,” she’d only laughed. *Oh, people are so formal—it’s so cute!* Henry could just see her saying it to one of her horrible colleagues. He had never been “Hank” in his entire life.

“Coming, Carrie.” He put both hands on the walker and inched forward—clunk, clunk, clunk—the walker sounding loud even on the carpeted floor. His class’s corrected problem sets lay on the table by the door. He’d given them some really hard problems this week, and only Haldane had succeeded in solving all of them. Haldane had promise. An inventive mind, yet rigorous, too. They could have used him in ’52 on Project Ivy, developing the Teller-Ulam staged fusion H-bomb.

Halfway across the living room of his tiny apartment in the assisted living facility, something

happened in Henry's mind.

~~He stopped, astonished. It had felt like a tentative touch, a ghostly finger inside his brain.~~ Astonishment was immediately replaced by fear. Was he having a stroke? At ninety, anything was possible. But he felt fine, better in fact than for several days. Not a stroke. So what—

"Dr. Erdmann?"

"I'm here." He clunked to the door and opened it. Carrie wore a cherry red sweater, a fallen orange leaf caught on her hat, and sunglasses. Such a pretty girl, all bronze hair and bright skin and vibrant color. Outside it was drizzling. Henry reached out and gently removed the sunglasses. Carrie's left eye was swollen and discolored, the iris and pupil invisible under the outraged flesh.

"The bastard," Henry said.

That was Henry and Carrie going down the hall toward the elevator, thought Evelyn Krenchnoted. She waved from her armchair, her door wide open as always, but they were talking and didn't notice. She strained to hear, but just then another plane went overhead from the airport. Those pesky flight paths were too near St. Sebastian's! On the other hand, if they weren't, Evelyn couldn't afford to live here. Always look on the bright side!

Since this was Tuesday afternoon, Carrie and Henry were undoubtedly going to the college. So wonderful the way Henry kept busy—you'd never guess his real age, that was for sure. He even had a haircut! Although that jacket was too light for September, and not waterproof. Henry might catch a cold. She would speak to Carrie about it. And why was Carrie wearing sunglasses when it was raining?

But if Evelyn didn't start her phone calls, she would be late! People were depending on her! She keyed in the first number, listened to it ring one floor below. "Bob? It's Evelyn. Now, dear, tell me—how's your blood pressure today?"

"Fine," Bob Donovan said.

"Are you sure? You sound a bit grumpy, dear."

"I'm fine, Evelyn. I'm just busy."

"Oh, that's good! With what?"

"Just busy."

"Always good to keep busy! Are you coming to Current Affairs tonight?"

"Dunno."

"You should. You really should. Intellectual stimulation is so important for people our age!"

"Gotta go," Bob grunted.

"Certainly, but first, how did your granddaughter do with—"

He'd hung up. Really, very grumpy. Maybe he was having problems with irregularity. Evelyn would recommend a high colonic.

Her next call was more responsive. Gina Martinelli was, as always, thrilled with Evelyn's attention. She informed Gina minutely about the state of her arthritis, her gout, her diabetes, her son's weight problem, her other son's wife's stepdaughter's miscarriage, all interspersed with quotations from the Bible ("Take a little wine for thy stomach"—First Timothy.) She answered all Evelyn's questions and wrote down all her recommendations and—

"Evelyn?" Gina said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, I—" Evelyn fell silent, an occurrence so shocking that Gina gasped, "Hit your panic button."

"No, no, I'm fine, I . . . I just remembered something for a moment."

"Remembered something? What?"

But Evelyn didn't know. It hadn't been a memory, exactly, it had been a . . . what? A feeling, vague but somehow strong sensation of . . . something.

"Evelyn?"

“I’m here!”

“~~The Lord decides when to call us home, and I guess it’s not your time yet. Did you hear about Anna Chernov? That famous ballet dancer on Four? She fell last night and broke her leg and they had to move her to the Infirmary.~~”

“No!”

“Yes, poor thing. They say it’s only temporary, until they get her stabilized, but you know what that means.”

She did. They all did. First the Infirmary, then up to Seven, where you didn’t even have your own little apartment anymore, and eventually to Nursing on Eight and Nine. Better to go quick and clean like Jed Fuller last month. But Evelyn wasn’t going to let herself think like that! A positive attitude was so important!

Gina said, “Anna is doing pretty well, I hear. The Lord never sends more than a person can bear.”

Evelyn wasn’t so sure about that, but it never paid to argue with Gina, who was convinced that she had God on redial. Evelyn said, “I’ll visit her before the Stitch ’n Bitch meeting. I’m sure she’ll want my company. Poor girl—you know, those dancers, they just abuse their health for years and years, so what can you expect?”

“I know!” Gina said, not without satisfaction. “They pay a terrible price for beauty. It’s a little vain, actually.”

“Did you hear about that necklace she has in the St. Sebastian safe?”

“No! What necklace?”

“A fabulous one! Doris Dziwalski told me. It was given to Anna by some famous Russian dancer who was given it by the czar!”

“What czar?”

“*The* czar! You know, of Russia. Doris said it’s worth a fortune and that’s why it’s in the safe. Anna never wears it.”

“Vanity,” Doris said. “She probably doesn’t like the way it looks now against her wrinkly neck.”

“Doris said Anna’s depressed.”

“No, it’s vanity. ‘Lo, I looked and saw that all was—’”

“I’ll recommend acupuncture to her,” Evelyn interrupted. “Acupuncture is good for depression. But first she’d call Erin, to tell her the news.”

Erin Bass let the phone ring. It was probably that tiresome bore Evelyn Krenchnoted, eager to check on Erin’s blood pressure or her cholesterol or her Isles of Langerhans. Oh, Erin should answer the phone, there was no harm in the woman, Erin should be more charitable. But why? Why should one have to be more charitable just because one was old?

She let the phone ring and returned to her book, Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter*. Greene’s world-weary despair was a silly affectation but he was a wonderful writer, and too much underrated nowadays.

The liner came in on a Saturday evening: from the bedroom window they could see its long green form steal past the boom, beyond the—

Something was happening.

—steal past the boom, beyond the—

Erin was no longer in St. Sebastian’s, she was nowhere, she was lifted away from everything, she was beyond the—

Then it was over and she sat again in her tiny apartment, the book sliding unheeded off her lap.

Anna Chernov was dancing. She and Paul stood with two other couples on the stage, under the bright

lights. Balanchine himself stood in the second wing, and even though Anna knew he was there to wait for Suzanne's solo, his presence inspired her. The music began. *Promenade en couronne, attitude arabesque effacé* and into the lift, Paul's arms raising her. She was lifted out of herself and then she was soaring above the stage, over the heads of the corps de ballet, above Suzanne Farrell herself, soaring through the roof of the New York State Theater and into the night sky, spreading her arms in *porte de bras* wide enough to take in the glittering night sky, soaring in the most perfect *jeté* in the universe, until . . .

"She's smiling," Bob Donovan said, before he knew he was going to speak at all. He looked down at the sleeping Anna, so beautiful she didn't even look real, except for the leg in its big ugly cast. In one hand, feeling like a fool but what the fuck, he held three yellow roses.

"The painkillers do that sometimes," the Infirmary nurse said. "I'm afraid you can't stay, Mr. Donovan."

Bob scowled at her. But it wasn't like he meant it or anything. This nurse wasn't so bad. Not like some. Maybe because she wasn't any spring chicken herself. *A few more years, sister, and you'll be right here with us.*

"Give her these, okay?" He thrust the roses at the nurse.

"I will, yes," she said, and he walked out of the medicine-smelling Infirmary—he hated that smell—back to the elevator. Christ, what a sorry old fart he was. Anna Chernov, that nosy old broad Evelyn Krenchnoted once told him, used to dance at some famous place in New York, Abraham Center or something. Anna had been famous. But Evelyn could be wrong, and anyway it didn't matter. From the first moment Bob Donovan laid eyes on Anna Chernov, he'd wanted to give her things. Flowers. Jewelry. Anything she wanted. Anything he had. And how stupid and fucked-up was that, at his age? Give me a break!

He took the elevator to the first floor, stalked savagely through the lobby, and went out the side door to the "remembrance garden." Stupid name, New Age-y stupid. He wanted to kick something, wanted to bellow for—

Energy punched through him, from the base of his spine up his back and into his brain, mild but definite, like a shock from a busted toaster or something. Then it was gone.

What the fuck was *that*? Was he okay? If he fell, like Anna—

He was okay. He didn't have Anna's thin delicate bones. Whatever it was, was gone now. Just one of those things.

On a Nursing floor of St. Sebastian's, a woman with just a few days to live muttered in her long, languid half-sleep. An IV dripped morphine into her arm, easing the passage. No one listened to the mutterings; it had been years since they'd made sense. For a moment she stopped and her eyes, again bright in the ravaged face that had once been so lovely, grew wide. But for only a moment. Her eyes closed and the mindless muttering resumed.

In Tijuana, a vigorous old man sitting behind his son's market stall, where he sold cheap serapes and jabbering *touristos*, suddenly lifted his face to the sun. His mouth, which still had all its white flashing teeth, made a big O.

In Mumbai, a widow dressed in white looked out her window at the teeming streets, her face gone blank as her sari.

In Chengdu, a monk sitting on his cushion on the polished floor of the meditation room in the ancient

Wenshu Monastery, shattered the holy silence with a shocking, startled laugh.

TWO

Carrie Vesey sat in the back of Dr. Erdmann's classroom and thought about murder.

Not that she would ever do it, of course. Murder was wrong. Taking a life filled her with horror that was only—

Ground-up castor beans were a deadly poison.

—made worse by her daily witnessing of old people's aching desire to hold onto life. Also, she—

Her stepbrother had once shown her how to disable the brakes on a car.

—knew she wasn't the kind of person who solved problems that boldly. And anyway her—

The battered-woman defense almost always earned acquittal from juries.

—lawyer said that a paper trail of restraining orders and ER documentation was by far the best way to—

If a man was passed out from a dozen beers, he'd never feel a bullet from his own service revolver

—put Jim behind bars legally. That, the lawyer said, "would solve the problem"—as if a black eye and a broken arm and constant threats that left her scared even when Jim wasn't in the same city were all just a theoretical "problem," like the ones Dr. Erdmann gave his physics students.

He sat on top of a desk in the front of the room, talking about something called the "Bose-Einstein condensate." Carrie had no idea what that was, and she didn't care. She just liked being here, sitting unheeded in the back of the room. The physics students, nine boys and two girls, were none of them interested in her presence, her black eye, or her beauty. When Dr. Erdmann was around, he commanded all their geeky attention, and that was indescribably restful. Carrie tried—unsuccessfully, she knew—to hide her beauty. Her looks had brought her nothing but trouble: Gary, Eric, Jim. So now she wore baggy sweats and no makeup, and crammed her 24-carat-gold hair under a shapeless hat. Maybe if she was as smart as these students she would have learned to pick a different kind of man, but she wasn't, and she hadn't, and Dr. Erdmann's classroom was a place she felt safe. Safer, even than St. Sebastian's, which was where Jim had blackened her eye.

He'd slipped in through the loading dock, she guessed, and caught her alone in the linens supply closet. He was gone after one punch, and when she called her exasperated lawyer and he found out she had no witnesses and St. Sebastian's had "security," he'd said there was nothing he could do. It would be her word against Jim's. She had to be able to prove that the restraining order had been violated.

Dr. Erdmann was talking about "proof," too: some sort of mathematical proof. Carrie had been good at math, in high school. Only Dr. Erdmann had said once that what she'd done in high school wasn't "mathematics," only "arithmetic." "Why didn't you go to college, Carrie?" he'd asked.

"No money," she said in a tone that meant: Please don't ask anything else. She just hadn't felt up to explaining about Daddy and the alcoholism and the debts and her abusive step brothers, and Dr. Erdmann hadn't asked. He was sensitive that way.

Looking at his tall, stooped figure sitting on the desk, his walker close to hand, Carrie sometimes let herself dream that Dr. Erdmann—Henry—was fifty years younger. Forty to her twenty-eight—there would work. She'd googled a picture of him at that age, when he'd been working at someplace called the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory. He'd been handsome, dark-haired, smiling into the camera next to his wife, Ida. She hadn't been as pretty as Carrie, but she'd gone to college, so even if Carrie had been born back then, she wouldn't have had a chance with him. Story of her life.

"—have any questions?" Dr. Erdmann finished.

The students did—they always did—clamoring to be heard, not raising their hands, interrupting each other. But when Dr. Erdmann spoke, immediately they all shut up. Someone leapt up to write

equations on the board. Dr. Erdmann slowly turned his frail body to look at them. The discussion went on a long time, almost as long as the class. Carrie fell asleep.

When she woke, it was to Dr. Erdmann, leaning on his walker, gently jiggling her shoulder. “Carrie?”

“Oh! Oh, I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be. We bored you to death, poor child.”

“No! I loved it!”

He raised his eyebrows and she felt shamed. He thought she was telling a polite lie, and he had very little tolerance for lies. But the truth is, she always loved being here.

Outside, it was full dark. The autumn rain had stopped and the unseen ground had that mysterious fertile smell of wet leaves. Carrie helped Dr. Erdmann into her battered Toyota and slid behind the wheel. As they started back toward St. Sebastian’s, she could tell that he was exhausted. Those students asked too much of him! It was enough that he taught one advanced class a week, sharing a lot of that physics, without them also demanding he—

“Dr. Erdmann? “

For a long terrible moment she thought he was dead. His head lolled against the seat but he wasn’t asleep: His open eyes rolled back into his head. Carrie jerked the wheel to the right and slammed the Toyota alongside the curb. He was still breathing.

“Dr. Erdmann? *Henry?*”

Nothing. Carrie dove into her purse, fumbling for her cell phone. Then it occurred to her that his panic button would be faster. She tore open the buttons on his jacket; he wasn’t wearing the button. She scrambled again for the purse, starting to sob.

“Carrie?”

He was sitting up now, a shadowy figure. She hit the overhead light. His face, a fissured landscape, looked dazed and pale. His pupils were huge.

“What happened? Tell me.” She tried to keep her voice even, to observe everything, because it was so important to be able to make as full a report as possible to Dr. Jamison. But her hand clutched at his sleeve.

He covered her fingers with his. His voice sounded dazed. “I . . . don’t know. I was . . . somewhere else?”

“A stroke?” That was what they were all afraid of. Not death, but to be incapacitated, reduced to a partiality. And for Dr. Erdmann, with his fine mind . . .

“No.” He sounded definite. “Something else. I don’t know. Did you call 911 yet?”

The cell phone lay inert in her hand. “No, not yet, there wasn’t time for—”

“Then don’t. Take me home.”

“All right, but you’re going to see the doctor as soon as we get there.” She was pleased, despite everything, with her firm tone.

“It’s seven-thirty. They’ll all have gone home.”

But they hadn’t. As soon as Carrie and Dr. Erdmann walked into the lobby, she saw a man in a white coat standing by the elevators. “Wait!” she called, loud enough that several people turned to look, evening visitors and ambulatories and a nurse Carrie didn’t know. She didn’t know the doctor either, but she rushed over to him, leaving Dr. Erdmann leaning on his walker by the main entrance.

“Are you a doctor? I’m Carrie Vesey and I was bringing Dr. Erdmann—a patient, Henry Erdmann. He’s not a medical doctor—home when he had some kind of attack, he seems all right now but someone needs to look at him, he says—”

“I’m not an M.D.,” the man said, and Carrie looked at him in dismay. “I’m a neurologic researcher.”

She rallied. "Well, you're the best we're going to get at this hour so please look at him!" She was amazed at her own audacity.

"All right." He followed her to Dr. Erdmann, who scowled because, Carrie knew, he hated this sort of fuss. The non-M.D. seemed to pick up on that right away. He said pleasantly, "Dr. Erdmann? I'm Jake DiBella. Will you come this way, sir?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and led the way down a side corridor. Carrie and Dr. Erdmann followed, everybody's walk normal, but still people watched. *Move along, nothing to see here . . .* why were they still staring? Why were people suspicious of ghouls?

But they weren't, really. That was just her own fear talking.

You trust too much, Carrie, Dr. Erdmann had said just last week.

In a small room on the second floor, he sat heavily on one of the three metal folding chairs. The room held the chairs, a gray filing cabinet, an ugly metal desk, and nothing else. Carrie, a natural nester, pursed her lips, and Dr. DiBella caught that, too.

"I've only been here a few days," he said apologetically. "Haven't had time yet to properly move in. Dr. Erdmann, can you tell me what happened?"

"Nothing." He wore his lofty look. "I just fell asleep for a moment and Carrie became alarmed. Really, there's no need for this fuss."

"You fell asleep?"

"Yes."

"All right. Has that happened before?"

Did Dr. Erdmann hesitate, ever so briefly? "Yes, occasionally. I *am* ninety, doctor."

DiBella nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned to Carrie. "And what happened to you? Did it occur at the same time that Dr. Erdmann fell asleep?"

Her eye. That's why people had stared in the lobby. In her concern for Dr. Erdmann, she'd forgotten about her black eye, but now it immediately began to throb again. Carrie felt herself go scarlet.

Dr. Erdmann answered. "No, it didn't happen at the same time. There was no car accident, if that's what you're implying. Carrie's eye is unrelated."

"I fell," Carrie said, knew that no one believed her, and lifted her chin.

"Okay," DiBella said amiably. "But as long as you're here, Dr. Erdmann, I'd like to enlist your help. Yours, and as many other volunteers as I can enlist at St. Sebastian's. I'm here on a Gates Foundation grant in conjunction with Johns Hopkins, to map shifts in brain electrochemistry during cerebral arousal. I'm asking volunteers to donate a few hours of their time to undergo completely painless brain scans while they look at various pictures and videos. Your participation will be an aid to science."

Carrie saw that Dr. Erdmann was going to refuse, despite the magic word "science," but then he hesitated. "What kind of brain scans?"

"Asher-Peyton and functional MRI."

"All right. I'll participate."

Carrie blinked. That didn't sound like Dr. Erdmann, who considered physics and astronomy the only "true" sciences and the rest merely poor stepchildren. But this Dr. DiBella wasn't about to let her research subject get away. He said quickly, "Excellent! Tomorrow morning at eleven, Lab 6B, at the hospital. Ms. Vesey, can you bring him over? Are you a relative?"

"No, I'm an aide here. Call me Carrie. I can bring him." Wednesday wasn't one of her usual days for Dr. Erdmann, but she'd get Marie to swap schedules.

"Wonderful. Please call me Jake." He smiled at her, and something turned over in Carrie's chest. It wasn't just that he was so handsome, with his black hair and gray eyes and nice shoulders, but also

that he had masculine confidence and an easy way with him and no ring on his left hand . . . *idiot*. There was no particular warmth in his smile; it was completely professional. Was she always going to assess every man she met as a possible boyfriend? Was she really that needy?

Yes. But this one wasn't interested. And anyway, he was an educated scientist and she worked a minimum-wage job. She was an idiot.

She got Dr. Erdmann up to his apartment and said good-night. He seemed distant, preoccupied. Going down in the elevator, a mood of desolation came over her. What she really wanted was to stay and watch Henry Erdmann's TV, sleep on his sofa, wake up to fix his coffee and have someone to talk to while she did it. Not go back to her shabby apartment, bolted securely against Jim but never secure enough that she felt really safe. She'd rather stay here, in a home for failing old people, and how perverted and sad was that?

And what *had* happened to Dr. Erdmann on the way home from the college?

THREE

Twice now. Henry lay awake, wondering what the hell was going on in his brain. He was accustomed to relying on that organ. His knees had succumbed to arthritis, his hearing aid required constant adjustment, and his prostate housed a slow-growing cancer that, the doctor said, wouldn't kill him until long after something else did—the medical profession's idea of cheerful news. But his brain remained clear, and using it well had always been his greatest pleasure. Greater even than sex, greater than food, greater than marriage to Ida, much as he had loved her.

God, the things that age let you admit.

Which were the best years? No question there: Los Alamos, working on Operation Ivy with Ulam and Teller and Carson Mark and the rest. The excitement and frustration and awe of developing the "Sausage," the first test of staged radiation implosion. The day it was detonated at Eniwetok. Henry, a junior member of the team, hadn't of course been present at the atoll, but he'd waited breathlessly for the results from Bogon. He'd cheered when Teller, picking up the shock waves on a seismometer in California, had sent his three-word telegram to Los Alamos: "It's a boy." Harry Truman himself had requested that bomb—"to see to it that our country is able to defend itself against any possible aggressor"—and Henry was proud of his work on it.

Shock waves. Yes, *that* was what today's two incidents had felt like: shock waves to the brain. A small wave in his apartment, a larger one in Carrie's car. But from what? It could only be some failure of his nervous system, the thing he dreaded most of all, far more than he dreaded death. Granted, teaching physics to graduate students was a long way from Los Alamos or Livermore, and most of the students were dolts—although not Haldane—but Henry enjoyed it. Teaching, plus reading the journals and following the online listservs, were his connection with physics. If some neurological "shock wave" disturbed his brain . . .

It was a long time before he could sleep.

"Oh my Lord, dear, what happened to *your* eye?"

Evelyn Krenchnoted sat with her friend Gina Somebody in the tiny waiting room outside Dr. O'Kane's office. Henry scowled at her. Just like Evelyn to blurt out like that, embarrassing poor Carrie. The Krenchnoted woman was the most tactless busybody Henry had ever met, and he'd known a lot of physicists, a group not noted for tact. But at least the physicists hadn't been busybodies.

"I'm fine," Carrie said, trying to smile. "I walked into a door."

"Oh, dear, how did that happen? You should tell the doctor. I'm sure he could make a few minutes to see you, even though he must be running behind, I didn't actually have an appointment today but

he'd said he'd squeeze me in because something strange happened yesterday that I want to ask him about, but the time he gave me was supposed to start five minutes ago and you must be scheduled after that, he saw Gina already but she—"

Henry sat down and stopped listening. Evelyn's noise, however, went on and on, a grating whir like a dentist drill. He imagined her on Eniwetok, rising into the air on a mushroom cloud, still talking. It was a relief when the doctor's door opened and a woman came out, holding a book.

Henry had seen her before, although he didn't know her name. Unlike most of the old bats at St. Sebastian's, she was worth looking at. Not with Carrie's radiant youthful beauty, of course; this woman must be in her seventies, at least. But she stood straight and graceful; her white hair fell in simple waves to her shoulders; her cheekbones and blue eyes were still good. However, Henry didn't care for the way she was dressed. It reminded him of all those stupid childish protestors outside Los Alamos in the fifties and sixties. The woman wore a white T-shirt, a long cotton peasant skirt, a necklace of beads and shells, and several elaborate rings.

"Erin!" Evelyn cried. "How was your appointment? Everything okay?"

"Fine. Just a check-up." Erin smiled vaguely and moved away. Henry strained to see the cover of her book: *Tao Te Ching*. Disappointment lanced through him. One of those.

"But you weren't scheduled for a check-up, no more than I was. So what happened that—" Erin walked quickly away, her smile fixed. Evelyn said indignantly, "Well, I call that just plain rude! Did you see that, Gina? You try to be friendly to some people and they just—"

"Mrs. Krenchnoted?" the nurse said, sticking her head out the office door. "The doctor will see you now."

Evelyn lumbered up and through the door, still talking. In the blessed silence that followed, Henry said to Carrie, "How do you suppose Mr. Krenchnoted stood it?"

Carrie giggled and waved her hand toward the Krenchnoted's friend, Gina. But Gina was asleep in her chair, which at least explained how *she* stood it.

Carrie said, "I'm glad you have this appointment today, Dr. Erdmann. You *will* tell him about what happened in the car yesterday, won't you?"

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"Yes." Why were all women, even mild little Carrie, so insistent on regular doctor visits? Yes, doctors were useful for providing pills to keep the machine going, but Henry's view was that you only needed to see a physician if something felt wrong. In fact, he'd forgotten about this regular scheduled check-up until this morning, when Carrie called to say how convenient it was that her appointment here was just an hour before the one with Dr. DiBella at the hospital lab. Ordinarily Henry would have refused to go at all, except that he did intend to ask Dr. Jamison about the incident in the car. Also, it was possible that fool Evelyn Krenchnoted was actually right about something for once. "Carrie, maybe you *should* ask the doctor to look at that eye."

"No. I'm fine."

"Has Jim called or come around again since—"

"No."

Clearly she didn't want to talk about it. Embarrassment, most likely. Henry could respect her reticence. Silently he organized his questions for Jamison.

But after Henry had gone into the office, leaving Carrie in the waiting room, and after he endured the tediums of the nurse's measuring his blood pressure, of peeing into a cup, of putting on that ridiculous paper gown, it wasn't Jamison who entered the room but a brusque, impossibly young boy in a white lab coat and officious manner.

"I'm Dr. Felton, Henry. How are we today?" He studied Henry's chart, not looking at him.

Henry gritted his teeth. "You would know better than I, I imagine."

"Feeling a bit cranky? Are your bowels moving all right?"

"My bowels are fine. They thank you for your concern."

Felton looked up then, his eyes cold. "I'm going to listen to your lungs now. Cough when I tell you to."

And Henry knew he couldn't do it. If the kid had reprimanded him—"I don't think sarcasm appropriate here"—it would have at least been a response. But this utter dismissal, this treatment if Henry were a child, or a moron . . . He couldn't tell this insensitive young boor about the incident in the car, about the fear for his brain. It would degrade him to cooperate with Felton. Maybe DiBella would be better, even if he wasn't an M.D.

One doctor down, one to go.

DiBella was better. What he was not, was organized.

At Redborn Memorial Hospital he said, "Ah, Dr. Erdmann, Carrie. Welcome. I'm afraid there's been a mix-up with Diagnostic Imaging. I thought I had the fMRI booked for you but they seem to have scheduled me out, or something. So we can do the Asher-Peyton scan but not the deep imaging. I'm sorry, I—" He shrugged helplessly and ran his hand through his hair.

Carrie tightened her mouth to a thin line. "Dr. Erdmann came all the way over here for your MRI. Dr. DiBella."

"Jake, please. I know. And we do the Asher-Peyton scan back at St. Sebastian's. I really am sorry."

Carrie's lips didn't soften. It always surprised Henry how fierce she could be in defense of her "resident-assignees." Why was usually gentle Carrie being so hard on this young man?

"I'll meet you back at St. Sebastian's," DiBella said humbly.

Once there, he affixed electrodes on Henry's skull and neck, eased a helmet over his head, and sat at a computer whose screen faced away from Henry. After the room was darkened, a series of pictures were projected onto one white wall: a chocolate cake, a broom, a chair, a car, a desk, a glass: four or five dozen images. Henry had to do nothing except sit there, and he grew bored. Eventually the pictures grew more interesting, interspersing a house fire, a war scene, a father hugging a child, Rita Hayworth. Henry chuckled. "I didn't think your generation even knew who Rita Hayworth was."

"Please don't talk, Dr. Erdmann."

The session went on for twenty minutes. When it was over, DiBella removed the helmet and said, "Thank you so much. I really appreciate this." He began removing electrodes from Henry's head. Carrie stood, looking straight at Henry.

Now or never.

"Dr. DiBella," Henry said, "I'd like to ask you something. Tell you something, actually. About an incident that happened yesterday. Twice." Henry liked the word "incident"; it sounded objective and explainable, like a police report.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"The first time I was standing in my apartment, the second time riding in a car with Carrie. The first incident was mild, the second more pronounced. Both times I felt something move through my mind, like a shock wave of sorts, leaving no aftereffects except perhaps a slight fatigue. No abilities seem to be impaired. I'm hoping you can tell me what happened."

DiBella paused, an electrode dangling from his hand. Henry could smell the gooey gel on its end. "I'm not an M.D., as I told you yesterday. This sounds like something you should discuss with your doctor at St. Sebastian."

Carrie, who had been upset that Henry had not done just that, said, "In the car he sort of lo

consciousness and his eyes rolled back in his head.”

Henry said, “My doctor wasn’t available this morning, and you are. Can you just tell me if the experience sounds like a stroke?”

“Tell me about it again.”

Henry did, and DiBella said, “If it had been a TIA—a mini-stroke—you wouldn’t have had such a strong reaction, and if it had been a more serious stroke, either ischemic or hemorrhagic, you’d have been left with at least temporary impairment. But you could have experienced a cardiac event of some sort, Dr. Erdmann. I think you should have an EKG at once.”

Heart, not brain. Well, that was better. Still, fear slid coldly down Henry’s spine, and he realized how much he wanted to go on leading his current life, limited though it was. Still, he smiled and said, “All right.”

He’d known for at least twenty-five years that growing old wasn’t for sissies.

Carrie canceled her other resident-assignees, checking in with each on her cell, and shepherded Henry through the endless hospital rituals that followed, administrative and diagnostic and that most ubiquitous medical procedure, waiting. By the end of the day, Henry knew that his heart was fine, his brain showed no clots or hemorrhages, there was no reason for him to have fainted. That’s what they were calling it now: a faint, possibly due to low blood sugar. He was scheduled for glucose-tolerance tests next week. Fools. It hadn’t been any kind of faint. What had happened to him had been something else entirely, *sui generis*.

Then it happened again, the same and yet completely different.

At nearly midnight Henry lay in bed, exhausted. For once, he’d thought, sleep would come easily. It hadn’t. Then, all at once, he was lifted out of his weary mind. This time there was no violent wrenching, no eyes rolling back in his head. He just suddenly wasn’t in his darkened bedroom anymore, not in his body, not in his mind.

He was dancing, soaring with pointed toes high above a polished stage, feeling the muscles in his back and thighs stretch as he sat cross-legged on a deep cushion he had embroidered with bearings rolling down a factory assembly line across from soldiers shooting at him as he ducked—

It was gone.

Henry jerked upright, sweating in the dark. He fumbled for the bed lamp, missed, sent the lamp crashing off the nightstand and onto the floor. He had never danced on a stage, embroidered a cushion, worked in a factory, or gone to war. And he’d been awake. Those were memories, not dreams—no, not even memories, they were too vivid for that. They’d been experiences, as vivid and real as if they were all happening now, and all happening simultaneously. *Experiences*. But not his.

The lamp was still glowing. Laboriously he leaned over the side of the bed and plucked it off the floor. As he set it back on the nightstand, it went out. Not, however, before he saw that the plug had been pulled from the wall socket during the fall, well before he bent over to pick it up.

The ship grew more agitated, the rents in space-time and resulting flop transitions larger. Every aspect of the entity strained forward, jumping through the vacuum flux in bursts of radiation that appeared now near one star system, now another, now in the deep black cold where no stars exerted gravity. The ship could move no quicker without destroying either nearby star systems or its own coherence. It raced as rapidly as it could, sent ahead of itself even faster tendrils of quantum-entangled information. Faster, faster . . .

It was not fast enough.

FOUR

Thursday morning, Henry's mind seemed to him as clear as ever. After an early breakfast he sat at his tiny kitchen table, correcting physics papers. The apartments at St. Sebastian's each had a small eat-kitchen, a marginally larger living room, a bedroom and bath. Grab rails, non-skid flooring, over cheerful colors, and intercoms reminded the residents that they were old—as if, Henry thought scornfully, any of them were likely to forget it. However, Henry didn't really mind the apartment size or surveillance. After all, he'd flourished at Los Alamos, crowded and ramshackle and paranoid as the place had been. Most of his life went on inside his head.

For each problem set with incomplete answers—which would probably be all of them except Haldane's, although Julia Hernandez had at least come up with a novel and mathematically interesting approach—he tried to follow the student's thinking, to see where it had gone wrong. After an hour of this, he had gone over two papers. A plane screamed overhead, taking off from the airport. Henry gave it up. He couldn't concentrate.

Outside the St. Sebastian infirmary yesterday, the horrible Evelyn Krenchnoted had said that she didn't have a check-up appointment, but that the doctor was “squeezing her in” because “something strange happened yesterday.” She'd also mentioned that the aging-hippie beauty, Erin Whatever-Her-Name-Was, hadn't had a scheduled appointment either.

Once, at a mandatory ambulatory-residents' meeting, Henry had seen Evelyn embroidering.

Anna Chernov, St. Sebastian's most famous resident, was a ballet dancer. Everyone knew that.

He felt stupid even thinking along these lines. What was he hypothesizing here, some sort of telepathy? No respectable scientific study had ever validated such a hypothesis. Also, during Henry's three years at St. Sebastian's—years during which Evelyn and Miss Chernov had also been in residence—he had never felt the slightest connection with, or interest in, either of them.

He tried to go back to correcting problem sets.

The difficulty was, he had two data points, his own “incidents” and the sudden rash of unscheduled doctors' appointments, and no way to either connect or eliminate either one. If he could at least satisfy himself that Evelyn's and Erin's doctor visits concerned something other than mental episodes, he would be down to one data point. One was an anomaly. Two were an indicator of . . . something.

This wasn't one of Henry's days to have Carrie's assistance. He pulled himself up on his walker, inched to the desk, and found the Resident Directory. Evelyn had no listings for either cell phone or email. That surprised him; you'd think such a yenta would want as many ways to bother people as possible. But some St. Sebastian residents were still, after all these decades, wary of any technology they hadn't grown up with. *Fools*, thought Henry, who had once driven four hundred miles to buy one of the first, primitive, put-it-together-yourself kits for a personal computer. He noted Evelyn's apartment number and hobbled toward the elevators.

“Why, Henry Erdmann! Come in, come in!” Evelyn cried. She looked astonished, as well she might. And—oh, God—behind her sat a circle of women, their chairs jammed in like molecules under hydraulic compression, all sewing on bright pieces of cloth.

“I don't want to intrude on your—”

“Oh, it's just the Christmas Elves!” Evelyn cried. “We're getting an early start on the holiday wall hanging for the lobby. The old one is getting so shabby.”

Henry didn't remember a holiday wall hanging in the lobby, unless she was referring to that gari-lumpy blanket with Santa Claus handing out babies to guardian angels. The angels had had tight cotton-wool hair that made them look like Q-tips. He said, “Never mind, it's not important.”

“Oh, come on in! We were just talking about—and maybe you have more information on it!—the fabulous necklace that Anna Chernov has in the office safe, the one the czar gave—”

“No, no, I have no information. I'll—”

“But if you just—”

Henry said desperately, “I’ll call you later.”

To his horror, Evelyn lowered her eyes and said murmured demurely, “All right, Henry,” while the women behind her tittered. He backed away down the hall.

He was pondering how to discover Erin’s last name when she emerged from an elevator. “Excuse me!” he called the length of the corridor. “May I speak to you a moment?”

She came toward him, another book in her hand, her face curious but reserved. “Yes?”

“My name is Henry Erdmann. I’d like to ask what will, I know, sound like a very strange question. Please forgive my intrusiveness, and believe that I have a good reason for asking. You had an unscheduled appointment with Dr. Felton yesterday?”

Something moved behind her eyes. “Yes.”

“Did your reason for seeing him have to do with any sort of . . . of mental experience? A small seizure, or an episode of memory aberration, perhaps?”

Erin’s ringed hand tightened on her book. He noted, numbly, that today it seemed to be a novel. She said, “Let’s talk.”

“I don’t believe it,” he said. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Bass, but it sounds like rubbish to me.”

She shrugged, a slow movement of thin shoulders under her peasant blouse. Her long printed skirt with yellow flowers on black, swirled on the floor. Her apartment looked like her: bits of cloth hanging on the walls, a curtain of beads instead of a door to the bedroom, Hindu statues and crystal pyramids and Navaho blankets. Henry disliked the clutter, the childishness of the décor, even as he felt flooded by gratitude toward Erin Bass. She had released him. Her ideas about the “incidents” were so dumb that he could easily dismiss them, along with anything he might have been thinking which resembled them.

“There’s an energy in the universe as a whole,” she’d said. “When you stop resisting the flow of life and give up the grasping of trishna, you awaken to that energy. In popular terms, you have an ‘out-of-body experience,’ activating stored karma from past lives and fusing it into one moment of transcendent insight.”

Henry had had no transcendental insight. He knew about energy in the universe—it was called electromagnetic radiation, gravity, the strong and weak nuclear forces—and none of it had karma. He didn’t believe in reincarnation, and he hadn’t been out of his body. Throughout all three “incidents” he’d felt his body firmly encasing him. He hadn’t left; other minds had somehow seemed to come in. But it was all nonsense, an aberration of a brain whose synapses and axons, dendrites and vesicles were simply growing old.

He grasped his walker and rose. “Thanks anyway, Mrs. Bass. Good-bye.”

“Again, call me ‘Erin.’ Are you sure you wouldn’t like some green tea before you go?”

“Quite sure. Take care.”

He was at the door when she said, almost casually, “Oh, Henry? When I had my own out-of-body experience Tuesday evening, there were others with me in the awakened state . . . Were you ever closely connected with—I know this sounds odd—a light that somehow shone more brightly than many suns?”

He turned and stared at her.

“This will take about twenty minutes,” DiBella said as Henry slid into the MRI machine. He’d had the procedure before and disliked it just as much then, the feeling of being enclosed in a tube not much larger than a coffin. Some people, he knew, couldn’t tolerate it at all. But Henry’d be damned if he let a piece of machinery defeat him, and anyway the tube didn’t enclose him completely; it was open

the bottom. So he pressed his lips together and closed his eyes and let the machine swallow his strapped-down body.

“You okay in there, Dr. Erdmann?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good. Excellent. Just relax.”

To his own surprise, he did. In the tube, everything seemed very remote. He actually dozed waking twenty minutes later when the tube slid him out again.

“Everything look normal?” he asked DiBella, and held his breath.

“Completely,” DiBella said. “Thank you, that’s a good baseline for my study. Your next one, you know, will come immediately after you view a ten-minute video. I’ve scheduled that for a week from today.”

“Fine.” *Normal*. Then his brain was okay, and this weirdness was over. Relief turned him jauntily. “I’m glad to assist your project, doctor. What is its focus, again?”

“Cerebral activation patterns in senior citizens. Did you realize, Dr. Erdmann, that the over-sixty-five demographic is the fastest growing one in the world? And that globally there are now one hundred and forty million people over the age of eighty?”

Henry hadn’t realized, nor did he care. The St. Sebastian aide came forward to help Henry to his feet. He was a dour young man whose name Henry hadn’t caught. DiBella said, “Where’s Carrie today?”

“It’s not her day with me.”

“Ah.” DiBella didn’t sound very interested; he was already prepping his screens for the next volunteer. Time on the MRI, he’d told Henry, was tight, having to be scheduled between hospital use.

The dour young man—Darryl? Darrin? Dustin?—drove Henry back to St. Sebastian’s and left him to make his own way upstairs. In his apartment, Henry lowered himself laboriously to the sofa. Just a few minutes’ nap, that’s all he needed, even a short excursion tired him so much now—although it would be better if Carrie had been along, she always took such good care of him, such a kind and delectable young woman. If he and Ida had ever had children, he’d have wanted them to be like Carrie. If that bastard Jim Peltier ever again tried to—

It shot through him like a bolt of lightning.

Henry screamed. This time the experience *hurt*, searing the inside of his skull and his spinal cord down to his tailbone. No dancing, no embroidering, no meditating—and yet others were there, not individuals but as a collective sensation, a shared pain, making the pain worse by pooling it. He couldn’t stand it, he was going to die, this was the end of—

The pain was gone. It vanished as quickly as it came, leaving him bruised inside, throbbing as if his entire brain had undergone a root canal. His gorge rose, and just in time he twisted his aching body to the side and vomited over the side of the sofa onto the carpet.

His fingers fumbled in the pocket of his trousers for the St. Sebastian panic button that Carrie insisted he wear. He found it, pressed the center, and lost consciousness.

FIVE

Carrie went home early. Thursday afternoons were assigned to Mrs. Lopez and her granddaughter had showed up unexpectedly. Carrie suspected that Vicky Lopez wanted money again since that seemed to be the only time she did turn up at St. Sebastian’s, but that was not Carrie’s business. Mrs. Lopez said happily that Vicky could just as easily take her to shopping instead of Carrie, and Vicky agreed, looking greedy. So Carrie went home.

If she’d been fortunate enough to have a grandmother—to have any relatives besides her no-good

stepbrothers in California—she would treat that hypothetical grandmother better than did Vicky, sh of the designer jeans and cashmere crew necks and massive credit-card debt. Although Carr wouldn't want her grandmother to be like Mrs. Lopez, either, who treated Carrie like not-very-clear hired help.

Well, she *was* hired help, of course. The job as a St. Sebastian aide was the first thing she'd seen the classifieds the day she finally walked out on Jim. She grabbed the job blindly, like a person going over a cliff who sees a fragile branch growing from crumbly rock. The weird thing was that after the first day, she knew she was going to stay. She liked old people (most of them, anyway). They were interesting and grateful (most of them anyway)—and safe. During that first terrified week at the YMCA, while she searched for a one-room apartment she could actually afford, St. Sebastian's was the one place she felt safe.

Jim had changed that, of course. He'd found out the locations of her job and apartment. Cops could find anything.

She unlocked her door after making sure the dingy corridor was empty, slipped inside, shot the deadbolt, and turned on the light. The only window faced an air shaft, and the room was dark even on the brightest day. Carrie had done what she could with bright cushions and Salvation Army lamps and dried flowers, but dark was dark.

"Hello, Carrie," Jim said.

She whirled around, stifling a scream. But the sickening thing was the rest of her reaction. Unbidden and hated—God, how hated!—but still there was the sudden thrill, the flash of excitement that energized every part of her body. "*That's not unusual,*" her counselor at the Battered Women Help Center had said, "*because frequently an abuser and his victim are both fully engaged in the struggle to dominate each other. How triumphant do you feel when he's in the apology-and-wooing phase of the abuse cycle? Why do you think you haven't left before now?*"

It had taken Carrie so long to accept that. And here it was again. Here Jim was again.

"How did you get in?"

"Does it matter?"

"You got Kelsey to let you in, didn't you?" The building super could be bribed to almost anything with a bottle of Scotch. Although maybe Jim hadn't needed that; he had a badge. Not even the charges she'd brought against him, all of which had been dropped, had affected his job. Nobody on the outside ever realized how common domestic violence was in cops' homes.

Jim wasn't in uniform now. He wore jeans, boots, a sports coat she'd always liked. He held a bouquet of flowers. Not supermarket carnations, either: red roses in shining gold paper. "Carrie, I'm sorry I startled you, but I wanted so bad for us to talk. Please, just let me have ten minutes. That's all. Ten minutes isn't much to give me against three years of marriage."

"We're not married. We're legally separated."

"I know. *I know.* And I deserve that you left me. I know that now. But just ten minutes. Please."

"You're not supposed to be here at all! There's a restraining order against you—and you're a cop!"

"I know. I'm risking my career to talk to you for ten minutes. Doesn't that say how much I care? Here, these are for you."

Humbly, eyes beseeching, he held out the roses. Carrie didn't take them.

"You blackened my eye the last time we 'talked,' you bastard!"

"I know. If you knew how much I've regretted that . . . If you had any idea how many nights I lay awake hating myself for that. I was out of my mind, Carrie. I really was. But it taught me something. I've changed. I'm going to A.A. now, I've got a sponsor and everything. I'm working my program."

"I've heard this all before!"

"I know. I know you have. But this time is different." He lowered his eyes, and Carrie put h

hands on her hips. Then it hit her: She had said all this before, too. She had stood in this scolding, on-up stance. ~~He had stood in his humble stance, as well. This was the apology-and-wooing stage that the~~ counselor had talked about, just one more scene in their endless script. And she was eating it up as if it had never happened before, was reveling in the glow of righteous indignation fed by his groveling. Just like the counselor had said.

She was so sickened at herself that her knees nearly buckled.

“Get out, Jim.”

“I will. I *will*. Just tell me that you heard me, that there’s some chance for us still, even if it’s a chance I don’t deserve. Oh, Carrie—”

“Get out!” Her nauseated fury was at herself.

“If you’d just—”

“Out! Out now!”

His face changed. Humility was replaced by astonishment—this wasn’t how their script went— and then by rage. He threw the flowers at her. “You won’t even *listen* to me? I come here goddam apologizing and you won’t even listen? What makes you so much better than me, you fucking bitch, you’re nothing but a—”

Carrie whirled around and grabbed for the deadbolt. He was faster. Faster, stronger, and *that* was the old script, too, how could she forget for even a half second he—

Jim threw her to the floor. Did he have his gun? Would he—She caught a glimpse of his face, so twisted with rage that he looked like somebody else, even as she was throwing up her arms to protect her head. He kicked her in the belly. The pain was astonishing. It burned along her body she was burning she couldn’t breathe she was going to die . . . His boot drew back to kick her again and Carrie tried to scream. No breath came. This was it then no no *no*—

Jim crumpled to the floor.

Between her sheltering arms, she caught sight of his face as he went down. Astonishment gaped open the mouth, widened the eyes. The image clapped onto her brain. His body fell heavily on top of hers, and didn’t move.

When she could breathe again, she crawled out from under him, whimpering with short guttural sounds: *uh uh uh*. Yet a part of her brain worked clearly, coldly. She felt for a pulse, held her finger over his mouth to find a breath, put her ear to his chest. He was dead.

She staggered to the phone and called 911.

Cops. Carrie didn’t know them; this wasn’t Jim’s precinct. First uniforms and then detectives. An ambulance. A forensic team. Photographs, fingerprints, a search of the one-room apartment, with her consent. You have the right to remain silent. She didn’t remain silent, didn’t need a lawyer, told what she knew as Jim’s body was replaced by a chalked outline and neighbors gathered in the hall. And when it was finally, finally over and she was told that her apartment was a crime scene until the autopsy was performed and where could she go, she said, “St. Sebastian’s. I work there.”

“Maybe you should call in sick for this night’s shift, ma’am, it’s—”

“I’m going to St. Sebastian’s!”

She did, her hands shaky on the steering wheel. She went straight to Dr. Erdmann’s door and knocked hard. His walker inch across the floor, inside. Inside, where it was safe.

“Carrie! What on Earth—”

“Can I come in? Please? The police—”

“Police?” he said sharply. “What police?” Peering around her as if he expected to see blue uniforms filling the hall. “Where’s your coat? It’s fifty degrees out!”

She had forgotten a coat. Nobody had mentioned a coat. *Pack a bag*, they said, but nobody had

mentioned a coat. Dr. Erdmann always knew the temperature and barometer reading, he kept track of such things. Belatedly, and for the first time, she burst into tears.

He drew her in, made her sit on the sofa. Carrie noticed, with the cold clear part of her mind that still seemed to be functioning, that there was a very wet spot on the carpet and a strong odor, as if someone had scrubbed with disinfectant. "Could I . . . could I have a drink?" She hadn't known she was going to say that until the words were out. She seldom drank. Too much like Jim.

Jim . . .

The sherry steadied her. Sherry seemed so civilized, and so did the miniature glass he offered it in. She breathed easier, and told him her story. He listened without saying a word.

"I think I'm a suspect," Carrie said. "Well, of course I am. He just dropped dead when we were fighting . . . but I never so much as laid a hand on him. I was just trying to protect my head and . . . Dr. Erdmann, what is it? You're white as snow! I shouldn't have come, I'm sorry, I—"

"Of course you should have come!" he snapped, so harshly that she was startled. A moment later he tried to smile. "Of course you should have come. What are friends for?"

Friends. But she had other friends, younger friends. Joanne and Connie and Jennifer . . . not that she had seen any of them much in the last three months. It had been Dr. Erdmann she'd thought of first and immediately. And now he looked so . . .

"You're not well," she said. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I ate something bad at lunch, in the dining room. Half the building started vomiting a few hours later. Evelyn Krenchnoted and Gina Martinelli and Erin Bass and Bob Donovan and Anna Cosmano and Anna Chernov. More."

He watched her carefully as he recited the names, as if she should somehow react. Carrie knew some of those people, but mostly just to say hello. Only Mr. Cosmano was on her resident-assignment list. Dr. Erdmann looked stranger than she had ever seen him.

He said, "Carrie, what time did Jim . . . did he drop dead? Can you fix the exact time?"

"Well, let me see . . . I left here at two and I stopped at the bank and the gas station and the convenience store, so maybe three or three-thirty? Why?"

Dr. Erdmann didn't answer. He was silent for so long that Carrie grew uneasy. She shouldn't have come, it was a terrible imposition, and anyway there was probably a rule against aides staying in residents' apartments, what was she *thinking*—

"Let me get blankets and pillow for the sofa," Dr. Erdmann finally said, in a voice that still sounded odd to Carrie. "It's fairly comfortable. For a sofa."

SIX

Not possible. The most ridiculous coincidence. That was all—coincidence. Simultaneity was not cause-and-effect. Even the dimmest physics undergraduate knew that.

In his mind, Henry heard Richard Feynman say about string theory, "I don't like that they're not calculating anything. I don't like that they don't check their ideas. I don't like that for anything that disagrees with an experiment, they cook up an explanation. . . . The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool." Henry hadn't liked Feynman, whom he'd met at conferences at Cal Tech. A buffoon, with his bongo drums and his practical jokes and his lock-picking. Undignified. But the brilliant buffoon had been right. Henry didn't like string theory, either, and he didn't like ideas that weren't calculated, checked, and verified by experimental data. Besides, the idea that Henry had somehow killed Jim Peltier with his *thoughts* . . . preposterous.

Mere thoughts could not send a bolt of energy through a distant man's body. But the bolt itself wasn't a "cooked-up" idea. It had happened. Henry had felt it.

DiBella had said that Henry's MRI looked completely normal.

Henry lay awake much of Thursday night, which made the second night in a row, while Carr slept the oblivious deep slumber of the young. In the morning, before she was awake, he dressed quietly, left the apartment with his walker, and made his way to the St. Sebastian's Infirmary. He expected to find the Infirmary still crammed with people who'd vomited when he had yesterday afternoon. He was wrong.

"Can I help you?" said a stout, middle-aged nurse carrying a breakfast tray. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No, no," Henry said hastily. "I'm here to visit someone. Evelyn Krenchnoted. She was here yesterday."

"Oh, Evelyn's gone back. They've all gone back, the food poisoning was so mild. Our only patients here now are Bill Terry and Anna Chernov." She said the latter name the way many of the staff did, as if she'd just been waiting for an excuse to speak it aloud. Usually this irritated Henry—what was ballet dancing compared to, say, physics?—but now he seized on it.

"May I see Miss Chernov, then? Is she awake?"

"This is her tray. Follow me."

The nurse led the way to the end of a short corridor. Yellow curtains, bedside table, monitors and IV poles; the room looked like every other hospital room Henry had ever seen, except for the flowers. Masses and masses of flowers, bouquets and live plants and one huge floor pot of brass holding what looked like an entire small tree. A man, almost lost amid all the flowers, sat in the room's one chair.

"Here's breakfast, Miss Chernov," said the nurse reverently. She fussed with setting the tray on the table, positioning it across the bed, removing the dish covers.

"Thank you." Anna Chernov gave her a gracious, practiced smile, and looked inquiringly at Henry. The other man, who had not risen at Henry's entrance, glared at him.

They made an odd pair. The dancer, who looked younger than whatever her actual age happened to be, was more beautiful than Henry had realized, with huge green eyes over perfect cheekbones. She wasn't hooked to any of the machinery on the wall, but a cast on her left leg bulged beneath the yellow bedcover. The man had a head shaped like a garden trowel, aggressively bristly gray crew cut, and small suspicious eyes. He wore an ill-fitting sports coat over a red T-shirt and jeans. There seemed to be grease under his fingernails—grease, in St. Sebastian's? Henry would have taken him for part of the maintenance staff except that he looked too old, although vigorous and walker-free. Henry wished him at the devil. This was going to be difficult enough without an audience.

"Miss Chernov, please forgive the intrusion, especially so early, but I think this is important. My name is Henry Erdmann, and I'm a resident on Three."

"Good morning," she said, with the same practiced, detached graciousness she'd shown the nurse. "This is Bob Donovan."

"Hi," Donovan said, not smiling.

"Are you connected in any way with the press, Mr. Erdmann? Because I do not give interviews."

"No, I'm not. I'll get right to the point, if I may. Yesterday I had an attack of nausea, just as you did, and you also, Mr. Donovan. Evelyn Krenchnoted told me."

Donovan rolled his eyes. Henry would have smiled at that if he hadn't felt so tense.

He continued, "I'm not sure the nausea *was* food poisoning. In my case, it followed a . . . a sort of attack of a quite different sort. I felt what I can only describe as a bolt of energy burning along my nerves, very powerfully and painfully. I'm here to ask if you felt anything similar."

Donovan said, "You a doctor?"

"Not an M.D. I'm a physicist."

Donovan scowled savagely, as if physics were somehow offensive. Anna Chernov said, "Yes, I did tell Dr. Erdmann, although I wouldn't describe it as 'painful.' It didn't hurt. But a 'bolt of energy along

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