

THE EIGHTH SCIENCE FICTION MEGAPACK



25 *Modern & Classic Stories*

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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to the 8th volume in our *Megapack* series. I'm very happy with the mix of stories this time, ranging across all of time and space, and I'm pleased to introduce a new feature—an interview with a famous science fiction author (in this case George R.R. Martin.) The interview was conducted by one of our regular contributors, Darrell Schweitzer.

Those who follow such things may have noticed that *The Eighth Science Fiction Megapack* is appearing about a month ahead of schedule. We are going to try to publish new volumes every other month, beginning with this one. Six per year seems like a good number. Perhaps, if all goes well, we can get it up to monthly someday!

As always, we welcome feedback. Let me know what you think of this volume, what you'd like to see in future Megapacks, and if you'd like more non-fiction. (We plan on sticking to 25 short stories in each volume, regardless of what else we add—but we can easily include more interviews, essays, and other features...but only if readers want and enjoy them. Rest assured, the price won't go up as a result of adding more content!)

And, as a bit of a shameless plug for our Megapacks, we are releasing our first “living author” megapacks in December, 2013, beginning with *The Darrell Schweitzer Megapack* and *The C.J. Henderson Megapack*. Both have had stories in our science fiction Megapacks (C.J. is in this one), and I hope you will check out these two “Best Of” samplers by a pair of great writers.

HELP WANTED—LOST WRITERS!

For those who read our message board, I'm sad to report that I have hit a dead end in tracing the heirs of Jay Williams, author of the Danny Dunn young adult series. We had a couple of requests to reprint these books. I'm also looking for the estate of Mack Reynolds, but cannot locate his son, Emory Reynolds and the estate of Rick Raphael. If anyone knows them, please get in touch!

—John Betancourt

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ABOUT THE MEGAPACK SERIES

Over the last few years, our “Megapack” series of ebook anthologies has proved to be one of our most popular endeavors. (Maybe it helps that we sometimes offer them as premiums to our mailing list!) One question we keep getting asked is, “Who's the editor?”

The Megapacks (except where specifically credited) are a group effort. Everyone at Wildside works on them. This includes John Betancourt, Mary Wickizer Burgess, Sam Cooper, Carla Coupe, Steve Coupe, Bonner Menking, Colin Azariah-Kribbs, Robert Reginald, A. E. Warren, and many of Wildside's authors...who often suggest stories to include (and not just their own!).

A NOTE FOR KINDLE READERS

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board at <http://movies.ning.com/forum> (there is an area for Wildside Press comments).

~~Note: we only consider stories that have already been professionally published. This is not a market for new works.~~

TYPOS

Unfortunately, as hard as we try, a few typos do slip through. We update our ebooks periodically, so make sure you have the current version (or download a fresh copy if it's been sitting in your ebook reader for months.) It may have already been updated.

If you spot a new typo, please let us know. We'll fix it for everyone. You can email the publisher at wildsidepress@yahoo.com or use the message boards above.

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THE TRUE DARKNESS, by Pamela Sargent

The shrieking wind went mute. Lydia's ears throbbed in the silence. Matt reached for the remote ju as the TV screen went black and the overhead lights winked out.

Matt did not curse the darkness.

Lydia lifted a hand to her face. The living room was so dark that she couldn't see her own finger "Isn't there a flashlight by the bookcase?" she asked. Matt had been looking for his nail clippers ov there earlier, shining a flashlight under the bottom shelf and behind the books; she had reminded hi that he wouldn't have lost the damned clippers in the first place if he didn't insist on clipping his nai while he watched TV. "Think you left it there before."

"If I can find it." She felt the shifting of his weight on the sofa. "Jesus, can't see a thing." His voi was above her now. "This must be the third power failure we've had. Better call and find out how lon it'll be."

"Even if we manage to call through, they won't tell us much," she said.

"At least we'd have an idea."

Lydia leaned forward, felt around on the coffee table for her cellphone, flipped it open, and thumbe a button. The tiny screen should have been glowing by now. "My cell's not working."

"What do you mean it's not working?" Matt's voice was a bit more distant.

"Just what I said." She paused. "Where's your iPhone?"

"Think I left it upstairs."

"I could try the phone in the kitchen."

There was the sound of a thump. "Ow!" Matt said. "Just bashed my knee."

Action and reaction, Lydia thought, yet another example of Newton's third law of motion. She sai "Be careful."

"Found the flashlight." A small round circle of light appeared, moved up and down, then went ou There was something wrong with the flashlight, too. Everything around it, except for the patch light, had remained completely black.

The floor creaked and then she felt the weight of her husband against her left side. "You don't hav to sit right on top of me," she said.

"Sorry." He moved away from her. The disk of light reappeared, but failed to illuminate anythin around it. "This is really weird," Matt continued. "This flashlight is screwy." His voice was shaky.

"Guess I should try calling," she said, "even if they don't tell us much." She had stored the numb for National Access Incorporated in both her cellphone and the landline phone in the kitchen after th last power failure. She fiddled with the cellphone again, but nothing happened. "I'll try the phone the kitchen."

"Take the flashlight."

She felt the cool metal cylinder against her palm and closed her fingers around it, then push against the slide with her thumb. At first she thought that the flashlight had died, and then she turne the cylinder toward herself and saw the small circle of light.

Her face felt cold; it was harder to breathe. She aimed the flashlight away from herself and saw th light disappear.

She heard Matt catch his breath, but he said nothing. During the last power failure, Matt had curse National Access for a minute or two, cursed some more while trying to locate a flashlight, had trie and failed to get a call in to the power company, then had suggested that they relax and finish the wine and he would tell her about his latest project while they waited for the power to come back on.

wasn't like him to sit there saying nothing at all.

Lydia stood up. Even with the flashlight on, she had to feel her way toward the kitchen. She crept through the dining room, expecting at almost any moment to get to the doorway and then around the corner to the countertop where the phone was located, but the kitchen felt far away, almost unreachable. Before she could take one step, she had to take half a step, then half of that half-step, then half—

Stop it, she told herself. The minutes seemed to crawl by before she finally touched the edge of the kitchen counter.

Late that afternoon, a middle school kid had called the library to ask what Zeno's paradox was; Lydia had taken the call.

"You don't need a reference librarian to answer that question," she had told him.

"But I don't understand the answer I found," the boy replied, sounding close to tears. A homework assignment, she thought, probably one he had put off doing until the last minute, and maybe his computer wasn't working and he couldn't go online to search for more information.

"Well, let me put it as simply as I can," Lydia said. "Zeno's paradox states that an arrow will never hit its target, because it has to fly half of the distance to it first, and then half of that distance, and so on and so forth, so the arrow will never reach the target at all, because it has to traverse—move through—an endless series of halves."

"But that doesn't make any sense."

"Having to cover endless half-distances and never able to get where it's going is a way of saying that motion is impossible. Or an illusion. Think about it."

"Thanks, lady," the boy said, sounding unconvinced.

At least she had made it to the kitchen, unlike the arrow forever kept from its target by halves. The power had only gone out for an hour last time, and for about half an hour a month ago, but there had been a high wind warning up earlier in the evening. There had been more such warnings lately, perhaps a sign of increasing climate change since this region had rarely been swept by such strong winds in the past, and the wind had been howling for at least a couple of hours, to the point where she had started to worry about the roof and the tree limbs that might come crashing down on the house. That was one thing they hadn't had to worry about while living in the city, where the nearest trees of any great size were in the park a block and a half away.

She slapped the countertop. Her hand found the telephone; her thumb pressed the "Talk" button. Instead of a dial tone, all she heard was a distant whistling sound.

Lydia leaned against the counter. The silence outside was unnerving. No police sirens, overheard conversations, car alarms going off, or people calling out to one another or gabbing on the sidewalk. She bit her lip, tried the phone again, set it down, then turned off the flashlight. The darkness and silence pressed in around her; she turned on the flashlight again. The patch of light shone up uselessly at her, illuminating nothing, as though the light was being blocked by an invisible barrier, or else struggling to penetrate the ether scientists had once believed filled all of space.

She made the journey back to the living room and sat down on the sofa. "Any luck?" Matt asked.

"I couldn't even get a dial tone." She waited for him to curse or say something, but he was silent. "Wasn't there supposed to be a full moon tonight?" She had noticed that earlier, on her office calendar at the library. Matt kept up on things like that.

"Yeah."

"So you'd think we'd see some light through the blinds, wouldn't you?"

"I was thinking the same thing. Maybe it's gotten really cloudy. Maybe the clouds are really thick."

That's what I've been telling myself." His hand slipped around her wrist. "But that doesn't explain the flashlight. Light doesn't work that way."

"I know."

She turned off the flashlight. They sat there in silence. This was what it must be like to be blind, Lydia thought. At last she said, "Maybe we should see how the people across the street are doing. They had been living in this house for almost four months now, and she had still not met any of the neighbors, but Matt must know something about them by now, since he ran his business from home. I mean, this is the third power failure since we moved here. Maybe they can tell us how often that happens."

"They've got three kids," Matt said. "At least I think all of them are their kids, the ones I saw playing on their lawn the other day. Hard to believe anybody can afford three kids these days." His voice sounded a little more like himself. "Guy's name is Olaf. He looks like an Olaf, too. He's a big blonde-haired guy who's built like a linebacker and his wife is this little tiny thing with black hair."

"What's her name?"

"Don't know. I only talked to the guy for a few seconds. He asked me what I did, and I told him Web site design and computer workshops for individuals and groups, and he asked if maybe I could design a Web site for him if he ever quits his job and starts a landscaping business. And that was it." He sighed. "I could head over there, see if he's found out anything."

"I'll come with you." She fumbled for his hand, afraid of sitting alone in the dark; his fingers closed around hers.

They moved slowly toward the front door, clinging to each other. After long moments, Matt let go of her and then she heard the door creak open. The still air seemed even colder than it had been earlier when the wind had started to pick up. It was as dark outside as inside the house; the other houses on their street were completely invisible.

"Matt," she whispered. Even the thickest cloud cover wouldn't have turned the sky this black; there would have been some sign of the full moon, a soft silvery glow behind the clouds, a break through which she could have seen stars.

A speck of light suddenly appeared in the blackness. "Olaf?" Matt called out. "That you? It's me, Matt Polgrave from across the street."

"Matt?" That was a man's voice, sounding very faint.

"Olaf?" Matt replied.

"Yeah, it's me. This flashlight isn't working." The speck of light disappeared. "Maybe it's the batteries. I knew I should have picked some up on my way home."

"My flashlight's got the same kind of trouble," Matt said.

"Vicky tried calling National Access, but she couldn't get through. National Asshole, I call them. We'll probably be the last ones in town to get our power back on."

Olaf was very likely right about that, Lydia thought. They were on a cul-de-sac in the middle of nowhere, or so it had always seemed to her, since it took her a good five to ten minutes just to get to the highway and another half an hour after that to drive to work. "We'll be able to have two cars," Matt had told her before they moved, "and we won't have to worry about parking." She would have preferred just the one car and the parking hassles and her former ten-minute walk to her job at the library. She had felt freer in the city, with the sounds and movement of so many other people around her. Here, she often felt cut off, embedded, trapped. Inertia had become the ruling principle of her life.

"This is the third time since we moved here," Matt said to Olaf. "How often does this happen around here, anyway?"

“Not this often. Not until the last few months, anyway.”

Another point of light appeared far to Lydia's left, then vanished. Another neighbor, she thought somebody else she didn't know who was probably bewildered by the totality of the darkness. She began to wish that she had made more of an effort to meet the people here, that Matt had been more outgoing. It had been mostly his idea to move out of the city, to get away from worrying about burglaries and getting mugged and hassles with parking the car and to have more space for his computers and his workshop and all the other stuff that had cluttered and finally overflowed the condominium and the small office he had rented down the street.

“Want to come over?” Matt asked.

“I'd probably get lost crossing the street,” Olaf said. “Can't see a goddamn thing. Anyhow, I better get back to Vicki, she's got a thing about the dark.”

“See you,” Matt said, and laughed.

“That's a good one.” Olaf's voice sounded even fainter.

“Step back,” Matt said to her, and Lydia knew that he was going to close the door. She felt her way back through the doorway and had to grope her way back to the sofa, brushing her hand against the bookshelves as she passed them and taking tiny steps so that she didn't hit her legs against the coffee table.

She felt as though she would never get to the sofa.

Her leg bumped up against an obstacle that felt like the sofa. She turned and sat down. Matt plopped down next to her.

“He was right,” she said.

“Who?”

“Olaf. About getting lost crossing the street. I read this article the other day that says if people don't get certain kinds of cues, they end up walking in circles, that's how people get lost in the woods. We could go out the front door now and end up just circling around to the back of our own house.”

Matt said, “You're creeping me out.”

She had thought she was making a joke. Now she knew from the flat tone of his voice that he was really frightened. She felt around the coffee table for her cellphone, found it, and pressed a button with her thumb; it still wasn't working.

“The radio,” Matt said. “You know, that old one we took with us up to the lake this summer. I think I left it in my workshop.”

“What about it?”

“We could tune into one of the local stations, find out what's going on. Might as well find out if it's a major blackout.” He brushed against her as he stood up. “Think I can get to the basement,” his voice said overhead. “I'll take it slow.”

* * * *

The first power failure they had experienced in this house had happened in the middle of dinner, and the power had come back on just as Lydia was lighting a candle for the table. The second had actually turned into a pleasant experience, giving her a chance to talk to Matt while they finished some wine instead of her having to sit through a DVD of a crappy action movie.

This power failure was different. This darkness didn't feel like only the absence of light. She could imagine it as something seeping into the atmosphere, thickening the air, leaking through crevices in the walls and windows and billowing throughout the house until they were drowned in the blackness.

“Planck's constant,” Betsy Dane had told four high school students earlier that week, “is a physical constant, symbolized by h , used in quantum mechanics to denote the sizes of quanta.” Lydia and

Betsy, a newly hired librarian, had spent half an hour helping the students locate references for science project. Quantum mechanics, to Lydia's surprise, had turned out to be a subject that greatly interested her coworker, who had minored in physics in college. But quantum mechanics was not what she needed to dwell on at the moment. It only reminded her that the normal, usually unexamined daily assumptions she made and acted upon—that there were such things as continuity and causation—might be illusions, that the light and space she sensed were only the product of her own perception of the way her senses ordered the world, and not a kind of absolute reality that existed independently of her relationship to physical phenomena.

I have to stop this, Lydia told herself. The lights would come back on any minute now.

She got up and walked slowly to the kitchen. There was a box of kitchen matches in the second drawer from the top of the counter, and there might be a candle in there as well. She found the drawer handle, pulled out the drawer, and found the box of matches. Leaning against the counter, she opened the box and struck a match.

The tiny flame danced, a spark against the darkness, but her hand and the match she held were invisible to her. Her hand shook. She blew out the flame and dropped the match on the countertop.

She shuffled back to the living room and sat down, then pulled on the sweater she had shed earlier. The living room felt cold for this time of year, and without any power, they could not turn on the furnace.

Matt was certainly taking his time looking for the radio; it felt as though he had been downstairs forever. There was no reason they had to sit here doing nothing just because of a blackout. They could drive to someplace where the power was still on and stay overnight at a hotel. She could always call in sick tomorrow, since she had some days off coming to her. If they stayed anywhere near downtown, she could even walk to work.

"Matt?" she called out, in case he had come back upstairs and she just hadn't heard him. "Matt?" The air seemed thicker, harder to breathe, but that had to be her imagination. She waited silently for a few more moments. "Matt?"

"Found the radio," he said from the direction of the dining room. "Couldn't hear anything downstairs, though. Maybe we can pick up something up here." There was doubt in his voice.

"I'm over here," she said, worrying that he might lose his way even along the short distance to the front of the house.

He thumped down next to her, at her right this time. "I know it's on," he said, "and I found the tuning dial, but nothing's coming in."

"Maybe the battery's dead."

"I know it's not dead, because I put in a new battery just the other day."

"I went to the kitchen again," she said, "and lit a match, and even..." She sighed. "Even the flame wasn't acting right."

"What do you mean?"

"I could see the flame, but nothing else, not even the match."

"What's so strange about that? You're not going to get much light from a match anyway. You're too suggestible. The flashlight doesn't work, so now you're imagining that fire doesn't, either."

She wanted to accept that. She always had been suggestible, even gullible at times.

"I mean, you're too damn suggestible." He seemed intent on establishing that fact, an assumption that would cut off other possible theorizing about their situation. "Damn radio." She heard him sigh. "Maybe there's nobody on the air," he continued, "because this is a really big outage, like the one that knocked out the whole East Coast a while back."

It isn't just an outage, she thought; she knew that and was sure Matt knew it, too, deep down however much he resisted the fact. ~~Flashlights that cast no light, a darkness so pervasive that nothing was visible, even the feeling that air was beginning to congeal around her—this was more than just a power failure.~~

"Matt," she whispered, "I was thinking. We don't have to stay here, you know. Let's go somewhere else."

"We'd feel awfully stupid when the power comes back on, driving around and wasting time and gas when we could just be patient." Matt had always been practical. Living in this house gave them more space for less cost than they'd had in the city, even with the second car; keeping their old furniture and making use of old appliances like the radio was economical; and there was no point in going on vacation somewhere else this year when they could enjoy their own back yard. Of course Matt had wanted to leave the city, she thought. The house gave him even more of an excuse to keep to himself, to anchor himself to one place, to surround himself with certainty, to become almost immovable.

"I'll keep fiddling with the radio," he said. "Think you can make it to the front door, see anything's going on outside?"

"Sure." The power would come back on any second now. The world would become continuous again.

She got up and inched toward the front door, hands out, until her fingers found a surface. She pressed her palms against the door, found the doorknob, and pulled the door open.

She stepped outside; the darkness took her, starless, cold. She wrapped her arms around herself. As she turned to go back inside, she glimpsed a faint glow to her right. The glow became two globes of light; there was the sound of a motor. A car was coming down the small hill at the end of the cul-de-sac, and it seemed to be moving very slowly, maybe no more than five miles an hour.

She retreated inside, closed the door, and shuffled back to the sofa. "It's still just as dark," she said, "but somebody was driving down the hill at the end of our street. The headlights—they were doing the same thing as our flashlight. I mean, I could see them, but I don't know how the driver could see the road or anything else." They wouldn't be able to drive out of here, with no way to see where they were going.

"Nothing," Matt said, and she knew that he was referring to the radio. "Everything's out."

She sat down. Maybe they should get out of here, whatever the risks. Anything would be better than sitting helplessly, passive victims of whatever was going on outside. Maybe the blackout, or whatever it was, had taken out the whole country this time. Maybe all of North America was dark and cold. Maybe terrorists had finally managed to knock out the entire grid. Maybe somebody had finally started a nuclear war. Thoughts of terrorists and nuclear war didn't frighten her as much as they might have. At least they were familiar possible causes of potential disasters.

"Hey!" That was a woman's voice, and very faint. "Hey!"

"Did you hear that?" Matt asked.

"Yes." Lydia was already up, shuffling toward the door. She pulled the door open and leaned outside. "Hello?"

"I'm here," the voice said. Lydia guessed that the woman had to be somewhere near the edge of the lawn. "In my car."

"I'm Lydia Polgrave," Lydia said. "My husband Matt and I live in the two-story brick house next to the white Colonial at the bottom of the hill." It suddenly seemed ludicrous to be introducing herself to someone she could not see.

"I know the house. My name's Gretchen Duhamel, and I live in that gray shingled job with the screened-in porch at the end of the road." The alto voice was strong, almost reassuring. Lydia tried

visualize this woman she had never seen. She sounded like a tall woman, maybe somewhat overweight, with a short, no-nonsense haircut. “Can’t see a darned thing, so it probably isn’t a good idea to keep driving. Only trouble is, I don’t know if I could even find my way home now, in the car or on foot.”

Lydia thought of asking her inside. Under the circumstances, Matt was unlikely to object, and might even welcome the company. Even the presence of a stranger would be better than sitting there stewing by themselves. “You could stay with us for a while,” she said. “Think you can find your way to our door?”

“I should be able to get that far,” Gretchen Duhamel replied. There was the sharp *chunk* of a car door being slammed shut. “Aren’t you the house with those flagstones on your front lawn, kind of like a pathway to your front steps?”

“That’s us.”

“For a minute there, I couldn’t remember if it was the brick house or the Colonial with the flagstones, and I’ve lived in this neighborhood for over ten years, must have driven past your house a million times. Funny what you can’t remember when you can’t see anything.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Keep talking,” Gretchen Duhamel said. “All I’ve got to go on is the sound of your voice.”

Lydia tried to think of what to say. “Uh, we moved in about four months back. I’ve got a job at Findlay, at the downtown branch of the public library.”

“The library?” Gretchen Duhamel sounded closer.

“I’m a reference librarian there. My husband runs his own consulting business from home.”

“Then I take it he’s the guy I’ve seen mowing your lawn. The tall skinny guy in the Red Sox cap.”

“That’s Matt.”

“I’m retired, but I used to teach introduction to physics at the community college. You know, I’ve been trying to get National Access on my cellphone the whole way here. Can’t get through.” The woman sounded really close now.

“Be careful. It’s four steps up to the door.”

“I’m being careful,” Gretchen Duhamel said. Lydia heard footfalls on the steps, and then something brushed against her. “Sorry.”

“You’re almost there. Just keep coming.”

* * * *

By the time Gretchen Duhamel was settled in the easy chair next to the sofa, Lydia had learned that she was a widow and that her late husband had died five years ago. The woman went on to mention a son who lived in Seattle and her two cats, Bartholomew and Percy, whom she had left behind in the fenced-in back yard of her house.

“They’re indoor cats,” the woman continued, “but I’ve got one of those kitty doors in the back, so they can get in and out of the house, but they can’t get out of the yard.” She went on at length about the felines’ favorite foods, their luxuriant black and white fur, and the way they loved to chase their favorite toy, a ball of aluminum foil. Normally such a conversation would have bored Lydia mightily, but now she welcomed the distraction, the feeling that things would soon return to normal. The lights would come back on, and Gretchen Duhamel would go home to her cats and toss them their balls of aluminum foil.

“I’ve lived with those cats for almost four years now,” Gretchen went on, “so they’re almost like my kids. You don’t have any kids, do you?”

“No,” Matt replied.

“Not yet,” Lydia added.

“People around here aren’t having so many kids these days,” Gretchen Duhamel said, “and they’re older when they do. It’s like they can’t count on a stable, normal life any more, doing what they’re supposed to do and having things work out. Nothing’s that predictable any more. The couple that used to live in your house must have been over forty when they had their first.”

“I think that big blond guy across the street has three kids,” Matt said.

“Olaf Janssen?” the woman said. “Don’t know where you got that idea. He and Vicky just have the one boy, Lars.”

“I’ve seen three kids over there.”

“You must be thinking of Josh and Becca, the Bloom kids. They’re over there all the time. They and Lars Janssen are as thick as thieves.”

Gretchen Duhamel fell silent. Lydia waited for the woman to say something more, anything to distract them from the darkness and the cold.

“Wish I hadn’t left my cats,” Gretchen murmured.

The power had to be restored soon. The light would restore everything to its previous state. Lydia was getting herself worked up over nothing, only imagining that the air was even thicker and colder around her. It was the waiting that got to her, the feeling that there was nothing she could do except wait there in the dark.

The front doorbell rang.

Lydia started. “Who could that be?” Gretchen said.

“Has to be one of our neighbors,” Matt said.

“Not necessarily,” Gretchen said. “Might be looters or burglars and such. And we can’t even call the police.”

Matt said, “I’ll see who it is.” He let out what sounded to Lydia like a forced laugh. “I’ll *find* out who it is.” She felt him get up from the sofa. The floor creaked slightly as he moved toward the door. “Who’s there?” he shouted.

“Olaf,” a muffled voice replied, and Lydia heard the door whoosh open.

* * * * *

Olaf had found a long length of rope in his garage and had tied one end of it to his front door knob, reasoning that if he got lost crossing the street, he would at least be able to find his way back to his house. As she listened to him, Lydia found herself admiring his resourcefulness and wishing that she had thought of such an idea herself or else that Matt had.

“Good thinking, young man,” Gretchen said when Olaf fell silent.

“That you, Miz Duhamel?” Olaf asked.

“Sure is. Anyway, it’s good thinking on your part assuming this is just a power failure and not something a whole lot weirder. You know what it’s like? It’s almost like the light’s going out and everything’s slowing down, and space is filling up.”

Lydia froze. She had been thinking almost exactly the same thing.

“My wife and my boy are still back at our house,” Olaf said after a long pause, “but I’ve been thinking there’s no point in just sitting around.”

“I tried to drive out,” Gretchen said, “but you can’t see a blessed thing, not even with the headlights on.”

“I thought of driving out myself,” Olaf said, “but no way. This just isn’t normal, this kind of darkness. You know what I saw just before the lights went out? For a second, everything looked kind of like these gray shadowy things in the dark, like I was seeing in the infrared or something. Vicky’s face was

like this pale blob with black pits instead of eyes.” He was silent for a bit. “We could still try to wa
out of here.”

He outlined his plan. They would tie whatever lengths of rope Matt happened to have in his house
Olaf’s rope. They could use the rope like a belay, going on to the next house, picking up more rop
and continuing on that way until...

“Until what?” Matt interrupted.

“Until we get to someplace where we can find out what’s going on or until the lights come back on
but if you want my opinion, I don’t think they’re coming back on any time soon. And if anybody
doesn’t have any rope, we can use sheets or something else, tie them to the rope. We can just kee
going and if anybody changes their mind, they can belay themselves back home.”

A giggle escaped Lydia. She clapped a hand over her mouth, but could not stop laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Olaf asked.

“You’re getting hysterical,” Matt said; Lydia felt his breath on her face.

Tears sprang to her eyes. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it.” She cleared her throat. “We’d look awfully
silly if everything suddenly went back to normal, standing around out there in a line hanging on to
rope.”

“I don’t know about you,” Olaf said, “but I’d rather do something instead of just sit around waiting
for National Access to get its shit together. Anyway, this feels like a whole lot more than just Nationa
Access.”

“Oh, it’s definitely more than that,” Gretchen added. “National recess,” she muttered.

“Light that doesn’t show you anything,” Olaf said, “everything so black you can’t see a damn thing
and I’ve never heard it so quiet outside. It’s like we’re...like we’re...” He seemed to be struggling f
words.

“It’s like we’re completely cut off from certain wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum,” Ma
said, “among other things.”

“Yeah, like that.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking anyway,” Matt said. Lydia heard the fear in his voice as he shifte
his weight on the sofa. “Cellphones not working, radios not picking up anything, the cold, the thin
with lights—” His voice trailed off. Lydia thought of the match she had struck in the kitchen.

“Whatever it is,” Olaf said, “I figure we can go back to my house, get my wife and son, and bel
down to the Blooms’ house.”

“What about your next door neighbors?” Gretchen asked.

“The Murrays? They flew out yesterday to visit his mother in Atlanta. Lucky for them, I guess.”

“Unless this is affecting everybody,” Matt said. “Everywhere.”

Lydia let that sink in. A worldwide catastrophe, she thought. What if they were trapped in the
darkness forever? She swallowed hard. They could get out of here with Olaf. If something had real
gone wrong, they would be better off in a group, She was pretty sure they had some rope in the gara
to tie to Olaf’s, and she could throw in a couple of old sheets she had been meaning to tear up for rag

“Well, what about it?” Olaf said. “I gotta get back to Vicky and Lars. Vicky has a thing about th
dark.”

“I’ll go with you,” Gretchen said. “Can’t give you more rope, though. There isn’t any rope in m
car.”

“What about you?” Olaf said, and Lydia knew that he was referring to her and Matt.

“Think I’ve got some rope in the garage,” Matt said.

“Think you can find it?” Olaf asked.

“Yeah. Just have to go through our kitchen and the laundry room, and it should be right next to the door.” Matt brushed against her as he stood up. “It’ll just take a minute.”

“Don’t get lost,” Olaf said.

“Don’t worry,” Matt replied, his voice farther away. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

“This blackout,” Gretchen said in a low voice. “It’s giving me the willies.”

“You can say that again,” Olaf said, also keeping his voice low. “I gotta tell you, before I came over Vicky tried to light a candle, just so we could have a little bit of light, and—” Somebody emitted a loud sniff. “It wasn’t working.”

Lydia said, “The same thing happened to me.” She tried to repress the fear uncoiling inside her. “Your wife struck a match, but all she got was a small flame, a bit of light that didn’t illuminate anything else. I lit a match earlier, in the kitchen, and it didn’t give off any light at all except for the tiny flame.”

“Know what I’m thinking?” Gretchen said. “I’m thinking of something Ernst Mach once said.”

“Who?” Olaf said.

“He was a physicist,” Lydia murmured. “I’m a reference librarian,” she continued by way of explanation. “That’s how I know things like that.”

“Ernst Mach once said that gravity might be our experience of some large motion of the universe as a whole.” Gretchen paused. “So in that case, light might be affected if there was any change in the motion.”

Lydia said, “Maybe the change is in us.”

“What do you mean?” Gretchen asked.

“Paul Valery once speculated that our universe is the plan of a deep symmetry, one that’s somehow present in the inner structure of our minds.”

“Who the hell is Paul Valery?” Olaf asked.

“He was a French poet and philosopher,” Lydia replied. “Wrote that in his *Cahiers*—uh, his notebooks.” That was yet another piece of knowledge she had acquired that now had no function except to feed her fears.

Gretchen and Olaf were silent. Lydia strained to hear something in the silence, but the darkness seemed to have muffled sound as effectively as it had doused light. The air seemed thicker, too, as if fog had formed around her.

Space was not empty. Their human senses deluded them into thinking space was empty when in fact it was full. Space and time were constructs of the human mind, and now their minds were failing them. Everything outside them was as it had always been; it was just that they could no longer impose their mental constructs on it.

She was imagining things again, being too suggestible. She pressed her hands together, trying to warm her fingers against the cold.

“Thought he said he’d be back in a second,” Olaf said. The words came from him slowly, and the pitch of his voice was even lower.

Lydia longed to call out to Matt, but restrained herself. She suddenly feared that if she opened her mouth to say anything, she would start screaming. She sat back, struggling to calm herself. Whatever was happening, there had to be somebody, somewhere, who was already trying to get help to anyone trapped in this darkness.

“Found the rope.” She could barely hear Matt’s voice. “And a couple of long cords, too.” He had been talking about the electrical cords he used with his clippers when he pruned the hedge. “Must be at least thirty or forty feet in all.” He sounded closer now. “But—”

Lydia took a breath. The air had taken on substance; she felt as though she were inhaling a soft, cool mist.

“But what?” Olaf said, his voice now a bass.

“I’m not...going with...you,” Matt replied in a baritone.

Another long silence ensued. “You’re not...going with me?”

“We’re...staying...here,” Matt said.

That was like Matt, speaking for her as well as himself. Lydia wanted to object, but there was no point in arguing with him, and also no reason why she could not leave with the others and without him.

“You...sure?” Olaf asked.

Lydia stretched out her arms and hit an obstacle. “Matt?” she said. “Is that you?”

“Yeah.”

She felt around and touched something that felt like coiled cord. “Give me the rope.”

“What?”

“Give me the rope.” A long moment passed before the coil was thrust into her hands. She got up, working hard to stand, struggling with the weight of the rope. “Olaf?”

“Over here.” By the sound of his voice, he was still near the door. She moved toward him, bumped into the coffee table, stepped back, then crept toward the entrance. Something suddenly slammed against her arm. “Sorry,” Olaf said.

“Here’s the rope.” She held out the coil; the invisible man relieved her of its weight.

“Thanks,” Olaf said in an even deeper bass voice. “Now I’m heading outside. Got the end of my rope tied to the railing around your front steps.”

“I’m right behind you,” Gretchen’s voice, nearly as deep as Olaf’s, was closer. There was the sound of the door opening. Lydia stood still, uncertain, searching the darkness for some sign of light.

“Lydia,” Matt called out.

“Are you coming?” Olaf asked. She hesitated. “Well?”

“I can’t leave Matt,” she said at last.

“You there, Miz Duhamel?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Grab my arm. Okay, I’m gonna take the steps real slow.” Lydia heard the dull thud of a foot on the steps; a long time passed before she heard another. For a moment, she thought she glimpsed the shimmering of a soft glow in the sky, and then it was gone.

She backed inside and struggled to push the massive door shut, surprised at how much effort it took.

“Lydia?” Matt said.

She shuffled slowly toward him. The cold air was congealing around her. She struggled across the room, wondering why Matt seemed so far away. “Matt?” The thickened air flowed into her mouth and into her lungs. “Matt?”

“Lydia?” His voice was as deep as Olaf’s had been. “Are...you...still here?”

“Yes.” She tried to swim toward him, but the air was beginning to jell around her arms and legs. She thought of Olaf and Gretchen and wondered if they were still towing themselves toward Olaf’s house along the rope or were already trapped outside on the steps.

“I’m...glad...you...stayed.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but was already embedded in the thick, frigid darkness; motion was frozen.

She wanted to say it, but the words escaped her.

“Matt,” she whispered, and her voice was as deep as his had been.

~~Her hand clawed through the solidifying darkness and clutched his as everything stopped.~~

PERMANENT FATAL ERRORS, by Jay Lake

Maduabuchi St. Macaria had never before traveled with an all-Howard crew. Mostly his kind kept themselves, even under the empty skies of a planet. Those who did take ship almost always did so in mixed or all-baseline human crew.

Not here, not aboard the threadneedle starship *Inclined Plane*. Seven crew including him, captained by a very strange woman who called herself Peridot Smith. All Howard Institute immortals. A new concept in long-range exploration, multi-decade interstellar missions with ageless crew, testbedded in orbit around the brown dwarf Tiede 1. That's what the newsfeeds said, anyway.

His experience was far more akin to a violent soap opera. Howards really weren't meant to be bottled up together. It wasn't in the design templates. Socially well-adjusted people didn't generally self-select to outlive everyone they'd ever known.

Even so, Maduabuchi was impressed by the welcome distraction of Tiede 1. Everyone else was too busy cleaning their weapons and hacking the internal comms and cams to pay attention to the mission objective. Not him.

Inclined Plane boasted an observation lounge. The hatch was coded 'Observatory', but everything of scientific significance actually happened within the instrumentation woven into the ship's hull and the diaphanous energy fields stretching for kilometers beyond. The lounge was a folly of nautical architecture, a translucent bubble fitted to the hull, consisting of roughly a third of a sphere of optically-corrected artificial diamond grown to nanometer symmetry and smoothness in microgravity. Chances were good that in a catastrophe the rest of the ship would be shredded before the bubble would so much as be scratched.

There had been long, heated arguments in the galley, with math and footnotes and thumb breaking over that exact question.

Maduabuchi liked to sit in the smartgel bodpods and let the ship perform a three-sixty massage while he watched the universe. The rest of the crew were like cats in a sack, too busy stalking the passageways and each other to care what might be outside the window. Here in the lounge one could see creation, witness the birth of stars, observe the death of planets, or listen to the quiet, empty coo of hard vacuum. The silence held a glorious music that echoed inside his head.

Maduabuchi wasn't a complete idiot – he'd rigged his own cabin with self-powered scream circuits and an ultrahigh voltage capacitor. That ought to slow down anyone with delusions of traps.

Tiede 1 loomed outside. It seemed to shimmer as he watched, as if a starquake were propagating. The little star belied the ancient label of "brown dwarf". Stepped down by filtering nano coating the diamond bubble, the surface glowed a dull reddish orange; a coal left too long in a campfire, or a jewel in the velvet setting of night. Only 300,000 kilometers in diameter, and about five percent of solar mass, it fell in that class of objects ambiguously distributed between planets and stars.

It could be anything, he thought. Anything.

A speck of green tugged at Maduabuchi's eye, straight from the heart of the star.

Green? There were no green emitters in nature.

"Amplification," he whispered. The nano filters living on the outside of the diamond shell obligingly began to self-assemble a lens. He controlled the aiming and focus with eye movements, trying to find whatever it was he had seen. Another ship? Reflection from a piece of rock or debris?

Excitement chilled Maduabuchi despite his best intentions to remain calm. What if this were evidence of the long-rumored but never-located alien civilizations that should have abounded in the Orion Arm of the Milky Way?

He scanned for twenty minutes, quartering Tiede 1's face as minutely as he could without direct access to the instrumentation and sensors carried by *Inclined Plane*. The ship's AI was friendly and helpful, but outside its narrow and critical competencies in managing the threadneedle drive and localspace navigation, no more intelligent than your average dog, and so essentially useless for such work. He'd need to go to the Survey Suite to do more.

Maduabuchi finally stopped staring at the star and called up a deck schematic. "Ship, plot all weapons discharges or unscheduled energy expenditures within the pressurized cubage."

The schematic winked twice, but nothing was highlighted. Maybe Captain Smith had finally gotten them all to stand down. None of Maduabuchi's screamers had gone off, either, though everyone else had long since realized he didn't play their games.

Trusting that no one had hacked the entire tracking system, he cycled the lock and stepped into the passageway beyond. Glancing back at Tiede 1 as the lock irised shut, Maduabuchi saw another green flash.

He fought back a surge of irritation. The star was *not* mocking him.

* * * *

Peridot Smith was in the Survey Suite when Maduabuchi cycled the lock there. Radiation-tanned from some melanin-deficient base hue of skin, lean, with her hair follicles removed and her scalp tattooed in an intricate mandala using magnetically sensitive ink, the captain was an arresting sight any time. At the moment, she was glaring at him, her eyes flashing a strange, flat silver indicating serious tech integrated into the tissues. "Mr. St. Macaria." She gave him a terse nod. "How are the weapons systems?"

Ironically, of all the bloody-minded engineers and analysts and navigators aboard, *he* was the weapons officer.

"Capped and sealed per orders, ma'am," he replied. "Test circuits warm and green." *Inclined Plane* carried a modest mix of hardware, generalized for unknown threats rather than optimized for anti-piracy or planetary blockade duty, for example. Missiles, field projectors, electron stripper flechettes, even foggers and a sandcaster.

Most of which he had no real idea about. They were icons in the control systems, each maintained by its own little armies of nano and workbots. All he had were status lights and strat-tac displays. Decisions were made by specialized subsystems.

It was the rankest makework, but Maduabuchi didn't mind. He'd volunteered for the Howarth Institute program because of the most basic human motivation – tourism. Seeing what was over the next hill had trumped even sex as the driving force in human evolution. He was happy to be a walking talking selection mechanism.

Everything else, including this tour of duty, was just something to do while the years slid past.

"What did you need, Mr. St. Macaria?"

"I was going to take a closer look at Tiede 1, ma'am."

"That *is* what we're here for."

He looked for humor in her dry voice, and did not find it. "Ma'am, yes ma'am. I...I just think I saw something."

"Oh, really?" Her eyes flashed, reminding Maduabuchi uncomfortably of blades.

Embarrassed, he turned back to the passageway.

"What did you see?" she asked from behind him. Now her voice was edged as well.

"Nothing, ma'am. Nothing at all."

Back in the passageway, Maduabuchi fled toward his cabin. Several of the crew laughed from side

bay, their voices rising over the whine of the bone-knitter. Someone had gone down hard.

Not him. Not even at the hands – or eyes – of Captain Smith.

* * * *

An hour later, after checking the locations of the crew again with the ship's AI, he ventured back to the Survey Suite. Chillicothe Xiang nodded to him in the passageway, almost friendly, as she headed aft for a half-shift monitoring the power plants in Engineering.

“Hey,” Maduabuchi said in return. She didn't answer, didn't even seem to notice he'd spoken. And these years, all the surgeries and nano injections and training, and somehow he was still the odd kid out on the playground.

Being a Howard Immortal was supposed to be *different*. And it was, when he wasn't around other Howard Immortals.

The Survey Suite was empty, as advertised. Ultra-def screens wrapped the walls, along with a variety of control inputs, from classical keypads to haptics and gestural zones. Maduabuchi slipped into the observer's seat and swept his hand to open the primary sensor routines.

Captain Smith had left her last data run parked in the core sandbox.

His fingers hovered over the purge, then pulled back. What had she been looking at, that had made her so interested in what he'd seen? Those eyes flashed edged and dangerous in his memory. He almost asked the ship where she was, but a question like that would be reported, drawing more attention than it was worth.

Maduabuchi closed his eyes for a moment, screwing up his courage, and opened the data run.

It cascaded across the screens, as well as virtual presentations in the aerosolized atmosphere of the Survey Suite. Much more than he'd seen when he was in here before – plots, scales, arrays, imagining across the EM spectrum, color-coded tabs and fields and stacks and matrices. Even his Howard-enhanced senses had trouble keeping up with the flood. Captain Smith was far older and more experienced than Maduabuchi, over half a dozen centuries to his few decades, and she had developed both the mental habits and the individualized mentarium to handle such inputs.

On the other hand, *he* was a much newer model. Everyone upgraded, but the Howard Institute baseline tech evolved over generations just like everything else in human culture. Maduabuchi bent to his work, absorbing the overwhelming bandwidth of her scans of Tiede 1, and trying to sort out what was that had been the true object of her attention.

Something *had* to be hidden in plain sight here.

* * * *

He worked an entire half-shift without being disturbed, sifting petabytes of data, until the truth hit him. The color-coding of one spectral analysis matrix was nearly identical to the green flash he thought he'd seen on the surface of Tiede 1.

All the data was a distraction. Her real work had been hidden in the metadata, passing for nothing more than a sorting signifier.

Once Maduabuchi realized that, he unpacked the labeling on the spectral analysis matrix, and opened up an entirely new data environment. Green, it was all about the green.

“I was wondering how long that would take you,” said Captain Smith from the opening hatch.

Maduabuchi jumped in his chair, opened his mouth to make some denial, then closed it again. His eyes didn't *look* razored this time, and her voice held a tense amusement.

He fell back on that neglected stand-by, the truth. “Interesting color you have here, ma'am.”

“I thought so.” Smith stepped inside, cycled the lock shut, then code-locked it with a series of beeps.

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