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the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag

A dead iguana lies on its back on a sandy surface. Its body is dark brown and black, with some lighter, yellowish-orange areas on its legs and underbelly. The iguana's head is to the right, and its tail is to the left. The sand is light brown and textured.

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Image in Oaxaca from Brian
Hosey & Lauren Braden

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How Did We Get into this Mess?

Guessing why jobs went overseas
and CEOs made millions... legally

Now, I know I'm the 24-hour drive-by news junkie (since I work at home I keep the cable news channels on for lunch breaks and in the morning before the work day starts), but I think I was actually in the car listening to someone like Rush Limbaugh when I heard tariff lifting mentioned. We started going over the history of the changes in policy on our country while we were driving, and by the time we got to the Brat Stop for beers I came up with an outline of what happened in this country.

(editor's note: Sorry, this outline may be a bit off, but we were in a car talking about this and coming up with a rough outline before we had beers. It made sense at the time.)

Let's start with the concept of tariffs. A tariff is a tax on imported goods. Like, if people try to import their products into the United States, we put a tax on it, helping make our products cheaper for people in our country to purchase. So protective tariffs have been used to keep a country's economy strong.

Seems a good idea, though we're always talking about globalization and the buying and selling of products worldwide, so... do we always penalize imports (and do they penalize the importation of *our* products too)?

Well, no, not completely, because after WWII we started minimizing tariffs "to liberalize trade among all capitalist countries" (see Wikipedia). And our industry and labor still prospered after WWII... until the 1970s, where low-cost production world-wide gave us a lot more competition. Even our automotive industry was starting to flounder, thanks to Toyota and Nissan. But instead of imposing government restrictions via more tariffs again to help the U.S. automotive industry, voluntary restrictions were put on imports from Japan.

Now, I'm usually the first to get rid of government restrictions (possibly like tariffs), but hear the rest of this story out. By the time the 80s came around, President Reagan reduced tariffs even more, and President George H.W. Bush *greatly* reduced tariffs. They abandoned their protectionist ideology with tariffs and supported the idea of minimal economic barriers to global trade. Trade was allowed with Canada thanks to NAFTA, but think about it historically. At this point in the 80s there is no tax for importing goods into the United States (is this when we finally saw an explosion of Japanese cars like Toyota and Nissan in our markets?). If this is when large companies are trying to further increase their profits, they would see that there is no tax on them for having people in third world countries create our products for us at a much smaller cost than in the United States (and there you don't have to worry about silly laws like worrying about health care or fair pay), without being taxed to bring your products back

into the United States for your company?

This idea really seemed like a winning situation for companies, but in the process American lose jobs. Great plan.

But think about it, if anything ever confuses you on a subject that has anything to do with politics, it is often easiest to just follow the money. Republicans like big business, so the likes of Reagan and Bush Mach 1 helped big business out — big time.

But in light of all of this (people losing jobs in the U.S. and CEOs making cheaper products), you'd think we'd have really cheap products comparatively speaking on the market now. But, even though the cost of producing these products greatly went down, the price of these items did not. And the CEOs made a ton of money.

No, my writing this isn't supposed to provide the answers to everything (I know, you've come to assume that's what an editorial should do). And it's not a call

to action, either... Because I don't know what can be dome about this. Thanks to supporting big business (which really *does* seem like a good idea, because if businesses do well, there are more jobs and more products and the economy grows and everyone improves, I get it), we've given them too much rope to be able to help themselves at the cost of the rest of the people in this nation. A Moral conscience is supposed to stop these CEOs fro raping their own country's workers for their own profits; at least that's the premise of a moral and just society. But I guess that's what we get for thinking that the rest of the people in this country would be moral...



Janet Kuypers®

Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

a diamond

Janet Kuypers

most of the world lived in desolation
there was only a few remnants of old fires
that once burned down things that could have been good
Imagine
a world where you'd see a diamond. In
all the darkness and desperation
there would be one loose random
stone that glittered more that anything else on the planet
Could you imagine a world like that
Could you imagine a simple diamond

Satin Fingernail Polish

Julia O'Donovan

Look into a bright light
See if you sneeze
Don't take it all so seriously
"Lighten up" that's what Dana said to me
So Many years ago

And the past is not a blur
Sometimes things can be so vivid
I just delivered a nickel bag
Never saw myself this way
I was always losing control

Satin fingernail polish
She wore satin fingernail polished
It matched her coat
And sometimes I wondered
How many colors she had

The man still has his music
He will always have his music
He sounds better now
Then he did a few years ago
When his hair was long

Blair, I have lost you
You're lost
In a sea of stars

You used to confide in me
Now you don't
Believe in me

They say you cried
When I had my fall
Long before yours

You gave up on me
Left me behind
But I'm not like the rest

If I could find you
You would hear me
You would talk to me

Now I have lost you
In that sea of stars
But I see you



Voyager

Eric Obame

The nearest planet outside our solar system is only 10.5 light years away
That is just a twenty-one year round-trip journey
Traveling at the speed of light
Einstein forbids us from ever going that fast
Something about mass increasing with speed
But as a child, I dreamed about boarding a ship
And sailing through space
And exploring the solar systems of the Milky Way
And encountering foreign forms of life
My imagination was a product of the Apollo flights
And all the extraterrestrial films and shows
Of the seventies, eighties, and nineties
Yet, I am an adult now
I am fully grown
And NASA has not done anything to hold my attention in decades
The nearest planet outside our solar system is only 10.5 light years away
That is just a twenty-one year round-trip
Traveling at the speed of light
It is the child of a sun called Epsilon Eridani
It is not yet clear how many planets revolve around that star
But that one we know of so far is 1.5 times the size of Jupiter
Will that giant ball of gas have as many moons as our biggest sister?
If so, some of them might be able to support life in some way
Like we think that organisms might live beneath Europa's ice
Creatures like the ones that thrive in our cold, dark ocean's depths
Could there be an Earth-like planet—an Earth 2 orbiting Epsilon Eridani?
Are there sentient and intelligent species on any of its worlds?
The nearest planet outside our solar system is only 10.5 light years away
That is just a twenty-one year journey to it and back
Traveling at the speed of light
That is one trip I would gladly take
Although Einstein forbids us from going that fast
But I know that there are other people who look up at the stars
And that somewhere there are smart kids dreaming about FTL flight
It is with them, that my hope of someday boarding a starship rests
The nearest planet outside our solar system is only 10.5 light years away

Naked Little Feet

Kenneth W. Anderson, Jr.

His shoes scrunched across the floor,
and he leaned over her.

“Just relax and remember to breathe,” he calmly suggested.

Her large red eyes buried into his pinkish face
and he quickly retreated to the safety of a distant chair.

Her body tensed, the sweat poured off her nose,
drowning her face, her body, the sheets, the bed, and the floor.
The crowded room moved closer to her open legs,
masked voices flashed against the polished walls,
the echoes piercing her ears.

“Push, and...stop,” came the faceless command. “Now, PUSH.”

Make up your mind, she thought. *Just relax and breathe, right.*

She was very relaxed the night before.

She dreamt of large watermelons,
hundreds ripe and ready to be sliced
their red flesh exploding with juice.

She had two large slices of melon in each hand,
her mouth was devouring, squeezing, biting, and swallowing.

Her face fell back to mother earth,
her tummy full and her lips smeared with a seeded smile.

Just relax and breathe.

She was always craving, eating, dreaming.

One night it was chocolate,
her entire body bathing in rich, dark, creamy chocolate.

That was a very good dream, until it was rudely awoken by the bell.

Her mother, his mother, her sister, his sister, female friends of all shapes and sizes,
and long lost female relations came to her door
bearing cheer, smiles, giggles, gifts and lots of chocolate.

Her sister had given her little white and pink shoes
for naked little feet.

That turned out to be a very good day.

Just relax and breathe.

The tears flooded her face and she tried to hide,
her hand reached out for him,
and he quickly rushed to her side.

His large, strong and warm hands rescued her,
and he kissed her on the cheek.
“Little white and pink shoes for naked little feet,” she whispered.
His eyes answered her lips with tears.
“Just relax and remember to breathe,” she calmly suggested.
And before the night closed its eyes and began to dream,
the room was filled with more tears, giggles,
and naked little feet

Things That Can Surprise the World

Fredrick Zydek

Make way for me, endless universe;
I’ve the courage to run with you
and am not different by design We’re
the same stuff, old treasure, Brother Fire -
you to expand and me to cry.

What do starfish and spiders worship?
Do they think we waste too much time
on God and not enough at being what
we’re supposed to be? What do we do
when hope is tired and we’re juggling
timber wolves?

This is your brain on poetry, muse.
It is filled with things that can surprise
the world, but the cosmos has seen it
all before. Are there thoughts without
a thinker, music mulling itself over
in the ridged depths of rocks and stones?

Third base ain’t what it used to be when
you reach my age. One’s holy purpose
shifts a bit to the right. One does more than
one’s fair share of conscious aging before
the journey catches up to the dream.

Road Rage

C.B. Anderson

I’m no Moses
or a Walt Whitman either
but if you fail to stay
in your own damned lane
I promise you a string of words
that will surely put to shame
any god-mentioning tirade
you have ever heard before
and if you have a problem
with that, then take me to court
because contentious litigation
is my other favorite sport.

Alice and Dorothy: Two Little Girls on a Marriage-Go-Round

Suzanne Richardson Harvey, Ph.D.

Grey smudges blur the mirror in Wonderland
A midnight spin through a gin glazed glass
Keeps splintered dreams
From invading Alice's boudoir
Sucking blusher from her cheeks
Draining violet shadow from an eyelid at 4 AM

Dorothy swings a shovel under a lead sky
In a field of bulging silos and heaps of stray manure
Where the world sags
With the price of corn
Where hubby Henry enfolds her
Like an empty burlap bag
Where a cyclone is the savior
Who'll spin her to another wizard
With a promise of ruby slippers
And the magic of a rainbow.



Just Too
Beautiful,
art by
Cheryl
Townsend

Handcuffs

Joshua Copeland

This book *The 120 Days of Sodom* and
a foreign movie by some dude Walerian Borowczyk (?) under my
older brother's bed while looking for my
batting gloves I eat my green Jell-O
and sit outside on the wooden porch swing to read

the squeaking of the porch swing, kind of like
the squeaking of the kids in the book, heh... The desert
is asleep, my legs dangle, the sky is
ironed out and unfolded all blue,
*"That I deny," said the Bishop with emphasis, "and even for such pleasures as
you allude to the boy is worth more than the girl. Consider the problem..."*
Then...Storm Clouds lean from the Salt Lake Mountains
Crumbs to Him, HIS crumbs, my Granddad has said, will always say, of us
...to spread a little hot sealing wax on dear Sophie's thighs, the scoundrel...
Dust devils sprout and spin like a desert ballet
Zelmire, whose death is not far off. Deep into her...
The hot air and dust slap the book hard
and breathe a flapping life into the pages
I must press them down to read
*The tales of pregnant women being chastised have proven woeful to Constance's
ears as they have delighted Curval's; she sees only too well...* As I rub sand out
my eyes
And the wind picks up more, the wind picks up
MORE It furiously assaults
the swing and me, I'm on a roller coaster, A whitely bearded God
cheeks puffed, lungs violently convulsed
One Way signs stream from his mouth (Weatherly pneumatics)
...she yields four teeth...prick the white of her eyes...
Flies land on ME—on my skin, not my clothes
Mom's angry that I'm not coming inside
...the top of the skull remains dangling. He was still breathing when he fell...
Soon the clouds cough and spit rain drops onto the jittery pages
*...'Twas only then his soul fled his body; at the age of fifteen years and eight
months thus perished one of the most heavenly creatures ever formed by Nature's
skillful hand. His Eulogy. Etc.*
Splinter in right thumb needles me
Drowning in unique dermal whorls

Now for This Commercial Message

Michael Ceraolo

-Program Guide-

ABC- Average Broadcasting Choices

CBS- Corporate Broadcasting Showcase

NBC- Numskull Brokaw Comments

FOX- For Only Xenophobes

PBS- Public Bored Stiff

CNN- Continuous Nattering Network

ESPN- Exceedingly Silly People's Noises

C-SPAN- Come: See Politicians Attempt Normality

E!- Egregious!

USA- Un Special Alternative

TNT- Trite N Tedious

MTV- Mendacity TeleVision

And there swirled a series of slogans and spots:

Alcoa:

We can't wait for tomorrow

(and another country to exploit)-

A folksy way to sell us beer,

having a dressed-down family member address us

But the family member had a numeral after his name,

and in trying to elicit sympathy

he was talking about how difficult a time Prohibition was

You could actually see him shudder

at the memory of how close his family had come

to having had to actually work-



Coca Cola:

the global high sign

(maybe we didn't take the cocaine out after all)-

The principle behind
having a celebrity
endorse your product
would seem to be defeated
if you have to identify the celebrity-

Coca Cola:
Things go better with Coke
(especially osteoporosis)-



In the season of hilarity and hypocrisy:
there was the third-generation politician,

whose
whole career existed only because of low standards,
smarmily and solemnly promising whole-heartedly
to raise educational standards to undreamt-of levels,

secure
in the knowledge that should such changes ever occur,
his career would already have long been over-

Eveready batteries:
Power to spare
(pollution to spare)-

The 'new' service economy:
the classical music station
was changing its frequency,

and
the station ran announcements
encouraging its listeners to come
and have 'professionals' change the settings
of their buttons to the new frequency-

Ford:
Quality is Job 1
(except for that Edsel thing,
and that Pinto thing,
and that SUV thing,
etc.)-

Misuse of the public airwaves:
in one of the small slots allotted for fulfillment
of the laughably lax license requirements was
a series that lasted a few weeks,
a series of political pronouncements
posing as public-service announcements
where the anonymous announcer solemnly intoned
that judicial reform and tort reform
were absolutely necessary,

and

this was followed by a doctor's dire warning
that unless reforms were put in place
immediately,
many doctors would be driven from the profession
(I could hear the cheering
of the tens of thousands who die each year
at the hands of people
who need more practice at their practice)-

GE:

We bring good things to life
(and put good things to death)-

The silly season had become the scary season
and the monsters were everywhere:
television's visions of politicians scaring up votes;
with the miracles of modern make-up
they all looked nearly human-

GM:

People building transportation to serve people
(Us dismantling transportation that served people)-

A certain candidate claimed
that his business experience
had prepared him for the job
He didn't explicitly explain
what aspect of his background was germane
(I think he meant that because he was a car dealer
he was already a professional liar)-

IBM:

A tool for modern times
(We can help you
run your holocaust more efficiently)-

A most mixed message
in the men's room of the bar:
under signs selling cigarettes and whiskey
the splash guard in the urinal
said to say no to drugs-

MasterCard:

For everything with a price,
there's MasterCard
(Your working so we don't have to:
priceless)-

Fast and furious the come-ons came in the mail:
one or two seemed to arrive daily,
attempts to tempt me
with generous offers to lend me money
at special semi-usurious rates
instead of the usual utterly usurious ones-



McDonald's:

You deserve a break today
(unless you work for us)-



The billboard boasted of the billions of dollars
the casino had paid out in winnings
in just the last decade alone
It wisely kept silent about the vastly greater billions
it had kept in the same period-

Monsanto:

Without chemicals
life itself would be impossible
(At least,
it would be unprofitable for us)-



The egregious electric utility
was running a series of ads
trying to improve its deservedly-low image:
actors portraying pseudo-real people
asked questions of a company spokesperson
who pseudo-sincerely said good question,
and then delivered a set speech
that did not answer the questions,
after which the actors followed the script
and proclaimed themselves satisfied
(the audience, not so much)-

Texaco:
We're working to keep your trust
(the hell with you;
we're working to keep our trust
from those anti-trust investigators)-

The delivery company had a string of spots
where football players suddenly materialized
to chastize business people for using football metaphors
As Johnny Carson might have said,
Not so fast Steroid-Breath
You first
We'll stop using sports metaphors
when you stop spouting war jargon
when describing your game-

Today's commercials have been brought to you by Corporate Contempt
One last example of the elite's contempt for you:
a bank and its associated advertising agency
actually hoped to appeal to prospective customers
by having a millionaire actor tell them
they needed a smarter way to manage their finances



Fuck You, David Greenglass

David J. Thompson

Do you know the answer?
the cashier asked, handing me
a large cup of houseblend.
It's worth ten cents off.
I looked again at the question
written on the chalkboard
behind her. Of course, I knew
the answer. It was the Rosenbergs,
sent to the Sing Sing electric chair
fifty years ago and now just trivia
worth a goddamn coffee shop dime.
Well? she asked as I gave her two singles.
No clue, I said, deciding poor Julius
and especially Ethel had already been
sold out enough. Fuck you, David Greenglass,
I muttered underneath my breath.
Excuse me? the cashier asked as she looked up
from digging around in the cash drawer.
Oh, nothing, I told her. Just talking to myself.
I tried to smile as I took my change, then
let the coins fall slowly out of my hand
one by one, each with its own distinct dull clink,
into the smiley-faced tip jar.



smDSCN3859,
art by Paul Baker

Weird Death

a lament upon the futility of war

frankm

* After seeing 1,000 photos of the Iraq War dead

Weird death
Captured the breath
Stopped the mechanism
Left invisible its
Stark ghost

The magnolia and its antique flowers
The gliding wing and faint sounds
Of egrets and herons
And all seems lost
With the dead and the war
In coffins, lives



Lives
With blood and flowers
With all the factions of this god and that god and war
With poverty's solemn tolling sounds
For all the souls lost
Ringing in the trees of the herons

The trees of the herons
Breathing in, I think of all the lives
Breathing out, I think of all the loss
On the graves, all the flowers
And in the granite cemeteries of quietude, no sounds
Meditate on endless nothing and war

Endless war
Notice silent in the gray moss of trees, herons
In clusters high above, still, no sounds
Solemn memories of those lives
And like the agave and its flower
Perishes and is lost

Lost
In the chaos of war
With narcotic flowers
And ravens now and the herons
In the here, with these dead and no lives
With churning sounds

Sounds
Of mourning and loss
And the grinding of lives
What is war?
The herons?
The indifferent magnolia and its antique flowers?

In the now, with ten thousands dead and the war
Silent herons
Words, flowers

Weird death
Captured the breath
Stopped the mechanism
Left invisible its
Stark ghost



Face of War, art
by Melissa Reid

Familial Felicity

Roseann Geiger

When they die
we turn to counterfeit happiness
paper lanterns with painted faces
a desperate emulation of past perfect.
Bulimic memory
The closest thing to laughter
Search and upchuck
Search and upchuck.

In praise of my two-dimensional girl

Tom Vanderman

In praise of my two-dimensional girl
whose outer beauty is reflected
by the soft light
glancing off the glossy page
revealing a sparkling smile
in perpetual greeting
and a playful air
as the ever-so-gentle wind
wafts through the wisps
of her golden hair.

I honestly don't see a purpose
in adding another dimension
to my desire
be it a measure of insecurity
a scrap of jealousy
or a portion of condescension.

Yet I'll airbrush my surface attractions
polish a sleek veneer over my animalistic urges
add a dollop of luster
to spring to life
and walk, erect,
out into the open air
beside you.



OH, SHE'S JUST
ANOTHER PRETTY FACE



You Can't Reinvent the
Wheel But You Can Sit
in Front of It, art by
Christine Sorich



Charley Plays a Tune

Michael Lee Johnson

Crippled with arthritis
and Alzheimer's,
in a dark rented room
Charley, plays
melancholic melodies
on a dust filled
harmonica he
found abandoned
on a playground of sand
years ago by a handful of children
playing on monkey bars.



He now goes to the bathroom on occasion,
peeing takes forever; he feeds the cat when
he doesn't forget where the food is stashed at.
He hears bedlam when he buys fish at the local market
and the skeleton bones of the fish show through.
He lies on his back riddled with pain,
pine cones fill his pillows and mattress;
praying to Jesus and rubbing his rosary beads
Charley blows tunes out his
celestial instrument
notes float through the open window
touch the nose of summer clouds.
Charley overtakes himself with grief
and is ecstatically alone.
Charley plays a solo tune.

The Incarnation

Louie Crew

I dreamed that Jesus came
all down my throat,
in wafer-like pellets.
The Holy Ghost scrambled
them, whistling Bach's
"Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"
very fast, gulping
alternate measures
not to let go of the tune.

I awoke to find Her
giving out McDonald's
fish sandwiches
to four pregnant nuns,
all madly in love
with one another.
A Big Mac cooker
censed the altar.

A very angry bishop
in a purple t-shirt
shouted to Her:
"You've got it all wrong!
Cut the pickle, leave the lettuce!"
Behind his frock
stretched an unending line
of the meek
waiting to inherit the earth.



Transported, art by Peter Bates

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

Life of Enchantment

Marc Tamargo

Prologue

Commander Jason Hawkins was accustomed to operating in the dark. His superiors never told him why his missions were important to accomplish, just that they were. He knew it was important that the public never discovered what he and his team were doing, so important that when he accepted the job all record of his existence was erased. So it didn't seem unusual to him at all when he was ordered to break into a civilian's home and apprehend a woman and a small child. He knew it was vital to the security of Mars, and that was good enough for him, even if the people he was sent to apprehend were citizens of Mars.

Commander Hawkins crept carefully across the dark street closely followed by two of his lieutenants, weapons in hand. He ordered Lieutenant Essy to operate the SEID: Standard Electronic Inhibitor Device. This device blocked all technology in the immediate area, so no one could record what they were doing or alert anyone else. When they approached the front door Hawkins waited patiently while Lieutenant Palmer placed a neutralizer on the locked door to force it open.

The moment the door slid open the three of them shot inside, using the speed and stealth that they had acquired through their years of experience. Hawkins signalled Lieutenant Palmer and Lieutenant Essy to search the house in separate directions, while he went upstairs. The house was very dark, which wasn't a problem because they were equipped with special implants that allowed them to see in the dark, among other things. He went down the hallway, carefully opening each door and checking inside, until he came to the third room down the hall. There, sleeping soundly in a bed was a little boy. Hawkins knew from the Intelligence reports he had received that the child was eight years and three months old. The boy reminded him a bit of his own son, the way he was sleeping peacefully in his bed, but he knew in his heart that he had a job to do which was vital to the safety of the people of his world that he loved so much.

Commander Hawkins raised his weapon, took careful aim and fired. The stun gun he used was very powerful; the boy would be unconscious for some time. This would allow him plenty of time to get the woman and then collect the boy's body. As Commander Hawkins resumed his search of the second level, he heard loud footsteps from the ground floor. He ran down the stairs with his weapon drawn to see Lieutenant Palmer running towards the kitchen.

When he entered the kitchen he saw Essy lying unconscious on the floor with a frying pan next to his head. Lieutenant Palmer in front of him must have seen something outside because he quickly ran towards the door. As Hawkins rushed outside to follow, he could see Palmer chasing the woman they were sent to apprehend. She started screaming frantically for help. Hawkins was afraid that she might alert her neighbours so he aimed his weapon and fired at her. She managed to dart out of the way of his blast, but that little maneuver allotted Palmer the time he needed to catch up with her.

Hawkins watched with satisfaction as Palmer tackled her to the ground. He began to move on her, but stopped when he saw Palmer jump back with a painful scream. He was holding his left cheek in pain, apparently she had clawed his face. She shot up and began screaming for help. Hawkins admired her spirit, but she was determined to cause harm to their people and he couldn't allow that. He raised his weapon, took careful aim this time and fired. It was a direct hit. She immediately fell to the ground, stunned.

Hawkins moved to pick up the woman. "Grab Essy and the child and let's go!" he ordered Palmer, his voice seething with irritation. He grabbed the woman and carried her to his van that just pulled up to take them quickly away from the scene. He shook his head as Palmer approached carrying the child and Essy moved all too slowly to the van. His team was supposed to be the elite, yet they let themselves be hurt by a helpless civilian. Hawkins was going to have to seriously re-evaluate the structure of his team.

As soon as they were in the van they drove quickly away. He glared at the unconscious woman and her son in the back. The expression on the woman's face was one of terror, and it was still wet with tears. Hawkins started to feel a bit sorry for her, but he reminded himself that she was going to be treated very well and would live the rest of her life better off than most. It was more than a traitor who tried to destroy the great nation that he loved so much deserved.

Chapter One

The front door to her house flew open as Miranda stepped through, weighed down with too many bags to carry. She slowly waddled into the house until she was far enough in to dump most of her baggage and sighed with relief at a release of the weight. Miranda was taking off her wet raincoat as her daughter quickly ran in after her and went straight to the Holoviewer, not bothering to help her. Miranda didn't mind, after all Maggie was only four years old. After changing into dry clothes Miranda went to the kitchen to have a refreshing cup of peppermint tea. It had been a long hard day at work. The real estate market wasn't so good at the moment so she was having a hard time finding enough buyers for the high prices estates she preferred to sell.

She was halfway through her second cup when her friend and next door neighbour Rebecca showed up to join her. Rebecca had recently been through a divorce with her ex-husband Steve who had left her for a nineteen year old girl when both Rebecca and Steve were in their thirties. For the past four months she had been coming over everyday around this time to join Miranda for a cup of tea. Miranda was

more than happy to have her over, she understood how Rebecca could be lonely after going through a separation but on this day she seemed particularly troubled. “I don’t know Miranda,” she said after a little small talk, “some times I have doubts.”

“About what?” Mirnada asked.

Rebecca shrugged her shoulders, “Life. Today I’ve been considering checking myself into an Enchantment Inn.”

“Enchantment Inn?” Miranda asked, puzzled.

“You haven’t heard of them?” After Miranda shook her head Rebecca explained, “It’s this new thing where you can go into this place and they hook you up to this computer and you can live any life you want in your head. You can do whatever you want, be whatever you want. The whole life you lead is not real it’s all in your head, but it feels real to you, you would have no idea that you’re in an Enchantment Inn.”

“How long does this last for?”

“The rest of your life.” Rebecca answered simply.

Miranda quickly put her cup down and shot her friend a look of disappointment. “You’re not seriously considering this, are you?”

“Oh, you can’t tell me that you wouldn’t be tempted. You could live the rest of your life as a rich mountain climber living on the sunny beaches of Mandero or as an interstellar spy operating on the remote moons of Neptune.”

“No, I’m not tempted, I love my family and my life too much and I’m surprised you would be considering this.”

A devious smile crossed Rebecca’s lips, “I’m not.” She said.

Miranda smiled in return, “I didn’t think so.”

The conversation turned lighter after that. Miranda and Rebecca laughed about neighbourhood gossip and reminisced about old memories until Miranda’s husband David came home, soaking wet and muttering to himself. “Hello David.” Rebecca said loudly to him.

“It’s always raining here. This planet was terraformed; you’d think they could have made the whole planet a sunny paradise. But no, they had to have wet, cold, miserable places as well.”

The comment made Miranda’s smile grow bigger. She knew that he was well aware of the fact that Mars possessed a totally diverse ecosphere, the same way Earth did, he just liked to complain. “If you don’t like it here, why don’t you move?”

“What, and leave you here by yourself?” He said with a look of mock pain, “You wouldn’t be able to get out of bed without me around.”

“True.” Miranda agreed.

David soon joined the conversation which he did on occasion. He was very busy with his job as a reporter so he seldom had enough time to relax. Whenever David and Rebecca conversed the conversation usually turned political which didn’t interest Miranda very much, so she drifted in and out of daydreams, but snapped to attention when they began arguing about the war in Iapetus. Mars had invaded that moon of Saturn in the hopes of liberating its inhabitants from the ruthless dictator that ruled there. Miranda didn’t know much on the subject but for some reason she was overwhelmed with an eerie feeling by this conversation. When the conversation

ended her uneasiness faded but she was puzzled at why she would feel so overwhelmingly strange by a topic she cared little about.

Soon after Rebecca returned home they had their usually brief family dinner after which David buried himself in his work while Miranda put Maggie to bed. As Miranda kissed her forehead she thought about the whole Enchantment Inn idea and realized just how much she loved her life with her family.

Interlude

Miranda lifted her tear stricken head up from her hands that were resting on her knees and slowly looked around. From her crouched position she could see the entire island she was on. It was barely large enough to fit her on it; just a tiny sandy knoll that stuck up out of the vast sea. The ocean waved angrily all around her while menacing storm clouds raced toward her. She could feel the sky darkening all around her. How long had she been there? How did she get there? And how much longer could she last?

She looked to her hands, they looked wrinkled and worn, and her eyes felt swollen. It seemed to her that she had been crying for an eternity. She had never felt so alone in her life. The water kept rising higher and higher, and her island kept getting smaller and smaller. The angry clouds grew larger and closer as if they would pick her up and spit her out. She felt so helpless.

Before she knew it the ocean had risen up and swallowed her little island and she found herself trapped within cold merciless waters. She felt her sorrows and regrets overcome her. The water choked her. She tried to swim up to get air, but the unforgiving waves beat her down until she could breathe no more and knew that she was drowning.

Chapter Two

Miranda heard a gasp escape her lips as she woke up suddenly. She sat up quickly and gasped desperately for air. She realized it was just a dream. She quickly took in her surroundings; she was in a small tent lying inside a thick sleeping bag. For some reason this felt wrong to her, like she should be in a comfortable bed in a house. She looked around again, she was alone. So where was David?

She hurriedly got out of her sleeping bag, only to be chilled to the bone by the cold air. She noticed a thermal jacket lying on top of a large red pack. She put it on, opened the tent door and stepped outside. Miranda looked around and found herself standing on a small precipice on the side of a very large mountain. There was another tent there; she recognized it as Rebecca's. It all started coming back to her then. She was climbing Mount Mandero with Rebecca. In fact they were on their way down.

She looked above her at the massive reddish mountain covered with sprinkles of green vegetation and further up, snow. She scanned the horizon where she could see the sun raising over the luscious blue green ocean and on the shore the city of Mandero, where she lived.

Even with the thermal jacket on she still felt cold, so she entered her tent and grabbed her thermos to boil some peppermint tea. Sitting outside sipping her peppermint tea, she watched the sun rise, and a very beautiful sunrise it was. It was still quite

early so she put off waking Rebecca, they were in no hurry. They weren't that far from the bottom and would be home by late afternoon.

A few hours later after Rebecca had awoken they packed their gear and headed down the mountain. Rebecca was her usual chatty self during the descent talking about how she couldn't wait to get home to the dinner party she was having tonight. "You're still coming to that, aren't you?"

"Sure." Miranda smiled. "You know David he'll be working till the late hours of the night. It takes a lot of work to be the CEO of Landov Inc. And it's not like we have to worry about looking after Maggie."

"Right," Rebecca said, "She's off at boarding school. When do you get to see her again?"

"In a couple months, but in the meantime I'm free tonight to do what I want."

After finishing the climb Miranda returned to her mansion and had her servants fetch her something particularly elegant for the party, after all she couldn't have Rebecca's friends thinking they were richer than she was.

The party was a bit drab but mildly entertaining. Miranda spent most of the night talking to Rebecca and her husband Steve whom Miranda suspected had a crush on her, but she couldn't blame him. Miranda returned home and let the massive amounts of alcohol send her to sleep as she thought to herself, *what a life*.

Interlude

Miranda laughed merrily as she watched Maggie play on the swing set. "Look at me, mommy." She called out with glee as she propelled herself upward on the swing. Miranda's smile was wide; it was a rare occasion when she could enjoy to the fullest a simple moment such as her daughter taking some enjoyment out of life. Miranda almost felt like a child again herself not being concerned with all the little problems that adult life brings. She felt hopeful that her daughter would lead a happy life.

But as she watched her daughter she started to realize something was wrong. Her daughter didn't seem real. She glanced around her; the swing set, the trees, the benches, they all looked fake, like a holographic projection. Panic crept into her heart. "Maggie!" She ran over to embrace her daughter only to glide right through her. Maggie continued swinging gleefully, totally oblivious to the look of horror on her mother's face. She was just a holographic projection, Miranda realized with shock. Something in the distance caught her eye, a house that looked familiar, familiar and real. She ran towards it as Maggie continued merrily on the swing. She stopped as she approached; although her mind couldn't place it, she knew in her bones that this was her house. She looked inside to see a boy playing, a real boy around the age of eight; he looked very familiar. She suddenly felt a warm hand on her shoulder and turned to see David smiling at her.

"Our son," David replied to her unspoken question, "Brian."

All her memories told her that this couldn't be true, she had a five-year-old daughter, not an eight year old son, but in her heart she knew it was true. She looked back through the window at the child with recognition it was her son, Brian. A smile

crept across her face and tears began to swell in her eyes. She looked to David hoping for an explanation. “You always did want a daughter Miranda, but I can’t believe you could forget your own son.”

Miranda wanted to apologize to him but when she turned to him again he was gone. She looked around but he was no where to be found. She decided to approach her son, she went to the front door and entered. She knew she needed to go up the stairs that led to the second floor to get to the boy’s room, except when she entered the house it was empty; no stairs, no doors, It was just a large empty room with nothing in it save a single glass table. On the table was a manila envelop with the words “from David” written in bold on the cover.

David suddenly appeared behind her and put a finger to his lips, “shh, don’t tell anyone, it’s a secret.” He said before exiting the house through the only door. Miranda slowly walked over to the table, picked up the envelope and looked inside. Inside was a single piece of paper with one word on it, repeated over and over, with no spaces in between, just the same word covering the entire sheet of paper; “secret”.

“You!” Miranda turned quickly around to see who had shouted at her. A man was standing in the doorway wearing a military uniform pointing a finger at her. “What are you doing with that?” Miranda opened her mouth to explain but the angry man cut her off, “You’re a traitor to your nation!” He raised a gun and pointed at her.

“No! Wait!” She called out, but it did no good. He fired and she collapsed to the ground.

Chapter Three

“Major Darren, we will arrive at Science Station R27 in ten minutes.” The intercom above her head buzzed loudly waking Miranda from her dream. She slowly got out of bed regaining her senses and pressed the intercom button.

“I’m on my way.” She responded. She tried to shake the strange feelings she still had from the odd dream as she put her uniform on. The dream was already beginning to fade from her memory, but what a strange dream it was. It had felt so real at the time, but she found the concept of being tied down to some family and stuck in one place preposterous. Miranda had neither the time nor the inclination for family life, not with her chosen career.

After fully dressing, Major Miranda Darren strode down the narrow corridor and climbed the long ladder leading to the airlock. Although the ship had artificial gravity, it still wasn’t the same as Mars’ norm. She could feel the extra bounce in her step, plus it made it that much easier to ascend the ladder, not that she would have any difficulty with her level of physical fitness.

When she arrived at the airlock she stood and waited until it was announced that they had docked with the space station. Station R27 was a scientific space station that orbited Triton, the largest moon of Neptune. It was established by Mars to study the possibility of establishing a mining colony on Triton. Miranda couldn’t imagine who would want to live this far out in the system though; the trip from Mars had taken three months. The scientists there had discovered to their surprise that

Triton contained unique minerals that could boost Mars' economy, so it was vital to Martian security that Mars' enemies didn't learn about the valuable mineral, for it could very well start a war. However Martian intelligence deduced that one of the scientists working on the station was spying for the Io government and sending them information about the mineral extraction project. Major Miranda Darren was sent there to uncover the spy, to prevent the valuable information from falling into the hands of a violent foe.

The huge airlock doors clamped open to reveal the inner corridors of the science station and Miranda was greeted by a large contingent of station personnel. They were trying to appear as welcoming and accommodating as they could, but Miranda could tell by the concerned looks on most of their faces that really, they were scared. Good, Miranda thought, she liked to make people nervous, because when they were nervous they made mistakes.

She slowly stepped onto the station giving the entire welcoming committee a very intimidating look. "Welcome to science station R27," the lead scientist said in a friendly voice, "I'm Rebecca Lemming, Team leader." She extended her hand to Miranda, but Miranda just nodded curtly at her, so she finally retracted her hand, trying not to look foolish, but failing. She began jabbering on nervously about all the progress they had been making. She was obviously anxious to find out why Miranda was sent there, so Miranda decided to get right to the point.

"Professor," Miranda said abruptly, cutting her off mid sentence, "I would like to speak to you," Miranda took an unfriendly glance at the rest of Rebecca Lemming's team then added, "In private."

Rebecca looked uncomfortably to her fellow scientists, and then said reluctantly, "very well." She led Miranda into her private office. When they stepped inside Rebecca gestured to the seat on the opposite side of her desk, Miranda took it. Rebecca went to the food slot and ordered a pot of tea. She poured herself a cup then turned to Miranda, "May I offer you some—"

"I'll get right to the point." Miranda said rudely, interrupting her again, she had waited three months to get there; she had no time to waste on pointless pleasantries. Just when she was about to move on she lost her train of thought as she detected a very pleasant and familiar aroma. "Is that peppermint?" Miranda asked indicating the tea.

"Why, yes." Rebecca said after taking a sip, "Would you like some?"

"Please." Miranda replied a bit more polite this time. As she sipped the tea she felt her whole body relax and felt more at ease; however that quickly passed as she remembered she had a job to do. "I'll get right to the point," Miranda continued, "You have a spy on board." Miranda paused for the expected gasp and look of disbelief she knew would come from Rebecca Lemming. When that passed she continued, "Someone on your staff has been covertly supplying Io with delicate information from your research. I'm here to find out who it is and stop them."

It was a risk she knew, letting Rebecca Lemming in on it, she couldn't know for certain that Rebecca wasn't the spy; however she had researched the station's personnel records before arriving, so she already had a few suspects and thought Rebecca to be one of the least likely candidates. Additionally Miranda was not familiar with the station's

crew. Rebecca was, so she would need her help.

After taking a few minutes to convince the naïve scientist that someone on her staff was a spy, she asked her for any additional information on any of her suspects. After studying Miranda's list, Rebecca pointed to a name.

"Him," She said, "I would say he is the most likely suspect."

"Why?"

"A few weeks ago, I noticed he was sending unrecordable messages to somewhere around Jupiter, but I didn't think much of it at the time." Miranda looked appalled. Rebecca continued, trying to defend herself, "A lot of the crew send some of their more personnel messages that way, and Mr. Burner has family on Ganymede, so I didn't think anything of it, that is until now."

It was true that Mars had two allies in orbit of Jupiter, Ganymede and Calisto, however one of their greatest adversaries also made its home on a moon of Jupiter's; Io. How could anyone be so naïve? Miranda was now convinced that this Mr. Burner was the perpetrator she was looking for. She was too excited at the prospect of finding her suspect to waste time chastising Rebecca for her incompetence, instead she said, "Where is he now?"

"In his quarters."

"Take me to him at once." Rebecca escorted her to the man's room. Miranda decided to forgo allowing the security team to escort her, judging she could handle one scientist herself. Rebecca stepped in front of a door that had a nameplate that read "David Burner", Miranda gestured her aside.

"I'll handle this." She overrode the lock on his door keeping her other hand ready to reach for her weapon, should she need it.

When she stepped in instead of the cold stale environment of a room on a remote space station she found herself in a warm, cozy lived in house, with a huge window showing the sun outside on a perfect spring afternoon on Mars. She suddenly found that she recognized this place, it was her home.

"Miranda, you're home!" David exclaimed while approaching her with a big grin. He was her husband, she realized. She looked down at herself only to find that the military uniform she was wearing only a moment ago was gone, replaced with plain casual civilian clothing. This was her home, this was her husband and this was her life she realized. Her life as a major in the military was starting to fade just like her dream had that morning. She embraced her husband and felt the warmth in his touch.

Someone else entered the room and rushed into Miranda's arms; an eight year old boy, Miranda's son, Brian, she realized. *This isn't real*, she thought, *none of it was*. As he jumped into her arms she felt a surge of great pain. As she felt the life drain out of her and she collapsed to the floor a single thought came to her, *I'm in an Enchantment Inn*.

Chapter Four

Pain surged throughout Miranda's body as memories came rushing back to her. The combination of the pain and her newfound revelation was so overwhelming that she wanted to scream for all eternity, but she couldn't. She had no voice, no stable realm of existence. She existed solely in her memories now, bits and pieces of many

memories spanning her entire life. She had no control over her actions, for these events had already occurred.

She knew now where she was; she was living inside her head, in a reality created by a machine, this so called Enchantment Inn. All of it was a lie. She recalled her recent lives of fiction: first her life which most resembled reality, except she had had the daughter she had always wanted instead of her son. Then the life she had always wanted, that of a rich mountain climber living in Mandero, the most beautiful place in the system. And finally, the life she had only imagined in her wildest fantasies, being a military agent in the far reaches of the frontier, but it was all fake. She couldn't believe she had accepted those fantasies as reality. Each time she'd had an entire lifetime of fake memories, but she'd won, she'd finally beat the machine and her real memories were returning to her. She felt triumphant, but the intense pain surging through her body kept getting worse.

All of the memories flashing before her eyes came crashing to a halt, and she could see nothing but white light. She could still see her own body, but it was as if she was standing in a great nothingness. She knew she wasn't really there, and that it wasn't her body she was observing. Her real body was lying somewhere hooked up to a machine, everything that was happening to her now was all inside her mind, just like it had been for who knows how long. She now remembered everything, growing up on Mars in the rainy city of New Seattle, finding a career as a real estate agent, meeting and falling in love with a dashing reporter named David, and raising a bright and beautiful young boy named Brian. But she couldn't recall recent memories of how she ended up in an enchantment Inn. The machine was still fighting her, it wouldn't let her access those memories. "Come on, give them to me!" she yelled out in defiance. She tried with all the strength she could muster to regain her memories. "GIVE THEM TO ME!" she cried out in an earth shattering shriek. The pain was growing beyond unbearable; it was all she could do not to pass out.

She collapsed to the floor with tears streaming down face. She was weak, very weak, she felt like she had very little life left in her. Suddenly her world came to life again right in front of her eyes. She again had no control of her actions as her body just reacted like it had... before.

She was sitting in the kitchen drinking peppermint tea with Rebecca talking about the events of the day when suddenly David burst through the door in a hurry. She was surprised to see him, because he wasn't supposed to be home for a couple of hours. He looked very worried and agitated which was unlike him. He was usually in a good mood when he came home from work.

"Hello David." Rebecca greeted him warmly, but he only replied with an emotionless half smile. Now Miranda was really starting to worry.

"Rebecca, could you excuse us for a minute?" Miranda asked, figuring that something was really troubling David.

"Sure," Rebecca replied, "I have some stuff I need to do anyway; I'll see you both later." Miranda and David said their goodbyes to Rebecca then she went back to her house next door.

"David, what's wrong?" she said with grave concern.

He walked very slowly toward her like he was burdened with a heavy weight. Miranda felt the heart in her chest pounding, and terror began to grow within her. She had never in her whole life seen him look so frightened. He gave her an ever so slight smile trying to hide his immense discomfort, but he didn't fool her one bit. "Nothing's wrong," he said. Miranda gave him a stern look, wanting to make it clear to him that she wasn't buying it. He caved in and his features sagged. "It's better that you not know."

The fear within her escalated, she stood up from the table to approach him. She grabbed both of his hands and clasped them in hers, and stared directly into his eyes. "David," she began, "We've been married for ten years. I can tell something is seriously wrong. You've got to tell me what it is."

He stared into her eyes then turned away from her. He took a few steps back toward the table then reached inside his coat and pulled out a manila folder and plopped it down on the table. "I found something huge." He said turning back to her, "A lead on a story that could change how everyone views our government and its foreign policies."

"What it is?" Miranda asked indicating the folder.

"Mike first uncovered it while he was on Iapetus. It's evidence of what our people did there." He looked directly into her eyes, "Miranda, Mike died right after giving this to me." An uncontrollable gasp escaped her lips and her hand flew to her mouth. "He died last night in an... accident."

Miranda couldn't believe what she was hearing, David's best friend from work was killed in what she could tell David suspected was clearly not an accident. "Are you saying that our own government had Mike killed?" Miranda didn't want to believe it, but she had never known David to be paranoid or to make outrageous assumptions without knowing all the facts, but she had some need to convince him that he was mistaken. Maybe she was just trying to convince herself, she realized. "It could have just been a coincidence..."

"No, Miranda I know it's hard to believe, but it's true. You have to trust me on this." He looked directly into her eyes, she knew him well enough to know that he believed with all his heart what he was saying, and she trusted his judgment enough to take him at his word even if she didn't want to believe it.

"But if what you're saying is true, that they killed Mike for trying to release this, and you want to release it now..."

"The people have the right to know, and I'm the only one who can tell them."

The terror started to overwhelm her, it would be easier if she didn't believe him because it would mean that his life is not in danger, but she had never known him to be wrong about anything like this before. "No!"

"The problem is that the evidence might not be enough to prove beyond any doubts what they did, so I'm meeting with an eye witness tonight in Dannysville. With his testimony no one will doubt me."

"David, don't go." Miranda heard herself say before she even realized it.

David took a step closer to her and continued, "There's still enough evidence in that folder to make a difference. If I don't come back tonight--"

"Don't say that!" Miranda yelled at him.

“If I don’t come back tonight, you have to take this to the station tomorrow, give it to Elizabeth; she’ll know what to do with it.” Miranda could hear the fear in his voice, it matched her own and she knew she couldn’t talk him out of it, so she embraced him. He held her tightly while a few tears streaked down their faces. Then he leaned back to look at her and she could see the tears in his eyes, “Don’t worry, I *will* come back.” And then he was gone.

Miranda waited for what seemed like an eternity. Even though Brian was home, she felt very alone. It was late and he was already in bed asleep. Miranda was far too terrified to get any sleep so she stayed up and watched the news in the kitchen. Then what she most feared would happen did. Life seemed surreal as she listened to the reporter go on about a deadly explosion in Dannysville, killing two people, including channel twenty-five’s own David Burner.

Everything else seemed to fade out of existence, panic spread through her as she tried to make sense of this nightmare. Her knees felt weak and gave way as she fell to a crouching position on the floor, sobbing loudly. Her whole life at that moment was nothing but grief. After a few moments where she just wanted to die so she could be with her beloved again, a thought occurred to her, Brian. He was still alive and he would need her more than ever now that David was gone.

David was gone? It was hard for her to believe, hard to accept. Then through her swollen eyes her gaze fell upon the manila folder sitting on the kitchen table. The gravity of her situation started to sink in. Agents from her own government, the one that was put in place to protect her, had killed her husband and if they knew that David was meeting with the witness tonight, they might also have known she had the folder. Panic hit her like a bucket of water to the face, almost completely overwhelming her grief. She had to get Brian and get out of there fast.

Suddenly there was a loud sound came from the front door as if it was forced open from the outside. *They’re here.* She realized. For a moment she was frozen with fear, not knowing what to do. They were in the main lobby between the kitchen and Brian’s room, she couldn’t get to him without encountering them.

She heard a slight noise outside the door and realized someone was coming for her. She felt a new emotion then that overwhelmed her: anger. First they’d killed her husband and now they were breaking into her own house. Who the hell did they think they were? She quickly grabbed a frying pan and ran to the door and stood beside it, poised to strike anyone who came through.

A person dressed all in black quickly entered the room with his weapon aimed in front of him. As soon as he entered the room, she let her rage take over as she knocked him flat on the head with every ounce of strength in her. The intruder collapsed to the floor apparently knocked out.

Miranda didn’t wait to see if he’d get up again, she seized the opportunity to run out of the house and seek help. There were still other intruders in the house, she could hear them approaching, so she bolted into the yard and ran towards Rebecca’s house, screaming for help. If she could just alert the public to what was going on, she might survive. She had to get the evidence to the public. She took a glance back

to see that there was one man chasing her and another who aimed his weapon at her, she quickly darted out of the way just as the shot whizzed past her right, but that little maneuver allotted her pursuer the time he needed to catch up to her and he tackled her to the ground. She turned on him. Full of panicky rage and fear, she clawed at his face. He drew back holding a hand to his face in pain.

Miranda took off running again, screaming at the top of her lungs. Rebecca had to hear her. She would, and she would send for help, she kept telling herself. But then she felt a sudden pain in her back as a shot hit her this time, then all went black as she collapsed to the ground.

Miranda slowly lifted her head up from her knees to look at her surroundings. She was in a room of nothingness, no door, no windows, no furniture, no color, no decorations, nothing, just white; an eerie unnatural bright white. The memories she was just reliving were finished, so now she knew how she'd gotten there. She had expected to die that night, but it seems that her abductors decided to spare her life, and instead checked her into an Enchantment Inn, where she would be a prisoner, trapped in her own mind. She now knew that none of this was real, that her real body was rotting out there somewhere in the real world. But there was nothing she could do about it, no way to wake up from this dream. She would be trapped in here forever.

She felt weak, like she was sick or dying. She wanted to be with her son or her husband, but they had found a way to rob her of both of them. She felt old and weak and all used up as she lost consciousness.

Chapter Five

Miranda slowly opened her eyes, which was a lot harder to accomplish than she'd expected, she could feel that she had very little strength in her. Her vision was still a bit blurry from deep sleep, but she could make out a friendly face. In front of her was a woman who was crouched beside her bed, who slowly helped her into a sitting position. She had never seen this bed before; it was huge with sheets that were all bright red, the most beautiful shade of red she had ever seen, and the bed was the most comfortable she had ever been in.

The woman sitting on the edge of her bed was slowly propping her up on the big soft pillows. Miranda looked at the friendly woman only to see a face she knew very well. It was the same face that greeted her every morning when she looked in the mirror. The haziness of sleep now completely faded, Miranda took a good look at the woman and found that she was looking at herself, entirely. Her arms, her face, her whole body was exactly like her own, except that there was a certain glow to her features, the likes of which she had never seen. It made her appear more beautiful than she ever thought she could be. "How..." Miranda said, startled while she was bolting up.

"Shhh," her other self said softly while gently pushing her back down, "You're still very weak." She said in a voice so beautiful it almost sounded like music, "You mustn't over exert yourself."

Miranda leaned back against the soft pillows; the woman's voice was so sooth-

ing she had to listen to her. The bed was comfortable; it felt like she was floating on clouds. Her mind raced to figure out what was going on, then she remembered where she truly was; the Enchantment Inn. None of this was real. It all made sense now. She leaned back, ignoring the comfort of the bed, resigning herself to ignore this fiction. She wanted no part in it. Suddenly there was a sharp pain in her side, overwhelming her. She screamed in pain as she reached for her side. She felt horrible inside, worse than she could ever remember.

Her other self gently touched the spot that ached and the pain slowly began to go away. Miranda saw genuine concern on the woman's face. She cried a single tear that splashed on Miranda's arm. Her own body looked very wrinkled and ill, but where the tear landed it became vibrant with color, and it felt more alive as well. Miranda stared deep into her eyes, which were identical to her own, except that they glowed bright, a realization, dawned on her. "You're real aren't you?" She asked with her weak voice.

"Well, of course I am." The woman replied with her song like voice.

"But how can that be?" Miranda understood enough about the Enchantment Inn to know that no one else could be in her artificial reality with her.

"Well, just look at me," Miranda looked, she looked exactly like herself, except she was wearing a big red sweater with matching red pants and scarf, where as Miranda was wearing the exact same outfit except it was completely black instead of red. She looked back at the woman, still puzzled. "I'm you." The woman gently touched her face with the back of her hand, and Miranda began to feel much stronger, a special glowing feeling emanated from the woman's touch.

"But why are you here?" She asked in a voice raspy, this time from sadness rather than sickness.

"Miranda, you're dying." She said with a great sadness to her voice.

"I know." She said as she cried a few tears of her own.

"And you're bringing it on yourself." The woman said sweetly. "You need to stop."

Miranda didn't completely understand, but as if in answer the door to her room opened and another woman entered, gliding through as if she floated until she came to Miranda's other side. It was another her. This woman looked just like herself and the other woman except her outfit was completely blue and her features didn't glow bright like the other woman's, nor were they sickly like her own. Yet she still didn't look normal, she had boldness to her that Miranda couldn't place. She stood by her bed looking down at her lovingly.

When she spoke it wasn't song like, like the other woman's voice. It was bold and deep, almost echoing. "The Enchantment Inn wasn't meant to operate when the person knows that they're in an Enchantment Inn."

"And," the woman in red added, "The fact that you're not accepting the reality it's giving you is killing you."

"What do you mean 'not accepting the reality it's given me'? It gave me several different fictions, and some were quite strange. I was trapped on a small island that got swallowed by the ocean and I drowned. Then I saw my daughter as I hologram and David was there. Then a soldier shot me. Why would the machine show me such things?"

"It didn't." Miranda in red answered.

“The way an Enchantment Inn usually operates is that it has one reality that the subject lives his or her entire life in, it’s not meant to switch from reality to reality as it did with you.” Miranda in blue explained.

“Then why did it?” Miranda asked

“Because most people who are in an Enchantment Inn are there voluntarily, it had a different effect on you because you do not want to be here.” Miranda in red answered.

“Your subconscious mind knew that you were in a computer generated fantasy and was trying to alert you to it.” Miranda in blue said.

“And although your memories of how you got here were being blocked by the machine, the technology does not exist to erase them entirely from your mind.” Miranda in red added.

“Part of you remembered what happen and was trying to relate that to your conscious mind.” Miranda in blue said, “And that’s what caused the strange dreams you had. Being trapped on an island to show how alone you really are and how horrible that made you feel.”

“But the machine fought back,” Miranda in red said, “by switching your reality to something that resembled your own life a little less but to something that would make you happy but not so happy to be an odious fantasy.”

“Then your subconscious fought back even harder by showing you that you had a son and not a daughter and giving you hints about how you were forcibly put here by soldiers.” Miranda in blue said, “So the computer came up with an even more elaborate fantasy but your desire to discover the truth won out. So here you are.”

“Here I am.” Miranda said in sadness.

“By discovering the truth you only endangered your own life you have to stop fighting it.” the woman in red said sweetly, “There’s no way you can get out of the Enchantment Inn, and even if there were, you regained your memories; you know how you got here. You don’t think they’d just let you go. They’d rather see you dead then let you go.”

“Then maybe I should just die, instead of giving them the satisfaction of seeing me trapped here.” She said with anger, and as she spoke the pain worsened.

“It makes no difference to the people who put you here whether you live or die.” the woman in blue answered matter-of-factly. “The only reason they put you in here in the first place is because a woman recently widowed, not being able to deal with the reality of her husband’s death, who checked herself into an Enchantment Inn is a lot easier to explain than another accident happening on the same night as her husband’s accidental death.”

“They could have made it look like a suicide.” Miranda retorted and the pain worsened some more.

“This is less suspicious, you know that.” The woman in red answered.

“If you die now, it will be the people who operate this Enchantment Inn’s problem, not the problem of the people who put you here. You are not being held or incarcerated; they simply dropped you off at a civilian run Enchantment Inn and made it look like you put yourself here. As far as they’re concerned they’re done with you. They don’t care what happens to you anymore because they know that you can never escape.”

Miranda eyed both women suspiciously, “You’re not me, are you? You’re the

machine trying to convince me to give up!”

“The machine is just a machine.” The woman in blue answered, “It can’t think on its own.”

“No,” the woman in red said, “we come from here.” She touched Miranda on her heart and she felt a great beauty, a great love swell up within her. She wept two more tears; she knew they were speaking the truth.

“We’re only a part of you.” The woman in blue answered her unasked question, “we can’t make the ultimate decision, only you can.”

The woman in red grabbed her hand tightly, “And we think you want to live.”

“But it’s not real.” Miranda said through tears.

“It’s as real as you allow it to be.”

“You can be with David and Brain again.”

“I want to.”

“Then let go.” Both women intoned lovingly.

Epilogue

Miranda slowly opened her eyes, she felt groggy as if she had just woken up from a very long sleep. She was lying on a couch in what appeared to be a hotel room. As she slowly started to get up, she noticed bandages all over her arms and legs and a few on her neck. Her head ached, and her body felt sore as if she hadn’t used it in a while. She tried to sit up, but could barely accomplish that. She groaned loudly as it took a lot of strength to sit upright.

Apparently having heard her, someone approached her room to check on her. “Mom, are you awake?” Miranda’s heart sank as she recognized that voice. A voice she thought she would never hear again.

“Brian?”

“Mom!” he yelled out as he ran into the room and straight into his mother arms. Pain surged through Miranda’s still sore body as Brian jumped up on her to embrace her, but she didn’t care she was just so happy to see him again.

Memories started coming back to her about an Enchantment Inn. She and her son had been abducted and put in an Enchantment Inn, but what were they doing here in a hotel room? After giving her son a long embrace, she brushed his hair out of his eyes and looked lovingly into them. “Brian, how did we get here? What’s going on?”

“Hello Miranda.” She heard a familiar voice say from across the room. She looked up to see her good friend Rebecca smiling down at her. “We got you out,” She then looked at Brian with a smile, “Both of you.”

Miranda looked at Brian again and noticed that he too had bandages all over his body in the exact same spot as she did. “Out?” she said her mind trying to comprehend what was going on, “Of the Enchantment Inn?”

“That’s right.” Rebecca said with a smile. “I saw the people abducting you and Brian, and when I learned that you were both in an Enchantment Inn, it didn’t take me long to figure out you were put there against your will. So we rescued you.”

“We?” Miranda asked, she was very grateful to Rebecca for saving her and her son but knew she couldn’t have done it herself.

Rebecca’s smile widened, “A friend helped me.” She gestured to the opened doorway and Miranda’s heart jumped in her throat and her mouth flung open as a man she’d never thought she’d see again stepped through.

“David, you’re alive!” She cried with joy as her husband went to her and their son and embraced them both. “The news said you were dead.” She managed to get out through her tears.

“They were onto me. They tried to kill me and thought they succeeded, so I let them think I was dead so I could get away.” He stared lovingly into her eyes and started to cry. “I’m so sorry they got you. I tried to save you but I was too late.”

He sobbed loudly and buried his head in her chest; she kissed the top of his head and soothingly shushed him. “Don’t worry; I know you did everything you could.” She said through tears, “And you did rescue us.” After a moments embrace a thought occurred to her. “Are we safe, now? Are they going to come after us again?”

Rebecca and David smiled widely, “You’re safe, alright. We got them!” Rebecca replied.

Miranda shot David a puzzled look. “I wasn’t the only one to survive the attack at Dannysville. The witness survived as well. Miranda, I underestimated his testimony; we didn’t even need the evidence. After we went public the whole government was in disgrace. The administration responsible for the atrocities committed on Iapetus was impeached. The agents who abducted you and tried to kill me were arrested, and now the people know the truth.”

Miranda remembered that they were in a hotel room. “So where are we now?”

Brian got up and walked to the main window that was still covered by a curtain. As he pulled the curtain back, Miranda squinted her eyes at the bright sunlight that poured through. “Our new home.” Brian announced proudly.

When Miranda’s eyes adjusted she could see a vast mountain range to the east and beautiful beaches to the west. “Welcome to Mandero.” David said then gave her a loving kiss. Her husband, her son, and her friend all looked to her with huge smiles, and as Miranda started laughing with joy they all joined in.

Sweet Miranda dressed all in red and bold Miranda dressed all in blue both sat by the window watching the recently recovered Miranda through the window as she lovingly embraced her family. “It’s so good to see that she’s feeling better.” Miranda in blue said.

“Yes, it’s so good to see her smile, and to see her happy.” Miranda in red agreed. She looked to Miranda in blue. “Do you think she’ll ever get sick again? Do you think she’ll ever discover the truth?”

“No, She won’t get sick again.” Miranda in blue replied then looked out the window at happy Miranda as she enjoyed a stroll on Mandero beach with her family. “We know the truth, so in a way, she knows the truth too.”

My Sister

Jim Meirose

So I'm going to be just like my sister. Foaming at the mouth at the littlest things. Also gnashing my teeth at the littlest things. And, at the other extreme, just sitting staring into space. Seeing something beyond the surface of things. She can sit for hours with her eyes trained on a single spot on the wall. Then it's back to the other extreme of staying up all night in a sweat, busy. Busy writing in her notebook. Or busy practicing her guitar. She knows what the house is like at four in the morning. Sweating that funny kind of hot oily sweat that goes along with being in that state. Dawn comes and she's always amazed to see us getting up and wandering in the room. She's still busy and has lots to do when we get up. There's no rest for her. She keeps on with her book or her guitar until it's time to do one of two things. She might settle down and sit staring at the wall, breathing fast. Or she might crash and decide to go to bed. That's what we encourage her to do. And to get her into the shower is a struggle. I'm not dirty—you're dirty, is what she says. Hygiene is important. And she just lets it go. There've been time when she's been in the hospital that they took her in the shower and scrubbed her down. But we can't do that at home. So she stays dirty. Black face, black hands, all smudged up. And greasy. Her hair slicked back in its own grease. And her face shiny with her own grease. Her nails have dirt under them—where they're not all chewed down. Jagged bloody nails. And she picks at the skin of her hands and bleeds. And at her feet, when she's sitting down cross-legged. I've read the things she's written in her book. It just long long strings of nonsense words. Like skedaddle the monkeys and ruin the front of the stately edifice. It goes on like that. She does play good guitar though. I think the only time she's fully sane is when she's practicing the guitar. She's got a whole routine to it. Metronome finger exercises. Metronome scales. Metronome arpeggios. Then each piece three times with the metronome. Then once a week each piece full blast wide open. She's a good guitar player. But she has bad stage fright. She can't play for people. The tunes fall apart. That's why she likes the writing better. She lets it rip, really lets it rip. She says she sees the words coming up from the paper at her, and she catches them and slams them into the page, and then nothing can change them, nothing can move them. Her stacks of used up memo pads fill the corner of the room. She says someday she'll get to cleaning it all up. She'll type it up nice and neat. But she'll let you read it. It's scrawl. Page on page of nonsense. After two or three days of staying up straight blazing through the music or blasting through the writing, she goes to bed. She might stay there for days on end. Just lying there with the covers pulled up

to her neck staring up through the ceiling. And to get her to eat is a struggle. You've got to catch her between cycles, if you know what I mean. You've got to catch her when she's dashing through the room. You've got to have the food on the table, and she stops up short. Then, she'll eat like a dog. Until its time to throw up. She doesn't know when to stop, so you've got to watch how much to give her. She might not eat for three days. Then, all at once, she wants to eat enough for a week. We take her to the doctor every Tuesday night. He sits in his chair, no pad or anything, and listens with a finger stuck in his cheek. She babbles on and on about the guitar or the writing. Then one time she stuck her finger down her throat and threw up right in front of the therapist. Said Whew! Whew—I just had to get all that stuff out. She's not overweight or underweight. Though she ought to be like a stick, they way she pushes herself. She sees a psychiatrist and a psychologist. She's got six different kinds of pills she takes. Prozac. Klonopin. Risperdal. Wellbutrin. Abilify. And there's more pills than that but the others aren't for her mind. I can hear her downstairs in the family room. Tonight, she's playing the guitar all night. It sounds beautiful, but it is a damned shame. Just rolls it up in one flight of sound all the things that could have been with her. She's got lots of talent. And, she is beautiful, in a crazed kind of way. You've have to see her to know what I mean. You'd have to look into her eyes. From the set of them in her face its as though they ought to be glowing red. Hot red. How long can she keep it up living this way? The doctors say years. But the body will weaken. She'll grow old before her time. And she'll probably die young, relatively speaking. But you know what's really funny? Her hair is always perfect. Pulled back in that bun. Filthy, but perfect. What must be living in that bun. Someday I'll go through that stack of memo pads. With the music, its easy. You can hear that it sounds good. But what might be in those pads? You can't hear what's in them, they don't shout out to the world. Someday I'll go through them. Probably after she's gone. The pile is still growing. When she's on the upswing, she fills a pad a night. She grabs at the air above the pad to show how the words are coming at her. And she catches them all, she says. Where they come from, who's to know? Somewhere deep in her. Too deep. Deeper than a person'd really want to look. But someday I hope to get at least a glimmer of insight. To what makes her go on this way. To know what's driving her. A bit of what's in her might be in me, you know. A bit of her madness might rub off, in time. We both came from the same womb, after all. The same warm soft place. Why should I be any different than her? And when will it start for me, if at all? Some of the things I do you might call crazy, I suppose. But I can't think of one. You know me, you watch me. Can you see any of her in me?

Sideshow Epiphanies

Kenneth DiMaggio

The magazine I edited in New York, folded. I had to find another job. Dressed in a suit I always hated, I took the F-train to Manhattan. Because I was now unemployed, I took the train later than I usually did. Before the train left the borough of Queens where I lived, a man with no body below his waist, got on the train. He propelled himself along with two pieces of wood. To “walk” he would prop himself up and then set himself down. He “walked” like this to the end of the car.

I realized that the F-train I was on went all the way to Coney Island in Brooklyn. I had never been to Coney Island. I heard about its magic and eccentricities. I decided to ride the end of the train to Coney Island.

Along the way, the train was filled with passengers who could have worked in a side show on Coney Island. At the Times Square stop, a man wearing a T-shirt entered with a stethoscope around his neck. He would constantly place the scope next to his heart and continue to listen for beats. At the Union Square 14th stop, a tall lithe blonde got on. Blondes are about as rare in Manhattan as brunettes are in Iceland. This blonde was even more rare in being a broad-shouldered drag queen. When the train got to Jay Street-Borough Hall in Brooklyn, an old man with long curly sideburns, a long black overcoat, and a black felt hat entered my car. For a moment I thought the train made a surreal stop in the Amish country of Pennsylvania. I soon realized that the passenger was a Hassidic Jew.

Finally the train arrived at the Coney Island stop at the end of Brooklyn. For this early, summer-like September day, there were not many people about. I started walking along the boardwalk. As I did, I passed the ivy-covered ruins of an old roller coaster. It looked like a large skeleton of a brontosaurus with its rump up while its long neck was lost grazing in some field of pre-historic grass. I also passed a few arcades that were still open. In one of them, a Frank Sinatra song was playing: I recognized the song as “A Summer Wind.” Giant inflatable pencils, beach balls, and cutely smiling sharks hung from the awnings of these cheap souvenir stands. I soon discovered a “museum” just off of the boardwalk. Inside were old glass framed exhibits of stuffed animals with two heads. There was a fake “skeleton” of a “Fiji Island Mermaid” which looked like the skeleton of a bat with the skull of a cat glued on top. And there were pictures of old side show performers with names like Dolly, the 500-pound honey, and Elaine, the Elastic Lady, who was pictured with her legs knotted behind her back while hanging from

a trapeze that she clamped on to through her mouth. (And it looked like she even managed to smile while doing it.)

After the museum, I went back to the boardwalk. I soon came to a pier. As I walked to the end of it, I thought about all the jobs I was supposed to look for today. I thought about how my day suddenly turned out differently, when that waist-less man entered my subway car back in Astoria, Queens. I thought about all the unusual people who got on the various stops on my way to Coney Island. Finally, I thought about the suit, tie, and white shirt I would have to wear tomorrow.

First I took off my tie. I let it dangle over the railing of the pier for a moment. Then I let it drift down to the anti-freeze colored sea below. I then took off my suit jacket; no, I would still need that. I would still need to get a job. But not today, and neither tomorrow, and probably not the next day.

Not until I found a few more places like Coney Island; a few more places in the city that I did not truly begin to know about, until today.



One Step Forward and Two Steps Back,
art by Aaron Wilder

The idea

“What’s she doing now?” I asked knowing full well.” —Raymond Carver

David Spiering

It was a clear night and the wind was strong and up high hissing and making shrill sounds in the treetops.

For years now I’ve been a writer/house wife. I married to get a steady paycheck, so that I didn’t have to worry about paper, postage and envelopes. In the old days, I worried about typewriter ribbons and now I worry about black ink jet cartridges and laptop computers. I buy used PC equipment because it does what I want and it’s cheap. I like the word “cheap” because it [poetically] doesn’t take up too much breath-space on my tongue and between my cheeks.

My husband’s name’s Mike and he works construction. He drinks rotgut beer, eats greasy fast-food and he likes it when I make scalloped potatoes and ham and hamburgers and lard-rich brown sugar BBQ baked beans. Sometimes I get nervous fits concerning the fact I’m living a double life and I want to believe he’ll leave me alone if I have dinner ready and keep the fridge stocked with bad beer. My worst fear zeros on he’ll come home and tell me it’s over and I’ll have to find a job as a waitress in a diner, somewhere, and I’ll have to subject myself to the general public’s petty whims.

We’ve been married for 20-years. We’ve lived in the same neighborhood for 15-years. There’s a small backroom in our house I work in. I have a desk where my laptop and printer are located; I have a large tv table I set up when I do submissions or when I want to write with a pen and a legal pad. Portable bookshelves line my room’s walls holding my books and I store my contributor’s copies and chapbooks in stackable plastic file boxes.

After I fed my husband his supper he watched sports on tv. Usually, he’d drink between 15 and 25 cans of cheap beer before bed. We had cable tv and the only time he changed the station from sports based programming was when sever weather passed overhead. At night, after supper, I slipped into my room to do some writing. I kept the window shade up so that I could watch the night approach. I liked the various stages and shades of twilight. In fact, I wrote a poem about it—I called it “evening light”—and I got it published by a well-known Midwestern literary magazine. My husband never said anything to me—I heard from other housewives what they went through trying to live their lives in the midst of the predatory male ego, needing know they can command their wives attention at any and every moment. Having fits and tantrums just like they were spoiled brat 5-year-old boys because the beans were too soupy or they wanted beef, and not pork; and, as a wife, you’re supposed to look at them (be so tuned-in to them) that on the night before you should be able to tell those things. I don’t know what I’d do if I had to put up with that. I guess I’d have to find a job to support myself. I use our weekly grocery money to lay-

in supplies and to buy postage, paper, and ink. I shop at used bookshops and I occasionally get some money for my writing, but mostly I'm paid in copies.

We've always had these peculiar neighbors. He smokes all the time and he has nothing better to do than turn the lights down or off and watch me while I'm writing. He has a housemate, I think, that's a woman but I'm not sure. I don't want to look too closely because I don't want to be like them. They're over there reveling in—what they think is total security—but they leave the tv on and I see from my eye corner their head shadows in the tv's glow. I never see them when I'm at the grocery store, when I'm fish-nosing downtown used bookshops. I'd like to tell my husband and he'll go puke on their front porch and stagger back home. I look at this way, it's more important for me to watch the twilight fade-down, than to snap those curtains shut.

When I was girl we had nosy neighbors. When they wanted to spy on us they'd walk their dog. Their dog didn't walk nice and he snarled, and clawed at the pavement, chewed at the leash as they drug him. They stared at us head-on without even a smile or a friendly wave. My family laughed about it. Sometimes, it made my mother mad. But my father said, "we don't have anything to hide, let 'em look all they want."

Out of my eye corner over there at the neighbors I see the heads bobbing in the tv glow at the windowsill level, but it's so petty and silly, I'll just rejoice in my twilight and heed no concern as to the rest.



Existential Panic,
painting by Jay Marvin

Living in New York

Mel Waldman

"Sometimes we force-feed life on others."

"What do you mean?"

"The cancer devoured my mother," the middle-aged man revealed. "If only she had lived in Oregon...not New York!"

"And if she had...?"

"Oregon passed a law that...well, physician-assisted suicide's legal there."

"But not here-in New York City?"

"Yeah."

"Did she suffer much?"

"Too much. Beyond human comprehension."

He took a deep breath and sat silently in the black leather chair across from me, where a spiraling silence seemed to swallow us. We sat in the center of my circular room, a whirlpool of unbearable emotion, launching us into a swirling vertigo, and I waited.

He spoke again, just above a whisper: "It ate her flesh and even...her soul. Like a beast of terrorism, it tortured her. Why couldn't Mother die a swift, soft, and gentle death? Painless and majestic."

He looked quizzically at me. I was mute. Couldn't play G-d! We sat silently, struggling to figure out why living in New York was so unholy-so cruel. Yet in the Waste Land of my soul, a distant voice whispered: Beware, my well-intentioned brother. New York may someday have a law which authorizes physician-assisted suicide. What will happen to us, my alter ego, if we travel on this dark road? Shall we discover bliss or ineffable evil? Beware!



What's in your Water?

I really am a 24-hour, drive-by media junkie. Translation: I usually turn to CNN or MSNBC for any news, or if there are commercials I'll subject myself to the "fair and balanced" (ahem) FOX News. But this morning I turned through the news stations, and I think the TV was on FOX News (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,336286,00.html>), when they started telling a story about how sometimes tiny amounts of prescription drugs are in tap water (based on a study done with testing the tap water of 24 major cities).

Now, the people on FOX News posed the question (as the AP article does): how do drugs get into tap water? FOX's answer was this: that people take their old medications and dump them in the toilet to get rid of them. (The AP Article said it is because "People take pills. Their bodies absorb some of the medication, but the rest of it passes through and is flushed down the toilet. The wastewater is treated before it is discharged into reservoirs, rivers or lakes. Then, some of the water is cleansed again at drinking water treatment plants and piped to consumers. But most treatments do not remove all drug residue": http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/P/PHARMAWATER_1?SITE=NYNYP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT)

Now, no studies have been done about the effects of miniscule amounts of drugs (from antibiotics or anticonvulsants to mood stabilizers and sex hormones), and there may be none, but FOX News questioned if people regularly drink tap water for 50 years, could a cumulative effect for the miniscule amounts of these drugs build up. And when people surveyed heard this, they said they would be more inclined to drink bottled water now — though there is no evidence that bottled water is not derived from tap water) which is some cases was even proven). But potential drug build-up isn't what I thought when I heard this story. I listened to how water is used to make tap water, which people drink, and the first part of the process is that waste from everyone's toilets get mixed into things that get cleaned and end up being used for tap water (which I drink from, instead of paying for bottled water). No one thought to mention that all human waste (you know, urine and fecal matter) also gets absorbed into what eventually becomes tap water, which you cook with, clean with, and drink.

I know, I know, blah blah blah, the cycle of life, reduce/reuse/recycle, but it's just interesting to think of exactly where even your tap water comes from...


Janet Kuypers



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