

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #29



Poetry by Timons Esaias

Stories by Rachel H. White
Shaylen Maxwell

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March

Table of Contents

Cover Art - Seth Crossman	4
Editor's Letter	5
Stories:	
The 100th Universe By Rachel H. White	6
One Giant Leap By Shaylen Maxwell	24
Poetry:	
Icon By Timons Esaias	22

Cover Art: *Winter War* by Seth Crossman

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Publisher, Golden Acorn Press

Editor, Seth Crossman

Issue #29 March 2011

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Editor's Letter

I have always watched disaster movies with a sense of detachment. They have never seemed very real to me. Some of it has to do with the special effects which seem a bit cheesy and can appear computer generated. I don't mind computer generated graphics, not at all. But when those graphics are showing meteors crashing into cities or giant tornadoes that move across the land like giant vacuum cleaners, it is difficult for me to get caught up in the action and the believability. They're just plain movies to me.

That was until the earthquake and tsunami in Japan that have taken the lives of 10,000 or more and left the country with more than \$35 billion in structural damage. I saw quite a bit of video footage of giant waves of water sweeping up cars and plowing through houses as though they were matchboxes. Unfortunately, these scenes were not the fantastic images of the latest Hollywood hit, but of real life. The damage there is real and devastating.

I lived in Japan for a period of time and so the quake and its after effects have hit me as well. I have probably driven along those streets that are now washed away, past those houses that might have had old grandmothers and little children the same age as those I taught. When I see images of communities huddled in the local high school gym, lying on blankets or tarps, I think of all the gyms I played in with raucous young children that could barely speak a word of English. Japan feels like a second home to me and it breaks my heart to see them suffering.

I visited Nagasaki and Hiroshima while I was there, walking slowly through the museums that memorialized what had occurred at the end of World War II. Those were hard museums to visit because of the graphic images and real trauma they displayed. However, in some respects, those memorials were badges of honor for the Japanese. *Look at what we have overcome*, they seemed to say. That was part of the Japanese nature I discovered. A people of steady perseverance and gentle spirits. They rose from the ashes of World War II to become the second largest economy in the world. I have a strong feeling they will come out of this disaster strong as ever. My prayers are with them.

-SC

The 100th Universe

by Rachel H. White

Rachel H. White is a writer and illustrator located in South Carolina though her mind and spirit reside in other worlds. She has been writing and making art ever since she was old enough to hold a crayon. Her artwork has been published in The Future Fire ezine and Apocrypha Studios rule book for Ngenesis role playing game. This is her first story to be published. Every decision we make matters, especially if it changes our world as drastically as Greg's.

“I have to tell you something. It’s hard to explain so just let me get it out before you say anything.

“My consciousness shifts between alternate realities. I can’t control where I go. It happens all the time, every day. Every time I make a decision, things change.”

Sally’s voice, far off in the kitchen, interrupted me, “Greg, I can’t hear you from in here. You’ll have to speak up.”

I opened my eyes, having closed them so I didn’t have to watch her expression change from loving to shocked. When I’d started my explanation, she’d been in the bedroom, kissing me good morning. My decision to tell her had switched me out of that reality and screwed up my confession. Again.

I could go in the kitchen and start over.

I felt an overwhelming aversion to the thought. I had already lost my nerve. I shook off the thought in an effort to avoid switching again needlessly.

I went about my morning routine: brush teeth, comb hair, and so on. I ignored the looming sense of the day. It seemed worse in the morning. Perhaps it was that I had to face my situation yet again after those few hours of restful sleep. Although, I didn’t always wake up in the universe that I’d gone to sleep in. I suppose decisions in my dreams can cause tangents to split off in the time line too.

After I did all the every-day routine things, there was nothing for it, no way to avoid it any longer: the choice of what to wear today.

I went to the dresser, where I’d trained myself to empty my pockets before bed. I picked up my day-planner, a navy blue one. Most people used

these things because they had too many appointments to remember them all. I used them because the appointments I had yesterday weren't always the same ones I had today.

There wasn't anything unusual marked for today: a meeting at work, no doctor's appointments, but we were scheduled to have dinner at a friend's house. That was something to look forward to, assuming I was still in this universe, or a similar one, by that time of day. Unlikely. Miniscule decisions would keep me near it, but any decision that was mildly important, and I'd be jolted too far off.

One would think I'd find interacting with friends frustrating. Any decision could shunt me back to a boring evening at home, or jolt me to the driver's seat of my car, traveling to some outing I didn't know about yet. However, I've been around this block. I've learned to do some things automatically. Dinner at someone's house? Serve myself a spoonful of each dish. Ordering drinks at a restaurant? Ask for the same as Sally's. Sally has good taste.

The shift during my confession this morning shoved back into my mind, stabbing my heart like a shameful defeat in some great battle.

Dropping the day-planner back on the dresser, I trudged to the closet. After looking over the casual-dress stuff I wore to work, I shuffled through the shirts until I found a striped one given to me by the friend we were going to visit. When I turned around, the bedspread had gone from a deep royal purple to gray and black stripes. I tossed my robe aside and put on the shirt. Back to the closet, after some thought I tugged a pair of black slacks off the hanger. This time the bedspread was the same, but the furniture was arranged differently, the bed up against a different wall. I sat on it and put on the pants. I glanced at the tie rack hanging on the closet door. I left the ties untouched, and the carpet became a rug on wood laminate.

I grabbed a pair of shoes. All my shoes are the same: all black work shoes, and one pair of white running shoes. Nobody notices if a guy wears the same kind of shoes all the time. Well, Sally notices. She buys me a pair for my birthday every year, same brand, same style, as a joke. She has no idea how helpful her joke is. She likes to tease me about my eccentric little habits. I have a desperate hope that, after I tell her the truth about my condition, she'll still find them amusing.

Finally, shoes tied, body clothed, and all-important day planner (the cover now green) in my pocket, I emerged from the bedroom. Sally was bustling around in the kitchen. She was more made-up than usual, the ends of her silky blonde hair curled under at the shoulders, and she was wearing a red power suit rather than one of her more comfortable dresses.

“Big day today?” I asked, looking her up and down appreciatively.

She smacked me on the arm with indirect frustration, “I told you three times yesterday. They moved the Busby meeting up to this morning.”

“Sorry,” I sighed. There were other pieces of me out there, jumping from dimension to dimension like me. Some of them were diligent enough even to write down Sally’s important events in the myriad of day-planners. Others...well, some never left me any notes at all. “I guess that means I’m fending for myself for breakfast.”

“You got it.”

“Have *you* eaten?”

“I’m bringing scones to the meeting. And speaking of which, I’ve gotta go pick them up. See you later, handsome.”

Half a second of pure, sweet peace as her lips touched mine, and then she whisked out of the kitchen, down the short hall and out the front door. In a few worlds Sally was devoted to her job. It was a good thing I got to see her in other worlds, because in these she was rarely home. But at the same time I had the chance to be her comfort blanket she could wrap up in at the end of every bad day.

Great. What’s for breakfast? So much for seeing friends for dinner.

Knowing I wouldn’t be here long, and that the other me would be eating a big meal later, I opened the cabinet and found the box of toaster strudel. I didn’t even have time to reach for it before I was standing in the kitchen door, looking at Sally in her casual-Friday jeans and Henley shirt, her hair halfway down her back now. She was scooping omelets onto two plates.

She looked up. “What? Were you going to say something?”

Was I? Was I so enamored of her in that moment that I was about to tell her about my condition?

Fearful of losing the moment, I halted my train of thought before I could ask that inner question that would lead to a decision. Outwardly, I shrugged, “No, nothing.” I spoke with a calm so practiced it was natural now, not a conscious effort. It reflected my emotions like a puddle of mud in a rain-storm.

“Okay.” She eyed me with some suspicion, then picked up the plates and handed me one. “Eat up.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. I grabbed a fork from the drawer and dug in to the delicious eggs while still standing.

Sally leaned against the counter beside me. “Were you saying something earlier? I thought I heard you in the other room.”

“Hmm? I dunno. Talking to myself, I guess.” I lie so easy. I hate it.

“I know. I still want to know what you said.” She poked me in the cra-

nium, “You know I always want to know what’s going on up there.”

I forced myself not to think about it for once. I just reached into my memory for the words I’d rehearsed, like trying to remember a poem I had to recite in high school English class.

“My consciousness shifts between alternate realities. I can’t control where I go. It happens all the time, every day. Every time I make a decision, things change. Yesterday for me and yesterday for you are two different things. Sometimes things are the same except for tiny details. Sometimes everything is different except my memory.”

I looked at Sally, unable to breathe.

She furrowed her brow, a skeptical smile quirking her lips. “What is that? A quote from a book?” She turned back to her eggs. “What book is it? Sounds like something I’d like.”

“It’s not a book.” I dropped my plate on the counter, the fork clattering, and grabbed her arm a little too hard, “I’m not making it up. It’s real.”

She stared at me this time, and I cringed away from her.

I hated when she looked at me like that. In all the universes where I’d already told her the truth, so many of them her reaction started with that look. What followed was very often worse.

I couldn’t stand to see her push me away again. I spun around and lurched out of the kitchen.

The world switched and the floors were carpeted again. Sally came out of the living room, her hair short, eating an English muffin with red jelly and looking at a magazine. She was wearing a blue pencil skirt and a green blouse. She glanced up at me.

I am Greg Masters, Master of the Blank Face.

She smiled and passed by me into the kitchen, and I forced myself to breathe.

I give up. I’m going to work.

I checked my day-planner, burgundy now. No meeting, call the boss to get confirmation on a supply order, pick up the dry-cleaning.

I turned to the table inside the front door of the apartment. I stopped and frowned down at a pair of scrapbooks. “Hon, did you move my keys?”

Sally sighed in the other room, and came into the doorway with her hands on her hips. “You always notice. You are so OCD. I had to put my scrapbooks by the door so I wouldn’t forget to bring them again. I put your keys by your briefcase. I thought you’d see them there.”

I should tell her to go get them for me.

I should tell her why I have to organize things so I can find them in all worlds.

Except it wouldn't make sense because I'll have switched, and it wouldn't be the same her. She'd just think I was nuts.

I went into the living room, where my desk was, and where I kept the briefcase by the desk. I reached for my keys and my briefcase, but the keys weren't there. I went back to the hall and they were on the table where they're supposed to be.

Sally came out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. She had on the same shirt, but different earrings.

"How are the scrapbooks coming?" I asked, guessing that in this reality she'd forgotten them.

"What?" Her brows knitted. "I haven't scrapped in years. Geez, sometimes I think you're going nuts."

I suppressed a sigh. *Well, there are worse situations where she could say that.*

I loved Sally's creative spark, and so it worried me in universes where she'd given it up. In the few where she was willing to talk about it, she'd told me that her parents had died in a car crash, or there was something similar that had happened in her past. She associated the scrap booking with her mom, and so she couldn't bear to do much of anything creative.

There wasn't much I could do right now though, so I shook off my concern. *Okay, briefcase, check; keys, check; overwhelming failure to tell my girlfriend the truth about my condition, double-check.*

I reached for my coat, and realized I hadn't taken time since the last switch to look out the window at the weather. In some universes, they'd been calling for rain today. I'd want the trench coat and hat if that was the case.

I could wear them both anyway, or I could go all the way back to the outside wall in the bedroom or living room to look out the window.

Hell with it. I put on the coat and hat.

A cell phone rang in my pants pocket, not in my briefcase where I kept it in most universes.

I answered. It was Sally, somewhere not at home with me.

"I thought I'd better tell you again, they moved the Busby meeting up to today. It'll probably run over, so I don't think I can make our lunch date." Her voice was cold and had a sense of repetition much like me reciting my memorized confession. Clearly this was a world where I had told her my secret. The fact that she was still speaking to me was a good sign, though bittersweet.

"I can wait until you're... Oh, never mind. It's your decision."

There was a long pause, and at last she said, "I will see you sometime,

Greg.” Her voice seemed warmer, but awkward too.

“I love you, Sally,” I said. I sounded desperate, like I was clinging to that slight warmth in her voice. I could have used my blank voice, my way of covering up my weakness, my reactions, my surprise when things changed. But it wouldn’t have sounded like I meant what I said.

Another pause. “Bye, Greg.”

On my way out the door the thought came to me. *Man, I could use a cup of coffee. Maybe I’ll run by Starbucks on the way in.*

Nah.

“Hey, baby?” a voice distinctly not Sally’s came from behind me.

I turned back to where a girl with short, curly platinum hair leaned on the bedroom doorway wearing a black slip. Gray paint peeled from the bare walls like ashes flaking off the cigarette in her hand.

She looked at me with mock-affront, “Don’t I even get a kiss goodbye?”

Don’t think. Just do it.

“Bye, Toma.” I managed a smile, backtracked up the hall to give her a peck on the lips, then left.

On second thought, I will go get that coffee.

Driving is one of the more difficult things to do in my condition. However, I have a system. It’s very simple: don’t do anything risky. Drive at the speed limit. Stop at yellow lights. Don’t pull into oncoming traffic. I just drive my exact same route to work and ignore it if someone beeps because I’m slow.

However, traffic was pushy today. Nobody would let me change lanes. So, do I go up to the next block and take the long way around, or do I try to cut my way in?

I suddenly saw a gap: the car beside me jolting forward, and the one behind it lagging a bit. I turned the wheel.

And there was no car around me. I was standing in the street, the cars nearby unmoving, abandoned, rusted out. Weeds were growing up through the asphalt. Moreover, there was a horrible stench to the air. It was not the smell from a passing clunker’s tailpipe, but the kind that’s been collecting for years, that has permeated the entire city and settled in for a long wait. There was pain in my stomach, which I recognized from my last glimpse of this reality and figured was true hunger.

Before I could shut my mind, my eyes took in the crumbled hulks that were once buildings, my ears absorbing a distant scream and the sound of running feet.

That’s what I should be doing: running. All I have to do is choose which way to run. Away from the screams is probably best.

I was back in my car, a Nissan now, waiting at a red-light. I thanked God for red-lights as I concentrated on not shaking.

When I was learning to drive, the switching wasn't so bad. Therefore, it wasn't until I was in college that I started thinking about lifetime bus passes instead of new cars. But even using public transport, there's still decisions to be made. Where to sit, how to react to the strangers around you. And the bus doesn't take you right up to your door. Walking traffic is almost as bad as driving in some cities. No matter what I do, I cannot stop from switching into worlds like *that one*. Or worlds with Toma, or worlds where I don't know Sally.

So, I decided, finally, that there was no point in giving up control of my life just to avoid decisions. Therefore, I drive, as safe as I can, and I do what I have to if I switch. Of course, there's the Toma universes, where I have given up trying, but I know that's the lazy me, and what's more, those worlds are there to remind me what I'm working for.

One thing I didn't have to worry about on weekday mornings was where I was driving to. The apartments or condos we lived in were very often different, though I made sure certain things were the same, like the table by the door where I kept my keys. That was so I wouldn't lose things from one universe to the next. My car was different a lot of the time, right down to the license plate number. But my job, what city it was in, the company I was with, even the building where it was located: all the same. It wasn't always like that. Somehow, I found out how to fix it.

It's like the 100th Monkey Effect. One monkey changes something in the way it does things, then other monkeys copy it, and then when a hundred monkeys have made that change, simultaneously all the monkeys start doing it.

Only this is my life, or all of my lives.

I started all this universe-hopping when I was a teenager. It used to happen when I made big decisions. Then it started being about once a day. By the time I finished college, it had reached its full potential, as it is now. At some point, I started setting up ways of dealing with it, like always putting things in the same place. And I am *not* Obsessive Compulsive; pretty much the opposite, until I had to force myself to straighten up or go crazy.

Therefore, I knew one of the things I had to do was find a job, or jobs, that required as little decision-making as possible. So I searched all kinds of papers and websites until I found the type of position that I was looking for, and I found this one company that had an opening like that. I went after that job with everything I had. I filled out the application over and over, and then I went to multiple interviews. Every time I switched I checked my cal-

endar to see if I had done that yet in that universe, and if I hadn't, I dropped everything and did it.

And then, I got the job. Not just in the universes where I'd made a point of it, but in *every* universe. In some, they called me out of the blue from someone passing around an old resume. In others, the higher-ups transferred me. And in a few I went to my old job, and they said I didn't work there anymore, so I went to my new job, and they acted like I was an old friend.

It was like with the monkeys: somehow I hit just the right number of universes, and it made my job change in all the rest of them, all at once.

There are infinite possibilities of parallel worlds, and maybe there's only so many of them where I was born, but to my mind it might as well be countless lives that I switch between. But on some level I have control. A tiny, seemingly insignificant amount of control compared to the chaos, but significant enough when I think of the possibilities.

What if I could convince one person in my life of what was happening to me?

At first, I thought any amount of effort, any risk, even being thrown in an insane asylum, would be worth that. I thought of never having to lie to the woman I love ever again.

But then I told Sally for the first time, and she freaked.

I had thought she'd be okay, because she likes all that Twilight Zone stuff. In fact, Sally told me about the 100th Monkey Effect. However, TV and real life are two different things. I should have known better.

Since then I've tried to work out the best way to say it. And not just because I don't want to sound insane, or sound like I'm joking, but there are so many decisions made on word choices when making a long speech about something most people can't imagine.

With my job, I wasn't counting. I didn't know what could happen until it *did* happen. Even now, I'm not sure, because there are some universes, the *dissimilar* ones, where I don't have this job. In some of them, this job doesn't exist, like the one where the Communists got the bomb before we did.

I've been counting this time, for all the good it does me. I've told Sally the truth about my condition a hundred and sixty-eight times.

Sometimes she freaks out and leaves. Sometimes she laughs like I'm joking.

Sometimes I've had to walk up to her on the train or at her office, because she didn't know me. Then she stares, walks away quickly, or threatens to call the police.

Five times, she looked at me with complete understanding, even gave

me a hug. She told me she was proud of me for having the courage to admit it to her. Twelve times, she accepted it, but she's still not quite okay with it yet.

A few times, she smirked and told me that I had already told her, but that hasn't happened much. Most of the time, I can tell those worlds, even the ones where we're spending some time apart until she can deal with it (or I come to my senses).

Maybe it's not a magic number, like exactly one hundred monkeys, that can fix any one aspect. Maybe it depends on what that aspect is. Anybody can control his choice of job for the most part, so maybe it didn't take a hundred times applying and interviewing and all that.

Maybe it depends more on Sally, how she reacts. Or maybe I'm just afraid of seeing her give me that shocked look again. Okay yeah, I'm afraid of that for sure, but does it affect the number of times I have to do it again?

Arriving at work, I made the usual greetings to my coworkers. A couple of people worked under me, but most of what I told them to do was relaying orders from above. Most days at work, I went through two or three switches, but even when there were different people working with me, the things we were doing were pretty much the same. That was all I needed to get me through the day.

No job is without some decisions, that is, except for working an assembly line and not making enough to afford a car and an apartment. It was possible to live like that. I knew because that was my job in the realities where I lived with Toma, or lived alone, in that rundown pint-size apartment that looked and smelled like an ashtray. I still worked for the same company though.

"Hey, Greg!" one of the project managers, a black guy with a shaved head and a big grin named Derek called to me, "Big game tonight. You joining us for drinks?"

Could be fun, a nice break in the monotony, although with Sally not around to make an interesting drink choice for me I would order the same old beer.

"Nah, thinking about taking my girlfriend out to dinner." Although to be precise, what I would do is ask her if she wanted to go out. Chances of switching are lower that way.

I left work waving at the guys headed for the bar. Derek wasn't among them, and I thought I remembered a few universes where he had found a better paying job. Oh well, no doubt he'd be watching the same big game from another bar somewhere. I walked all the way across the parking lot to my red Chevy, which had been a tan Datsun this morning, and prepared to

face one of the trickiest parts of my day.

The address in my planner clued me to the route I had to take home.

It did not say whether Sally's important meeting was today in this universe or not.

In some worlds, Sally's job kept her longer than in others. Still I'd have a few hours to myself before she got home. As I drove I considered what I would work on at home today. There were various things I could do with my time, but for the last few months I'd been spending a lot of it practicing my confession.

It took me a long time to write it, working off and on. I found out I had to plan it out because it was impossible to tell her right off the top of my head. You have no idea how many decisions you make on word choices when you're trying to explain something. That kind of on-the-fly confession causes scenes like a switch I had a week ago:

"What was that?" Sally was blinking at me.

"Hmm? Did you hear something?"

"I don't know. It was like you started in the middle of a sentence, then hesitated."

Was I struggling through an explanation in another universe and shifted here then away again?

Should I try to explain to her right now?

I don't know where the other piece of me left off.

I looked around and Sally was no longer there, this apartment one of the ones that felt empty of a feminine presence. There never seemed to be enough lights turned on.

Since then I'd been trying harder to memorize my exact wording, like a quotation from a book, or perhaps like a mantra to be repeated religiously. I needed to spit it out without having to make a decision when the time came. I suppose I could write her a note, but that seemed so impersonal.

I paused in my thoughts as I moved down the worst street in town. The lights here aren't timed well, and if I hit the street at the wrong time, I have to stop at *every light*.

I edged along with the traffic. One light went from yellow to red. Stop.

Light turned green, go. Next light, when I was halfway down the block, turned yellow. Stop. The SUV behind me filled my rearview, stopped close on my bumper.

Green again, and I moved, pressing the gas harder, praying to get to the next white line before—

Light turned yellow when I was mere yards from the line. If I stopped now, the SUV would likely plow into my little sedan.

I felt my nerves stand on end. I dove under the light as it blinked to red above me.

The car around me changed and so did the world. I was on a different street entirely, and the car was a rickety Oldsmobile. I cursed, not even having a glance at my planner to know where I was going.

Toma's car wasn't in the lot when I pulled in at the apartment complex, but that didn't mean much. Sometimes she stopped off here if she was out riding with someone for reasons that I didn't want to know about.

I felt stupid sneaking into my own apartment, turning the key with care and walking in almost on tiptoe. Toma could be a real bitch if woken up from a nap.

Dating Toma, if it can be called dating, might seem like a dumb thing to do from an outsider's point of view. Well, some of my other personalities aren't as willing as I am to work hard at life. They pick the simplest job, the laziest living, and, well, a girl that likes to make all the decisions in the relationship. I, or rather some other me, had met Toma in a bar after a bad day. After that, she simply hadn't gone away, and I didn't have the initiative to drive her away.

Keys on hall table, messenger bag beside kitchen table (couldn't afford a desk in this reality and didn't have the space for it even so). On the counter, a half-pot of coffee had been left turned-on. It was probably half crisped by now, but it would have to do. I poured a cup, then added a spoonful of sugar from the bowl by the coffee-maker. I was about to reach for the refrigerator in hopes there would be fresh milk when I felt something cool and metallic press into the back of my neck.

"Where do you keep the money, Greg?" Toma's voice was recognizable, but only just, as it was so cold and serious in tone.

I didn't dare move even to put my hands up. "I don't keep cash on me."

Toma laughed and I turned. She was holding a metal lighter, which she took away from the back of my head and flipped open to light the cigarette in her other hand. She was grinning. "Fooled you! Come on, Greg, I know you ain't got any money to pinch."

"Yeah." I leaned back against the counter, trying to look nonchalant as I waited for my heart to drop to its normal pace. "Nothing worth giving up your favorite boy-toy for anyway."

"Who said you were my favorite?" She eyed me. Pointing the lighter at me again, she put on the worst gangster accent she could muster. "Nevah f'get dat youse is *expendable*." Then she cackled so loud I almost thought she was kidding.

I sketched a smile on my face. "You, ah, planning to stay tonight?"

She shrugged. “Not at the moment. Won’t be here long either. Krueger’s coming to pick me up.” She reached up and patted my cheek with a teasing look. “But you know, plans change.”

I nodded, then picked up my cup of coffee and sipped. I grimaced. It was possible the coffee maker had been left on since *yesterday* morning.

I finished my exercise of taking out the milk and softening the coffee with it, only somewhat assured that Toma wasn’t going to shoot me in the back. The coffee was not much improved, but it was on the drinkable side.

I searched for something to fill the silence, as I was often doing when I appeared in Toma’s worlds, “Did you ever hear back from that guy from my company about the shipment of computer parts?”

The timbre of the silence changed, and I stretched my face blank as I turned to look at her.

At first she just stared at me, then her face locked down in a stern, piercing look. She closed in on me, and despite her petite frame, her sharp gaze pinned me against the counter.

“How do you know about that?”

It had been maybe a month ago that she’d asked me to call in a favor to someone in my department. That was the last time I’d been in a Toma reality for any length of time. Clearly, my present reality was not the same stream.

“Sorry. Forgot I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

She held my eyes in a fierce glare, one of her eyelids twitched, and then she stepped back. She surveyed me while I kept my face blank.

She snatched my coffee cup, and sipped. “Next time you feel like being psychic, you better think about the consequences. *Some* people would have you rubbed out just for knowing about things like that.”

“Loud and clear, babe.” I tried for that uncaring thug persona that wore thinner every time I used it on her. Dear God, I was going to have to find a way to leave her.

The problems would come if she didn’t want to be left.

I slipped out of the kitchen and made for the bathroom. Shutting myself in, I looked in the mirror.

After such a disjointed day, I didn’t like switching again on purpose. However, it was either that or spend an entire evening in this ratty apartment, wondering if Toma might change her mind and come back.

I decided I might feel better if I thumped my head on the wall a couple times.

I blinked to find the wall I was leaning my head on was rather pliant, and there was a tightness around my chest and arms. I looked up to find myself sitting on the floor of a dimly lit box of a room with a gently frightening grid

of padding on the walls

A reminder, again, that some worlds were easier, and worse, than life with Toma.

Alright Greggo, calm down. There're decisions to be made everywhere. Any number of things I could do in here. I could start screaming, and even better, I'd have to decide what to scream. I could try to get free of the jacket, start kicking the door. Throw myself at the walls. Hell I could just curl up in a fetal position and decide to count to a hundred!

Oddly enough, this last random thought was the wisest, since I wouldn't burst into screams or knock over a piece of furniture when I switched.

However, I had another thought: *I could sit here, undisturbed (at least in the physical sense) for a few hours before I switched. A whole evening without the stress of trying to interact with my girlfriend without constantly shunting from world to world.*

Friday night wasn't as much of a relief for me as other people. The only respite I had on the weekend was Sally doing most of the driving for me (I had lied to her some time ago: some bull about my nerves and city traffic). But at the same time, the weekend meant spending the entirety of two whole days with someone who observed all my moves and mistakes, as much as I loved her attention, her presence in my life.

No. Hiding away in this reality was lazy, defeatist thinking. If I was to be a man who deserved a love like Sally's, then I was better than that.

I sat up in a chair in our living room and took a deep breath, flexing my arms and half expecting to feel pins-and-needles even though I had left the body in the straightjacket behind.

Sally walked into the room. "Hey babe." She looked at me and cocked her head to one side. "What are you thinking?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask?"

"You've got one of those weird smiles on your face."

My smile widened. "Just thinking how blissfully happy I am to be with you." No blank voice here: this one was true without a doubt.

"Hmm." She grinned, then leaned down and kissed me hard on the lips. "Funny, I was thinking something similar to that. So what are we going to do about it?"

After a while, we moved into the bedroom. The darkness and the cool sheets seemed to block out my troubles, and all there was in the world was her skin and mine.

Until we were close to the end.

I longed to say her name. I longed for a life where I could be sure I never shifted so far that my body joined with another woman.

I didn't dare, and my pleasure was stained with the guilt of my fear. I collapsed beside her, deflated as the buzz already began to fade. However, I felt her arms around me, and knew by the feel of her body that it was still Sally, not Toma, not some random weakness or whim. I relaxed into Sally's warmth and fell asleep.

* * *

Saturday morning: an extra hour or two of decision-free snoozing with Sally curled up next to me. She often got up before I did though, as she loved to cook in the mornings. Sometimes she got too creative with new recipes, but it never stopped me from eating them.

At the smell of pancakes, I crawled out of bed and reached into the underwearer drawer with my eyes closed. I shuffled into the kitchen in bathrobe and slippers.

"We're doing whole-grain this morning," Sally said, her eyes all but sparkling as she looked at me. "But I made up some strawberry and rhubarb compote to put on them, so that should cover up the healthiness taste."

We dished out our plates, and she hooked her free arm in mine. "Let's eat in the living room," She whispered conspiratorially. "Just for fun."

We sat down side-by-side on the couch. Before we could dig in, however, she caught me looking at her.

"You've got one of those weird looks again," she said.

She tried to draw me out more and more often as our relationship grew longer. What she didn't know was that what I was thinking could bring that relationship to an abrupt halt.

I huffed a short sigh and closed my eyes, rubbing my face with one hand.

Say it. Right now. Don't think just go.

"I have to tell you something. It's hard to explain so just let me get it out before you say anything." I kept my hands over my eyes, afraid I wouldn't be able to do it this time, knowing I might see that horror in her eyes again, although I desperately hoped to see that twinkling understanding once more. "I—my mind that is, my consciousness—shifts between alternate realities. I can't control where I go. It happens all the time, every day. Every time I make a decision, change my mind, stuff like that, things change. Yesterday for me and yesterday for you are two different things. Sometimes things are the same except for tiny details. Sometimes everything is different except my memory."

She'd been silent too long. I looked up, and the sights now around me shocked me so that my lungs felt like they were full of needles, and I

couldn't breathe.

It was Toma, not Sally, standing there in the cigarette-ash room, staring at me.

She took a step back, and then started backing away rapidly until she disappeared into the next room.

I didn't move. I didn't dare, unsure what was going to happen now.

She reappeared, tugging her leather jacket across her shoulders. She pointed an accusing finger at me. "You're insane. Don't talk to me. Nobody cooks up a story like that."

I could see it in her eyes. Toma wasn't stupid. What I'd said *did* make sense to her, knowing me and my weirdness, even the things that my OCD-like habits couldn't explain, or the way I'd know things she hadn't told me while forgetting things that had happened minutes ago.

"Don't you call me. Don't even think about coming to my house. I'll call my brother and if we see you stalking me or something, he'll put a hurt on you so much you—" She stopped, seeing this was not affecting me. My panic button was maxed out. She turned and strode out the door, slamming it behind her.

I still did not move from my chair. I didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified. If *I* was crazy, then no matter what she might say, Toma was not far behind. What if she got paranoid, started jumping at shadows, and called her "brother" on me anyway? We'd never spoken about it, not directly, but it was clear from what I'd found out in a round about way that her relatives were high up in the hierarchy of the mafia.

What happened if I died in this universe? Did that affect the other realities at all? Or would I just stop, whether I was here in this universe to witness it or not? What if I was, if I died screaming and then woke up somewhere else? What if I came back to this universe to a rotting body in a coffin six feet under?

I put my head down again, *I am deciding to stop thinking about this now because if I don't I really will go crazy.*

I opened my eyes, relieved to see the living room in Sally's Citrus Phase, when she had painted the room lime and lemon with hints of orange.

What if I died having never told Sally the truth?

What if I died and never took the chance to tell Sally the truth?

There are a thousand million universes—infinite worlds!—where I could die at any moment from some freak accident or misplaced malice. There are only a hundred and sixty-eight of them where the woman I love knows the truth about my life.

I sat up, sucking in air, feeling like I'd never breathed before.

I stood and rushed into the other room. Sally wasn't home.

What now? Cell phone!

“What’s wrong, honey? You look like you either won the lottery or wrecked the car.” I turned to see Sally smirking at me from the doorway.

“Maybe both.”

This could be it, Greggo, I thought. The one more universe I need!

“Sally!” I crossed the room to her, taking her hands in mine, “I have to tell you something...”

Icon

by Timons Esaias

Timons Esaias is a writer and poet living in Pittsburgh. His short stories, ranging from literary to genre, have been published in fourteen languages. He has had over a hundred poems in print, including Spanish, Swedish and Chinese translations, in markets ranging from Asimov's Science Fiction to 5AM and Elysian Fields Quarterly: The Literary Journal of Baseball. He has also been a finalist for the British Science Fiction Award, and won the Asimov's Readers Award. He is Adjunct Faculty at Seton Hill University, in the Writing Popular Fiction M.F.A. Program.

Icon

The icon of Fitness
etched into the glass door
is a man struggling against
a machine.

I think that though
the man will do his best
he will tire, and the machine
will not.

The man will wear down, huff,
hunch over his shoulders,
and go back to his room.
Leaving the machine
in possession
of the battlefield.

How long, I wonder,
before the icon of Fitness
is the man running, strongly,
from the pursuing machine?
Then of the man
down at the loading dock,

being chosen, by a machine,
to serve its purposes
for the day?

One Giant Leap

by Shaylen Maxwell

Shaylen Maxwell emerged from the womb penning novels. Her fiction has appeared in nearly two dozen publications to date, most notably: Reflection's Edge, Literal Translations, and Wild Violet. She resides in exile with her menagerie of wild animals: two dogs, two cats, three bunnies, her husband Beldoe and her baby Sneaky. In this story a woman struggles with her altered identity and the idea of pregnancy.

All that was required was some tampering in the home laboratory and voila: my conception! Embryo implanted, carried to term, and delivered healthy. I was their first child, their baby girl. Fast-forward three years and my mother had scaled a tree. My father sat on the grass below, while she coaxed in a nurturing, albeit slightly hostile tone, "Jump, Birdie. Jump!" And before I could protest, I was flung from the branch.

"One giant leap for mankind," my father shouted, capturing it all on his newest camera phone, documenting my fright (ahem, flight) in action.

Did I fly? Well, miraculously my wings did open up, but barely! Just enough to cushion my landing, lessening the severity of my free fall. I certainly wasn't soaring back up, as they'd promised, no amount of thinking happy thoughts would've achieved any differently. As I lay upon the earth, one wing still in the air twitching, my mother cooed, "Just like the first dinosaurs to sprout wings."

I didn't know whether to weep or to shriek. I got no chance to do either because my father approached me, looked me over, and began recording a voice memo into said phone. Modifications, he titled it. And it set in motion the conception of my little brother Jay. Jay, short for Blue Jay, the provincial bird. A superior prototype, or so they planned...

The phone tucked back into my father's pocket, he picked me up, shook his head, and said, "This time you're going to fly, goddammit!"

I was back up the tree within the hour.

Yes, I know, and they wonder why I didn't want to reproduce.

* * *

I'm with child now, of course. But the little duckling was not the miracle I planned for. I let it show on my face when I finally broke down and told

Lencho. Lencho, my mate, was a wingless man I'd met through an online dating forum who'd migrated (forgive the pun) to Canada the year before from a small village in Africa. He hadn't heard the stories, the genetically-engineered bird-girl who was all over the tabloids only a decade earlier. That's why I'd dated him. He was a good man too. He was intelligent. Sympathetic. And forgiving of my enigmatic ways.

I thrust out the stick I'd peed upon, only minutes earlier. And I swore loudly. He stood there puzzled, his gaze flitting madly about the room. "It can't be," he finally exclaimed, as I burst into tears. "I don't see the egg."

I remember thinking that sometimes he was just as ill-formed about my condition as the media was. Course that was more my doing. I could have been more forthcoming... "There's no egg," I retorted. "My father engineered me better than that. You wouldn't even be able to mate with me if there was!"

"Really?"

I was blind from the tears. "I don't know," I wept. "I don't know how it really works, never did. Just there's no god-damned egg, okay?"

And though I loved him, certainly, I resented him then too. I resented his ignorance much as I resented my own condition—the parturient one he was now partially responsible for. He grabbed me, holding me tight to his chest as I wailed into his shirt. I thought for sure he was going to suggest abortion, given my hysterics, and what I wanted to imagine was his own horror. Sure I was a good screw, but did he really want to share a nest with me (again, pardon the pun)? I had wings, after all. Who wanted to wed a woman with wings?

He said nothing of the sort, he just whispered in my ear—I could barely hear him over my own guttural sobs— "I love you, Birdie. And the little baby bird too."

It should come as no surprise that I began to sob even louder then, so loud my chest heaved, and I fell to my knees losing my breakfast to the toilet.

* * *

He called it a baby bird. And it was. Because I was. Feathers, wings—these would be the differences that set me apart. Prototype #1. Failure of a prototype that I was. I was the first woman to be born winged and to fly. Despite the initial disappointments I was soaring about the backyard by the time I hit kindergarten.

No one really cared at that point though—my parents, I mean—because

Jay was around. And Jay, the show off, burst from the womb, popping his water with his beak (yes, the little bugger actually had a beak—I told you he was a show-off!) and flew from my mother’s cervix and did two rotations about the room. Not the hospital, no way in hell my father would let an ordinary hospital be privy to his secrets. The laboratory. And, perhaps he didn’t fly, no, at least not like that. Even baby birds cannot achieve such feats. But if you heard my parents recount the tale, you’d have sworn it was that extraordinary. After all, my father engineered him to outshine me, and he did.

There are a lot of things I’m bitter about, you can probably tell by my tone, but his usurping my reputation as the family flyer wasn’t one of them. It was to be expected, given my father’s demented determination to succeed. He was the child of a famous genographer. Yup, granddad was the guy who first made rabbits glow neon in the dark. Tampering with genetic code was in my father’s bloodline, even after the circumstances were no longer favorable and society began its two decade long revolt.

Yes, this revolt happened long after the mass extinctions of nearly every living being on the planet (minus humans, of course); the Ray Kurzweil, *live forever as a machine* attempts; the adoption of the Segway in all major cities across the globe, ala Dean Kamen; although it did happen before anyone proved cold fusion was anything but a theory, go figure! (Snicker, snicker! Yes, that was a joke in my father’s bad taste!)

As the story goes, my father—and by default, my mother who loved the ambitious idiot—was set on having his own page in the Trangenesis Bible (the official encyclopedia of hybridized species), one to trump the page his older brother had already begun, engineering his future gene pool with gills and webbed toes. My poor cousins spent most of their formidable youths submerged in a tank in their basement. (And I thought I had it bad!) There weren’t any casualties, besides the infant, who was buried blue and swollen (the press never heard about that, it was just one of those dark family secrets!). Yes, the cousins walked about like, quite literally, fish out of water at family functions. But it was all salt in my father’s wounds.

Which is why, as soon as mother and he were at the age to begin considering giving their lives over to their offspring (a stage I never really got to), they were experimenting. My father saw this old special, by National Geographic, all about the transition of dinosaurs into birds, or rather, the first dinosaurs to sprout wings. Although familiar with the event, the documentary became a catalyst to his enthusiasm, an epiphany born. How better to show up his brother than to tamper with his children and get them flying? Trickier, yes, than just adding gills and webbed toes (Webbed toes happen

by accident. In fact Uncle had one webbed toe which was, reputedly, the inspiration for his creations). Dad definitely had his work cut out for him. Took him three years too! Mom froze some eggs in case she were through her reproductive years by the time it was perfected. And they used the extras to experiment with the code, infusing my DNA with the genetic material of an ostrich, an eagle, and parts of a seagull (for size, wing span, and a scavenger's survival smarts).

Of course, it was all biological logistics until my eventual arrival. So they crossed their toes and fingers, as the story is told, and it worked. No sooner had I slid from the birth canal, the buds of my future wings began to appear where should have been only my chicken wings...

* * *

My one claim to selfhood, independent of the plans and machinations of my parents, was and had always been my right not to reproduce. Perhaps that's why it took me so long to end up in this predicament. But I was with baby now, two months gestation, and as out of sorts about it as I'd been in the beginning. The nausea, I could manage—hell, I'd have vomited into my old age if the gosling had just stayed put. Lencho said I was being overdramatic. No, he just didn't understand the depths of my own self-loathing.

I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't blame the usual pregnancy insomnia either. The primal act dredged up what I'd spent decades trying to deny: my own mortal differences. When I did finally succeed, oh the nightmares I had. Like the one of my tiny mite being born a bird of prey. Laid upon my chest, it dug its talons into my collarbone as its beak tore out my throat. Or the dream I'd had where I was discharged, post-delivery. When I bent to scoop it up from the hospital bassinet, it was a stuffed rabbit. A pink, stuffed rabbit. I swaddled and coddled it, but it didn't make a sound. Outside, I found myself setting it down in the parking lot, first next to the toll booth, and then next to my car. Each time, I'd remember and then go to it, scolding it. "You have to make more noise than that, if I'm supposed to remember to be your mother." What a strange thing to say, I'd thought.

In a cold sweat, I'd lie awake listening to Lencho breathe heavily in his slumber. Sometimes I'd reach out and slip a hand in his, my other hand grazing my belly. "You're being ridiculous, Birdie," he'd say, come morning.

But I couldn't hear it. What if this continued? No maternal bond, no majestic miracle. Just conception, nausea, back pain, and dread—the deepest of dread.

And I had reason to feel dread (whether Lencho believed I were over-reacting or not). I knew what this little life would face all too well: a childhood of exile.

I was conceived just five years shy of the rebellion against the transhumanism movement—born into biopolitics I never could have understood. And when the curiosity and interest had waned in these human-animal hybrids—one of such being me, and my eventual feat of a solo flight from Niagara Falls all the way to Timmins (covered by every press around the globe)—the world revolted. The Prime Minister was even quoted by the press as saying, “To do to a child what Birdie’s perverse parents have done to her is irresponsible and sick!” With the exclamation point. The world, albeit once up for a little experimentation, felt there was now something distinctly non-human about this kind of creative indulgence, modifications to our very core. Human beings were, after all, defined by their limitations—to each species its own special niche (crafted by the sacred hands of time). Such a reverence for nature prompted a return to simpler times, to a pre-information and even pre-industrialist era; seemingly a revolt against science and progress altogether.

“Naïve stupidity,” my father had always cursed. “Let them live in their stupid little huts, growing sustenance from their meagre gardens. They’ll go hungry, eventually. And come begging for my genetically engineered, gargantuan tomatoes. And it’s like that with their offspring too, Birdie. Don’t you forget it.” Then he’d go on about end of the world cataclysms. Jay would chime in, chirping that he was proud to be a superior breed. And then the two of them would flutter off to the lab to measure Jay’s wingspan again.

No, indeed, there was nothing natural about what we were. Jay, or myself. Caught in the middle, it wasn’t long before I was persecuted for my Frankensteinian freakishness.

“Your nose is so big it could be a beak,” my insolent peers had jeered, shortly after the rebellion hit.

“Piss off,” I harrumphed. Oh the shame I’d felt, and the mortification.

“It’s jealousy,” said my mother, of their boorish behavior. “Children are cruel.”

But it wasn’t their conduct that gnawed at me. I hated that I stood out at all. “I hate being a bird,” I’d retorted.

Jay-Bird, busy preening his feathers in the corner, grinned at me, “Daddy

loves us.” God I wanted to slap the little bugger. Mother always punished me for calling him that though: a little bugger.

“Shut-up! You—you little Budgie!”

It was a lie, yes. But it was as degrading an insult as I could think of for a Blue Jay. Everyone knew Budgies were retarded...

As a consequence of my biology, I spent my childhood being home-schooled. In time the jeers of the crowd dulled to mere whispers and muffled giggles. Is she really the woman who could fly? I became my own urban legend, forced to tape my wings to my back anytime I left the house. It was rumored my father had even de-winged me, but it wasn't true. He'd never have allowed that, and as far as doing it behind his back, only my father's colleagues at the lab were equipped to handle such a complex procedure. Anywhere else and I'd surely be subject to botched surgeries and infection. Infectious diseases were running rampant, as you can probably imagine, given the world was also against vaccines (Subject of tampering! Subject of science!)

I bided my time best I could, occupying myself with a passion for journalism. I wrote, and sent my work away. Wise for my years, they all thought, when they realized the recent articles I'd penned on chemical warfare were the act of an eight year old. I wrote under an alias, obviously. Birdie merely reminded the public I was, in fact, a biological bird. Without such a moniker, people didn't think much of a Sarah or an Elisabeth. Still, my social development suffered. I was denied friendships, going to slumber parties, and attending school dances. So many experiences that proper, wingless people got to have. For that, I loathed my parents all the more.

I contemplated flying away, I did. Knowing if only I was strong enough (physically mature), I could cross the Americas and live in the tropics. Not a migratory urge, no, just a giant fuck-you. I didn't get that far, of course. Because come maturity it had been so long since I'd exercised my wings I didn't trust them to the journey. So I moved out, the old fashioned way. And then met Lencho.

But now, on account of my father's choices, he'd not only have stolen my childhood and adolescence, but he'd steal away my adulthood too (this baby within me carrying his signature, subject to the suffering I'd experienced). How could I celebrate the miracle of life, when such a life would be viewed as inhuman, and worse still, to my father, another opportunity to radically experiment, never thinking through the ramifications of his actions?

* * *

For that, I was set on never telling him. It wasn't hard to achieve, I imagined, given I hardly saw my parents anymore. They were a rudimentary support system, at best. And they more than knew I resented them, which is why they invested all their parental energies in Jay. Jay, after all, never begrudged them for his differences.

I probably would have gotten away with it too, if Christmas hadn't fallen over the course of my pregnancy (the one day a year they expected to see me). The first trimester's not conducive to convivial affairs, much less dinners with my parents (which left me nauseous and nasty at the best of times). I was managing it well though, not in danger of announcing my hatchling, that is, until my mother declared, "Birdie, you're looking so fat!" My outrage at such an insult prompting my slip of the tongue reply.

"I'm pregnant."

My mother was dishing out wax worms at the time, trying to push them on me, just as she'd done as a child. Higher in protein. And in salad, it was so Atkins. That's why she was having them. I didn't dare tell her, the byproduct of my primal condition left me craving them again. On principle, I rejected them.

She ceased dishing, glared at me, and said, "Jay's been trying to conceive for months now."

Jay wasn't there. The lucky bastard was in BC, skiing the holiday away on a private slope owned by a fellow bioscientist. Jay could fly up the mountain without the use of a ski lift!

"Isn't that right?" my mother added, turning her gaze to my father. "Strange, considering you engineered him to be the more fertile one." There was a pause then, she must've sensed she'd said something she shouldn't. "I mean—well, he had the genes your father wanted to pass on. You were more the prototype." Again, silence. "He didn't sterilize you or anything, Birdie."

Oh, the things you should never hear from anyone, particularly your own mother. Honey, your Daddy sterilized you. I focused my attention on my father, balling my napkin up in my fists. My mother went back to enjoying her insect salad and my father just sat there, looking right through me, his attention obviously fixed on whatever was going on between his ears. I could see it, the calculations and computations in his eyes, going over equations in his mental notebook. "Need a pen?" I challenged.

He barely looked at me and my mother tapped me on the forearm. "If you're with child, you need your protein. Eat some of this salad." Again she thrust the bowl at me.

This was exactly why I never visited. Things like this. For what they'd

done to me. The weird girl who lived on bugs. Yeah, a diet of greens and grubs were healthy, but I was eating them long before baked worms became the fashion, what with the cattle shortages, and the cost of beef spiking. Bugs packed a caloric punch, requiring very little means to produce. But no, Mommy dearest started me on it when I was still in a high chair, holding grubs out like lollipops. *You know you want it, Birdie-dear. Now suck back the little slug like a good baby.* And I did, because they were delicious—plate fright of no issue to me. But I'd been mocked for it readily. No one had transitioned yet so you can imagine the controversy it caused. And when my teacher later leaked it to the media (post revolt), the tabloids jumped on it. Another fact that garnered me the label of freak. Little could they imagine everyone and their mother would soon be toting bagfuls of bugs in their biodegradable (cradle-to-cradle made) lunch boxes.

"I'm not eating them," I sneered, gritting my teeth.

It took fifteen minutes of rejecting the salad before my mother finally conceded. And an additional thirty minutes, plus dessert, for my father to speak again. It was then he confessed, "Birdie, I have a renewed interest in you." Yes, science geek that he was possessed only plain-speak. Always had. No masking his intentions, which made his conduct all the more deplorable. He didn't waste his time congratulating me on being a mother-to-be. Nor did he make any mention of his promotion to grandparent. No, he simply started to research, ascertaining the likelihood this one too would have wings. And then, with a quick call to a colleague at the lab, figuring out what could still be done, with some cell manipulation, to ensure my offspring was even stronger.

It was then that I blurted out, "It was a sperm donor!" Hoping such an admission—clearly a lie, Lencho was sitting next to me—might distract them long enough to take the talk of experimenting on my egg off the table. They took the bait, if only momentarily.

My mother was aghast. "You couldn't just get a man?"

My father narrowed his eyes, no doubt further calculating the odds I'd mated with someone who'd also been genetically tampered with (by other transhumanist pioneers). Perhaps even a man with a superior IQ (a match for the bird brain that I was). How excessively dominant were the genes? Would my recessive genes stand a chance? Which would win the DNA race? I could see it in his furrowed brow and shifting eyes: So much possibility.

Lencho wouldn't stand for such talk. "I'm the father," he cried then.

And my mother threw me a condescending look (one she was quite famous for) while my father frowned. "Did you at least gender sort?" he

asked.

Lencho looked at me with some confusion, and I shook my head. “No,” I grumbled. “Sex, the old fashioned way.” I knew he especially could never have understood the appeal. Even his grandparents had been advocates of the Shettles method, after all. Shallow penetration and makeshift latex beakers filled with lemon juice and semen for insertion.

“Our first grandchild,” my mother squealed delightedly.

“... Might as well be a bastard,” my father grimaced. “Imagine the page they’ll pen for us now. Darwin would be so disappointed.”

“Darwin?” I demanded. “Really, Dad?”

“Natural selection at its best.”

I balked, “More like making natural selection unnatural since 2014!” He rolled his eyes and I added, “There’s nothing natural about me, Dad! I shouldn’t have wings!” It was lies, it had always been lies. Leave the nest. I won’t push you, he’d promised. But I had been. Not wanting to disappoint them, full with fear, I’d been flung! And they owed me an apology, him especially. For stealing away my miracle, depriving me of a life unfettered.

* * *

I left my father’s house in tears, contemplating doing something rash. Not abortion, no. Just fleeing the country. To Africa or something. I wept the whole way home as Lencho drove, trying to convey through my sobs, how wrong it all was, while trying to simultaneously stave off the nausea. I wanted crackers, but that only made me feel more like foul than ever. “I’m not a fucking parrot,” I swore at myself.

“This is our child,” Lencho said, squeezing my hand.

But it didn’t feel like that. It didn’t even feel like ours at the ultrasound.

The more time wore on, the chancier it got to go without medical intervention. Midwives were hard to come by, for the general public even (Women electing to die in childbirth, regardless of potential complications, was part of the whole stupidity movement). My parents pushed that I needed to be watched (another way they tried to control the outcome of my pregnancy), and it was true, I suppose. I certainly couldn’t chance a stranger in the field, questioning an unusual feature or measurement on the fetus. Which was how I ended up consenting to meeting with Teona, a clinician from their lab. I’d agreed only because she’d been like an aunt to me, in childhood, and had too since objected to the practice of engineering life. In fact, she and my father had had quite the falling out, as she confessed to me at our first appointment. She might’ve still loitered about the lab part time,

but his ethics she questioned. Lencho bought it, but I remained sceptical. Yes, her private clinic might've suggested a different perspective—located outdoors, with nothing more than a glass roof overhang, trees and wildflowers growing up through the floor—but no matter how much I wanted to trust her, she was still a friend to the enemy.

Teona performed the ultrasound. Our little bird on the screen was perfect, all its fingers, all its toes accounted for (Oh, how Lencho had beamed!) And, she told us, it was a girl. I felt a tenderness then, but it was a fugacious thought, gone as soon as Teona had shut off the monitor. A girl. Like me. Yes, that only made it so much worse. Lencho and I were given a picture, and I studied it the whole time we waited for the results of the blood work.

Under a canopy of willows, I examined each gray and whitish line and curve. She has a sharp nose, I remember thinking, before requesting Lencho turn his head so I could examine his profile. Yes, he had a smooth, rounded button of a nose—the perfect kind, the kind our little duckling seemingly hadn't inherited. I felt only further estranged from it. Like it were a reincarnation of Jay even, one my parents might even love all the more. It ate at me.

“That looks more like a thumb,” Lencho contradicted, when he caught onto my thought process.

I scowled, as he pointed out each of the four fingers, curled into a fist. The fist up against her tiny face. I knew damn well that was a hand, but that line, that sharp jutting point could be anything. Sure, it might be just the thumb. But it could be a beak too.

“It's not a beak!” Lencho insisted, as Teona returned with the verdict. My iron levels were good, no STD's, and I'd require a Rhogam shot at 29 weeks. My father had ensured I'd fly, but never thought about giving me a better blood type for childbirth. Fascinating!

“She won't have a beak,” Teona said then, obviously having overheard our conversation. She bent down, kneeling on the soil before us. “I know,” she smiled. “It wasn't in your code so it couldn't be in hers.” I didn't feel reassured any. “And there are things we can do, Birdie. If...” Then she gave a look toward Lencho. “... If you're concerned about the other things.”

* * *

Things? I hadn't know what she meant, of course. At least not the specifics. I presumed she meant her wings. But I didn't know whether she were even equipped to perform such a procedure, especially on a newborn. She'd elaborated the following visit. She had meant that. But I still ob-

sessed over it. That is, the prospect of my tiny daughter being born just like me. Part human, part bird.

Such a fate seemed to be made all the worse by my parents' continual attempts to intervene in my pregnancy too. By February, they were naming our babe. Tara, Dad thought her name should be, short for Tarydakdyl. "It's feminine, and the press will love it."

And Mom? She was set on decorating the nursery. "Any crib you want, Birdie," my mother promised. "And any bedding too." But it was a lie, like all the others. Because as soon as we came upon the bedding with little chickadees and nests on it, she was quick to snap it up, immune to my protests that I didn't want anything bird related. So much for getting anything I wanted. Perhaps it was the same logic they employed when I was a child. *Anything you want, baby, after we toss you from this cliff. Land safely, and we'll go straight to ToysRus for a treat!* Something perhaps resembling skydiving Barbie or paragliding Ken. My father would have gotten me a biologically-engineered winged Barbie, but Mattel rejected his attempt to market it.

"Are you nesting?" my mother had asked, as we approached the cash register. Oh the literal meaning of that too.

"I'm not nesting," I growled. Nesting's a sign of impending labour, or love for a child, and I wasn't feeling either. I was too lost in my resentment. The feathers growing in over my linea nigra. The baby growing her own, or at least her DNA being infused with the code for it.

"Born bald, with gooseflesh, just like you," I could imagine my mother cooing over a bassinet placed dangerously close to the window. Three floors up. Just as I'd been. And me? Unable to leave my infant's side, in case they decide to toss her similarly. It was a nightmare of a whole new kind.

"There's no way I'm letting them baby-sit," I insisted to Lencho, as he lay next to me in bed, the lights long off but my eyes unwilling to rest.

"Agreed," he muttered, sleepily.

"No beak. And no midnight practice base jumps from dad's lab window."

"This is our child," he repeated, pulling me close to him and spooning with me. "Not theirs, Birdie. Ours. And it's our right to do whatever we want."

De-wing our beloved baby? Did he mean that? I'd begun to hope he did. Though I didn't dare say it. Clipped wings certainly was the antithesis of what you were supposed to do as a parent. That's why they coined that bugger phrase: *Give your child wings to fly*. My father took the literal meaning of such a phrase too far. And here I was, wishing to pluck each feather out

individually. I am the worst mother ever, I thought, falling asleep.

* * *

Lencho only repeated the sentiments over the course of the next four months. Yes, he loved my wings, he said. Whether I ever “flaunted them or not,” it was, after all, what made me special. But his words only made me weep more. I felt hideous, I always had. Didn’t he understand? He held me tight, always assuring me. It was my baby, much as it was his, and he vowed whatever I decided, we’d do. This should have placated me, but it didn’t.

Labor pain, I never feared. Not one to digest grain, I had my share of abdominal pain! No, I feared the moment I set eyes on her, this being. Would I even be able to love her? I had to get over this, I knew. But how? If I’d been normal, if I’d been conceived the old-fashioned way, then I wouldn’t be so torn, I was sure of that. If I didn’t wake every morning, angry at how my bath towel caught on my wings like a coat hanger. Or having to don my ugly wardrobe of starched vests, designed to keep my wings from jutting out, particularly when I got excited or at higher altitudes (elevators, balconies, or the top floor of the local mall). Bird calls. Crackers. They all mocked me, mocked me for what I wasn’t: normal. I loathed it.

“This baby, you know, it’s not theirs. It’s yours,” Teona told me, as if to reassure me, on the first of what would be our weekly appointments. Labour was impending now. I was nearly full term. “You’ll be able to protect your child. It’s your right. Just as it’s your choice of what you name her.”

I wiped the tears from my eyes and said how Lencho had said the same thing. Lencho had stayed home that day, because I required a cervical check, and he had a weak stomach. “I just don’t believe it,” I wept. “Because... because it’ll look like theirs. What they created.”

“It’ll look like you, kiddo. And him. And if it has traces of what your parents did. Well, I’ve told you, there are ways to hide those things, if you so choose.”

It was deeper than the physical blemishes upon my body, more than my wings, my feathering, my features. It was what it had all represented. An attempt to make me someone I wasn’t, someone I’d never been allowed to be. She had me lie back, the fetal monitor grazing my belly, hearing the th-arump, th-arump of my hatchling’s heartbeat.

Teona pointed then, up at the sky, the thick white clouds just beyond the glass. “What do you see, Birdie?”

I was quiet for a few minutes, studying the shapes. “A roman warhorse

with a plume. Just the head though.”

Teona smiled, shaking her head gently. “No. Life. Beyond our control. One of the most beautiful things is the sky, because it can’t be controlled. Beautiful in its imperfections. Why man thought they could tamper with the rest of life, I’ll never know.”

I didn’t understand, not really. Had she meant my father? “He shouldn’t have done it,” I concurred. “He tried to control it all. Everything, down to the color of my feathering.” White, with a touch of seagull grey.

Teona patted my hand, smiling tenderly. “Oh, Birdie.”

I went home pondering the conversation, wondering later if she’d been speaking about the rest of humanity and not about my father’s act at all. The imperfect, beautiful portion of humanity that I’d never gotten to be a part of. Superior too. I resented it, even more than I resented my own state of mind. “I meant, sometimes it’s not about choosing anything, controlling anything,” Teona clarified, at our next appointment. “But letting go.”

I lay upon the table. A fingertip dilated, nearly fully effaced. That much closer to delivery with every passing day. “My father should have been told this,” was all I could say, still frowning, still unconvinced.

She studied me again, silence settling around us before she confessed, “I never told you, Birdie. But you’re the reason why I left the lab. Abandoned my research. I saw the emotional repercussions of our decisions in you. And I couldn’t do that to another being. It was never our right to decide what became of you.” I dropped my gaze, tears hot at my eyeballs. “I’ll do whatever I can for you and your little one,” Teona repeated, “if you wish it. I promise.”

* * *

The gosling arrived on a stormy night in July, the rain pouring down, in an earthworm’s paradise. Contractions came on hard, and we rushed to the clinic, meeting Teona there under the glass ceiling, my makeshift delivery room. I laboured through the night and into the morning.

When it was time to push, I felt her tiny body, slick with vernix, slide from me. Teona placed her upon my stomach as Lencho cut the cord, tears in his eyes. I felt her tiny uncoordinated fingers, outstretched, scraping at my cheek, her breaths wet and rattling in her chest. The sun was breaking through the clouds over our heads, as I clutched her, tears of another kind finally streaming down my cheeks.

She was beautiful beyond words; all those tired clichés which no longer seemed cliché at all. Her bald little head and lips the shape of a heart. I

barely thought to check her back for the bumps, not even as Teona stitched me up. I could only clutch her tightly, as she chirped against my breast. Robin, my little Robin; my child, mine. Was this love, I wondered.

When it was Lencho's turn to hold her, I let my head fall, heavy from fatigue. My head resting on the pillow, I lifted my eyes to the sky above. It was dry now. Cotton ball clouds dotting the blue firmament.

Life. Life with flaws. Perfect life. Studying them, I understood. Or at least, I thought I did. I hadn't any control all along. It's how it should have been. For me. And for her too. Yes, it wasn't about undoing what had been done. But about choice. Her choice, as it should have been mine...

I glanced to Lencho perched at my side, Robin's little fist gripping his index finger mightily. "They can do the procedure now," he said tentatively, holding her up. I could see them then, at last. The smallest of buds, dotting her purple skin, just beneath her chicken wings. They looked just like mine... "Birdie?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No," I replied softly. "No."