InterText

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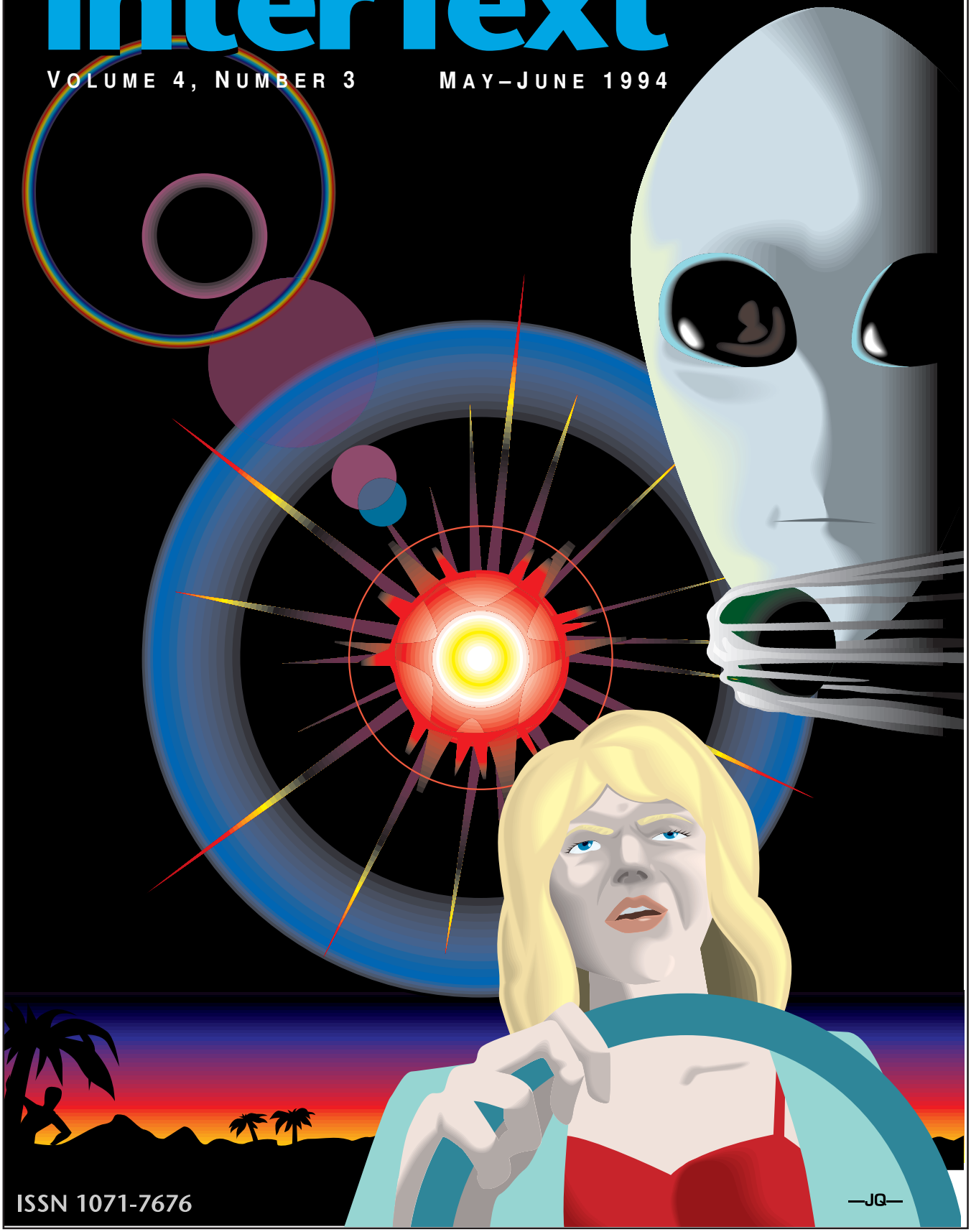

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THE WATCHER

JASON SNELL

THE WATCHER HAD JUST PASSED MIDDLE AGE WHEN IT felt it for the first time, a little breath of cold as it passed by just out of reach. It was the first cold the watcher had felt in the millions of years since its coalescence.

Time moved along, balls of mud and gas spinning in their orbits, the cold touch a long-forgotten memory. The small life-things still clung to one of the balls of mud, taking hesitant steps toward their brothers. The watcher continued its silent vigil.

Then, again, the cold breath blew into its heart. Stronger this time, and the watcher could feel its claws as it passed. A black icy bird, with a sharp beak and razor-sharp talons. Moving through the darkness like quicksilver.

The watcher could only sit, as it had for eons. And that was when it knew the cold would spell the end. It saw everything—how far the tiny life-things could go. How slowly they moved. They could never escape the watcher's eye, and that would be their doom.

The black bird-thing came more often, then, each blast of cold air dampening the watcher's own brightness. And one day, it did not turn away as it flew by. It dove into the heart of the watcher.

A screech of… thankfulness?

The cold claws, scratching through the watcher's body. A pain in the watcher's heart.

The fire is dying…

The little life-things, moving quickly now. Do they see the black thing? Do they know the watcher's end is near?

An icy claw reaches the heart. The claw tears it out and feeds it to the beak.

Inconceivable pain. The watcher makes one final effort, surging toward the black thing in its heart.

Light flares. The small life-things move faster, but there is nothing they can do.

In an instant, there are no more balls of mud and gas, and no more life-things to cling to them. There is no more black bird-thing.

There is only the watcher, everywhere screaming in pain.

And then, after a time, there is only silence—and the echo of the watcher's death throes, spreading outward, to its brothers.

Distant star's radiation bursts puzzle scientists

JANUARY 22, 1992: A group of scientists reported that for the last several months, a star about 815 light years away in the constellation Auriga has begun emitting unusual bursts of electromagnetic radiation. The star, Yale #2143, is barely visible to the naked eye or binoculars in the southern sky near Capella, one of the brightest points in our night sky.

Yale 2143 contains about twice the mass of our solar system and astronomers have speculated in the past that it may be a variable star or a member of a binary system. "Otherwise, not much is known about it," said Robert Hartman of the Kitt Peak National Observatory in a telephone interview. "But this isn't normal behavior for a star at its point in its life-cycle so we're very interested in it."

Normally, a star like Yale 2143 burns white-hot at a temperature from 7,000 to 10,000 Kelvin and has a life-cycle of several billion years. "It's larger and hotter than our sun, but otherwise it's really not that exceptional as stars go," said Hartman.

So why all the excitement in the astrophysics community about this nearly invisible and apparently nondescript member of the heavens?

"Because, quite simply, nothing we've seen has done this before." The star suddenly began emitting strong irregular bursts of invisible radio and microwave radiation a few months ago that are unusually focused around a small number of wavelengths. Scientists first noticed the bursts when they interfered with data collection from quasars and other deep-sky objects. "At first we didn't know where it was coming from, and then we weren't sure if it was coming from this particular star or another phenomenon behind it," said Mailika Gibbons, the graduate assistant credited with first observing the bursts. "But it quickly became clear that this was a local event, happening right in our stellar backyard."

Scientists are still collecting data and analyzing the phenomenon. When asked to speculate about its cause, Dr. Hartman declined, but emphasized that this event might lead to significant revision of our understanding of a star's life-cycle. "The main sequence of a star is presently understood to be a rather uneventful period. This could reveal it to be a time when dynamic changes occur."

NOVALIGHT

GREG KNAUSS

May 1992

AS SOON AS THE EQUIPMENT WAS TURNED ON, IT started to record the message. Originating at a charted but uninteresting star near the constellation Auriga was a steady, constant stream of information across a wide swath of the electromagnetic spectrum—rapidly alternating, millisecond-long blasts. When the speakers were on, you could hear the rhythm.

The group was quickly and quietly assembled, culled from universities and government installations. There was a period of secrecy; there were many variables, many scenarios to consider. Nothing was released until it became clear there was some sort of intelligence behind it.

Then the story raced through the scientific community like wildfire. Something was out there. Somebody was out there.

There was a palpable euphoria within the group. This was the thing that every one of them had been waiting for all their lives but had been too realistic to expect, to even hope for. Aliens—intelligent aliens—were making contact with our species.

Humanity was being greeted.

June 1992

THE MESSAGE WAS DIVIDED INTO THREE SECTIONS, EACH separated by a brief silence. After a gap double that length, the entire cycle would begin again. There were only three amplitudes used in the entire message, and the group took to calling them on, off, and none.

The group was much larger now, researchers pulled from projects around the world. The linguists and anthropologists were prepared to spend a lot of time arguing about how universal the concept of binary was, but the debates became academic when the computers produced results within weeks.

The message was actually a series of pictures, four-bit-deep animation they rendered in gray, each part a different movie. Image-recognition software turned the one-dimensional stream of bits into two-dimensional pictures by running through all the possibilities of width and height until something sensible appeared.

The public was fascinated. They released all three animations as soon as they were decoded, before they had even attempted to analyze them. Soon they were distributed via videotape, computer networks, books, and even on postcards. The aliens' message entered mass consciousness. Conspiracy theories abounded; the Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked to assess the military threat; UFO "experts" wrote books on the alien's society and connected them with Stonehenge and the pyramids at Giza; televangelists called the whole thing a hoax.

The first series showed machines in orbit around a star, and thin, spindly spikes of solar plasma rising toward them. The scene faded to complex pictograms and cutaway views that the physicists scrambled to decipher.

The second was stranger. While it shared some pictograms with the first, the concepts being displayed were harder to grasp. There was no animated prelude and, at over a million frames, it ran almost twice as long as the first.

The third was pictures of the aliens themselves. Sleek and gray, with wide, black eyes, a small group performed some ritual the meaning of which no one in the group would even speculate upon. Their movements were fluid and exaggerated and almost indescribably eerie. Occasionally static would leap across a frame as the computer displayed a damaged portion of the message. After enough repetitions were collected, a composite was assembled that removed all the static, but the sense of dislocation remained.

The anthropologists claimed anthropomorphization, but the aliens looked distressed somehow.

They looked ashamed.

September 1993

THE FIRST PART OF THE MESSAGE TOOK OVER A YEAR TO fully decipher. Though understanding it required intuition and massive amounts of additional research, the message led the physicists almost inexorably to what they called solar mining. The pictograms described what the initial animation played out—a technique for retrieving fusing material from the core of a star. The conclusion was wildly hypothetical, resting on unproven and perhaps untestable theory. But there seemed to be no mistaking the message.

Unlimited, inexhaustible energy. The first part of the message was the key to unlimited, inexhaustible energy. The United Nations and government panels began to research and assess the possibility of a small mining operation, but even the most optimistic warned that benefits were still decades, if not centuries, off. Despite this, research continued. Limitless energy would be an incredible boon to mankind. A solution to innumerable problems.

The message was a gift. Not just a greeting, but a tremendous gift.

LITTLE SUN

PATRICK HURH

JANUARY 1, 1994 01:31:56
Catherine,

This New Year's eve was, except for the locale, rather uneventful. I heard fireworks or gunfire in the distance, muffled and faint, drifting from down river. I naively assumed the noise to be from Leticia or Iquitos although both those villages are over two hundred miles from here. I looked from my small porch, but could see nothing. I thought about climbing to the roof, but the canopy of trees was too thick to see through, even this close to the river. It was most likely gunfire and probably from Bolognesi just upstream. I thought about trying to walk up to Bolognesi then to see if any celebrations were underway, but I couldn't muster the courage needed to make that trip in the dark. Of course I am sure that the FUNAI house was probably just as dark and empty as it has been for the past five days. Except for sleeping loggers and druggers, Bolognesi is lifeless after the sun goes down.

I sat out on the porch most of the remaining evening sipping from a small bottle of whiskey I negotiated from one of the river port hands in Leticia. I'll have to remember to try and haggle a larger bottle next time I'm in Leticia, although that could be awhile; that twenty-eight hours of bug-slapping, sweat-reeking, and idle staring into swirling brown water was more than I could take—at least more than I can take just for a bottle of whiskey. Still, this bottle has almost run dry. Perhaps without the booze I wouldn't become so melancholy (and then angry) when I think of you… or perhaps I wouldn't even think of you so much in the first place. No matter, tonight, with the cheap whiskey trailing hot into my chest, I was caught in the endless circle, thinking of you.

Partly because of this night's drunken reveries, and partly because I need to make writing this journal feel not so conspicuously like talking to myself, I have decided to address this journal in your name. At first I wasn't sure if this was a good idea; I saw myself, months from now, stifling an emotional hiccup every time I wrote in this book. But now, looking back at the other sparse journal entries, I realize that this is what I need to do to keep writing and documenting my thoughts while here in the Amazon. No one has yet been assigned to replace you or the other researchers called back to work on the SETI project. Although I write and take notes everyday on my experiences here on Rio Javari and, hopefully in the future, with the neighboring Mayoruna villagers, I think this private journal will be crucial to my understanding of those experiences. This will be my scratch pad for my thoughts onto until they take on enough shape to formalize and send upline to UIC. I want to do more than be a glorified caretaker of the equipment left here. Since the research station has been entrusted to me for the time being, I want to ensure my time here is put to some useful purpose.

So, without knowing how I really feel about you anymore… or without even just being able to know you … I start this new year by writing your name.

JANUARY 13 1993 20:21:11
Catherine,

The first two weeks of the year have been extremely busy. My delayed luggage containing several pieces of needed equipment, including the radio antennae, arrived yesterday. I spent that day assembling the equipment and trying to raise the FUNAI contact in Leticia but didn't have any luck. I took a quick walk over to Bolognesi, but the FUNAI house is still empty. At least the doors are locked and the place hasn't been ransacked. It would be encouraging, though, to use their radio to contact Leticia and help troubleshoot my own. Ah well, I missed the packet transmission last week so I guess if I miss tomorrow's it won't matter too much. Still, I had such an experience this morning that I feel I should immediately communicate it to my peers (if only the damned radio would work!).

I made contact with a Mayoruna Indian today! He was walking through the main dirt road in Bolognesi as I was standing by the lumber dock. I was waiting for a good opportunity to talk to the loggers loading the boat and ask to borrow their radio for a moment. I admit I was nervous, my Portuguese is not as good as yours, you know, and I was put off by the loggers' brutal handling of the ripe-smelling wood. I turned, giving up, when I saw a bouncing head covered with straight shiny black hair disappear behind a stack of the huge tires used by the logging trucks. Instantly realizing that this could be exactly what you and the research station were here to study, I ran around the stack of tires and almost tripped over the young, naked man.

"You speak English?" I exclaimed, not being able to think of anything else. "Where…" I pointed at him. "Where did you learn English?"

He was crouched, with knees splayed wide, over a piece of a truck's transmission. His dark elbows rested on the inside flesh of his thighs while his hands forcefully fiddled with grease-covered gears. As I began to fall over him, he sprang up and turned to face me solemnly. He was

not afraid… and I, within the relatively familiar context of the lumber dock, showed no fear either. Thinking back, I probably expressed extreme pleasure and curiosity on the paleness of my face, much like the naïve white scientists we have both seen on late night television as they approached some alien race.

The Indian immediately strode by me, bouncing slightly as I had witnessed before and, if I hadn't stopped him, would probably have strode out of the town of shacks without a pause. I'm not sure what I said; it might have been "Hey!" or "You!" or more likely some grunt that in any language said, "Hold on there!" But I must have said something, since he stopped and turned toward me slowly on the balls of his feet. His face presented a slight scowl and, when he spoke, his head moved sharply forward like a dog's head barking.

"What!" he coughed, pronouncing it as 'wat.' His held his hands out to the sides of his body. His fingers were poised stiffly like the whisker-spikes that bobbed from the small bulbs of his nostrils. "Wat you want?"

I couldn't believe it. Did this Mayoruna actually speak English? "You speak English?" I exclaimed, not being able to think of anything else. "Where…" I pointed at him. "Where did you learn English?"

He seemed to smile at that and said something to the effect of "I learn English at the fork of Javari." Besides the characteristic needles jutting from his nostrils, his face also wore the dark blue tattooed line that united his ears in a toothy grin.

"At Leticia? The town there?"

"Yes, Letisha… I learn at that place and make much money." His English was broken and heavily accented but wasn't too bad. "Now, I go… this boat has no parts." He started to turn, again quite slowly as if waiting for me to stop him.

"What do you mean, 'no parts'? What parts are you looking for? I have some parts you might want." I spoke the last sentence quickly, not knowing if I really wanted him to understand.

He looked back at me and smiled widely this time. The blue stain surrounding his lips accentuated the lines of his stained teeth. "I find parts for our gun." He took a step toward me. "You have gun parts?"

I hesitated. I had a small pistol hidden under my hammock cushion, but I knew I could not admit that.

"No," I stuttered, hoping that this wouldn't be the end of the conversation. "But I would like to talk with you anyway." My hand, half folded, unconsciously slapped my chest as I referred to myself, just as I'd seen him do earlier.

"Now, I go," he repeated as he walked away with his bouncing gait. "But I think you very smart," he called over his shoulder. "I think you very holy man. I maybe see you on a new sun." He broke into a quick trot and darted into the thick undergrowth of the forest.

I followed him to his point of departure from the road. I was amazed that he was able to run so quickly and without fear among the poison brush and dangerous wildlife that surrounded us. But when I inspected more closely I realized that where he stepped off the road was a path of trampled spine grass—prickly, but tolerable with callused feet. I wanted to follow but where would that have got me? Most likely, lost.

I realize now, in talking to you as a person, Catherine, that I have described this event much more vividly than my record in the official log. I will have to go back and cut and paste this more descriptive perspective into the log; this event deserves no less. This is exactly what motivated you/us in the first place. The nomadic Mayoruna tribe settling into a camp near a logging port and interacting with the relatively technologically advanced and "more civilized" community of industrialized loggers. It is unheard of! As I watched that small brown man, clothed only in a fibrous cloth wound about his waist, strings dangling to his crotch in a mess of ritual knots about the foreskin, nostril spikes shaking as he spoke in English—English for God's sake!— about 'gun parts' and 'much money,' I felt so much like an outsider, a foreigner bearing the guilt of corrupting his pure soul. Why has his tribe come to this small spot of western industry to make their camp? Am I witnessing the effects of civilization on his culture? Or am I, just by being here and observing, really just studying my own effect on his life?

I now wish I hadn't drank the last of that whiskey three nights ago.

JANUARY 24, 1994 22:39:26

Catherine,

I reached Leticia today via my radio. The S/N was not too bad and I talked to a fellow at the FUNAI house there. He said he was sorry that the house at Bolognesi was shut and boarded, but with the lack of money this year to fund what is now considered highbrow cultural research, FUNAI and the surrounding countries in general are having to scale back their support operations. I protested this 'scaling back' and wondered aloud how the preservation of the indigenous cultures of the Basin could be considered "highbrow." The speaker on the other end did not offer much in reply, but only agreed with me and said something to the effect of "But what are you gonna do?" Good question.

The radio contact's name is Mohammed. Funny name for a FUNAI worker in the middle of the Amazon. A convert? I wonder. It seems strange that a native of this land so rich in tradition and mystique would embrace another land's religion as his own. Perhaps not—after all,

I was brought up in the Midwest of America and still, to this day, am heavily influenced by the doctrine and catechism of the Roman Catholic church, whether I want to be or not.

Mohammed told me that he would arrange for a radio packet transmission in a week. I will transmit the data I have so far plus some e-mail messages that should be able to reach you at the SETI Institute via the Internet in a few days. He will also relay a digital packet to my workstation consisting of any e-mail messages I might have received in the past three weeks plus a download of the Usenet newsgroups I asked for. I'm not sure if the UIC news-server has set up the *sci.seti.anthro* newsgroup yet, but I requested it anyway. Mohammed seems to be a nice guy. I hope he is reliable also.

Not much news on the Indian front, I'm afraid. I waited daily by the docks, expecting to meet Tantu there. I know his name is Tantu because I finally was able to get the attention of the dock loggers and I asked them about the strange Indian I had met. They laughed and told me about Tantu. Apparently he lived in Leticia for some time and had just recently returned to the tribe's village. When I asked about the village, the loggers just shrugged their shoulders and pointed to the east. They said it had been there for almost two years. One small gnarled man burst out laughing and whispered something in Portuguese to another that I couldn't catch. When I asked the foreman what was so funny, he replied that a lot of the men didn't mind having the village so close and he turned back to smile at the small laughing man. I pressed him for an explanation and he simply said, "The women wear little clothes—the old ones are not so good, but the young ones…" His face smiled with clenched teeth and he snorted inwards through his thick, flat nose. The other loggers began to chuckle and I turned away, trying to smile and make light of the lewd noises I heard erupt behind me.

I understand your motives: why wouldn't you choose to leave this "mop-up" research study for the grand adventure that the nova transmissions have to offer?

Tantu, obviously, never showed up—at least not during the daylight hours. I amused myself by throwing rocks at the shut FUNAI house. Somehow the activity seemed to cool me off from the hot midday temperature. Eventually I came back to the cabin and sat in the shade of its thick mosquito netting. I wondered about Tantu and what he meant by "I maybe see you on a new sun." To me that meant 'tomorrow' or 'in the morning,' but it obviously must mean something else to him. Or perhaps his perception of time and a day's passing is different than mine. I remember you telling me that the Mayoruna tribe often defined the passage of time by the coming and going of the days and nights, but also that they seemed not to place these passings within the contexts of a larger season or calendar… but I can't remember what else you had said on the matter.

I wish you were here now, not just because of what you meant to me in a romantic sense, but also because of what you could tell me about these people and how I should approach them. I still don't understand the purpose of sending me here alone, even for just an interim period. The entire research proposal hinged upon the team of us—anthropologists, sociologists and research staff—studying the changing relationships of this taciturn and nomadic tribe of Indians with encroaching pockets of industrialization. I was prepared to help project the fundamentals of societal theory upon this interaction of Indian village and logger town, the depth of the moral contract, the absorption and adaptation of the indigenous culture. The culture that your group were supposed to help make clear to me!

I guess I am bitter about the choices you had to make. I understand your motives: why wouldn't you choose to this "mop-up" research study for the grand adventure of discovery that the nova transmissions have to offer? I, too, felt pride when I learned you had been chosen to help decipher the culture of an alien race from the signals that spiked through the EM universe, as reality for that distant intelligent species…. But when I realized that it would mean not the end of our Mayoruna project but the mutation of it into a one-eyed, blunted stab into a deep and rich culture, I wilted. I think you sensed that weakness in me. It drove you further from me. Even before you had to leave for Colorado, I felt like slinking away from your shining example. I did slink away… I holed myself with self-pity and hid myself with anger.

I didn't think the Foundation would fund the Amazon expedition without you or the others, but still I asked. When my workstation arrived at my office two weeks later, I still couldn't believe they were so stupid as to let a Chicago-bred sociology research assistant continue with this crippled agenda. Don't get me wrong: I really think you're an asset to the team studying the nova transmissions, but I find it odd that you would embark on a mission to study such a distant society when on this planet, less than a half-mile from where I lay my head at night, lives and breathes a culture that we understand less than we comprehend our own: one whose comparison to our own "modern" society will yield more fruit than the fanciful conjectures of how an alien race might have lived eight hundred years earlier.

I know this is a harsh accusation, and that is why I will make no mention of it when I write to you via e-mail next week. Yet, I realize when I go back and reread this entry I am no longer filled with self-pity and the longing to be with you. I believe I have inspired myself (how's that for a recovered ego?). While you decipher the secrets of an alien race I will be here attempting to understand a living, mysterious society and its role in teaching the rest of us why we are here.

FEBRUARY 19, 1994 08:14:48
Catherine,

Finally, after the boredom of the past weeks, Tantu visited again. I was almost ready to have the loggers show me the way to the Mayoruna village to seek him out, when he sauntered into town again yesterday afternoon. After a brief talk near the docks, I convinced him to follow me to the cabin where I could show him some of the gifts that I had brought to ease my acceptance into the hidden tribe. Tantu followed, again without fear. I think his times in Leticia must have put him relatively at ease with Western strangeness.

I stepped on my small porch and was surprised not to hear his hollow footstep directly behind me. I turned to find that he was waiting below in front of the first step. I opened my arms in acceptance and tried to urge him in. He balked and shook his head slightly. "I have no gifts for you," he called out.

I replied, "Yes, you do, Tantu. Just your presence here is a gift to me."

He looked at me perplexed and I spoke again, more slowly. "Tantu, you can wait here and I will bring out my gifts—my parts—for you to see."

His face smiled and he replied in true Western fashion. "Okay."

I ran inside and grabbed a few of the items I had set out earlier in anticipation of just this circumstance. I picked up a mirror, a small pen light and a sheathed machete, then returned outside.

Without stepping off the porch, I handed the items to Tantu. He placed them on the ground at his feet and squatted to inspect them one by one. He looked very much like he did when I almost tripped over him a few weeks ago.

I sat on a nylon chair at one end of the porch and watched him. I occasionally offered advice to him, naïvely forgetting that he had probably seen most of these items during his time in Leticia and his exposure to the logging communities. His face was expressionless, yet I felt as if he were seriously considering his next words to me rather than investigating my bribes.

After a few minutes, Tantu looked up at me and said, "Thank you."

"I think these gifts may be very useful to you in your village," I said.

He shook his head once, sharply. "I know these things. These things are… nice." His eyes never left mine as he raised his arm to point with all of his fingers at the small radio tower at the side of my cabin. "That is… more nice."

"Do you know what that is?" I asked glancing at the antennae.

"Yes. That is radio tongue. You talk to many others with it." He lowered his eyes to the items between his feet and then stood upright.

"Tantu," I said, "would you like to come inside and see the radio?"

Without a vocalized sound, Tantu nodded and stepped on the porch. I stood and guided him into the small one room cabin.

What followed inside is both logical and fantastic to me now. I showed Tantu the radio transmitter equipment and demonstrated its use, trying to raise Mohammed in Leticia. Mohammed didn't answer, but another strange voice did. After a few moments of trying to explain to the person on the other end of the radio waves that he was talking to a genuine Mayoruna Indian, the FUNAI operator asked us to change frequencies because we were broadcasting on a reserved band for FUNAI official communication. I was a bit irritated, but Tantu did not seem disturbed. In fact he was more interested in the computer equipment and jumble of cables that littered my work area. He went to the table and began to finger some of the components carefully. After a few moments he looked at me inquisitively, I switched off the radio and proceeded to show my workstation to the Indian with the flair of a magician.

Tantu remained mesmerized by the computer's display and the whirring, clicking hard drive for over an hour. I eventually had to shut it down because the bank of batteries was almost depleted. Tantu then stayed at the cabin for another hour, following me as I went outside to start the generator up and back inside as I checked on the charging batteries. The entire time he asked strange questions about the computers and the display—he even pointed to the cables that connected the computer to the radio and questioned me about that. Most of his questions were simple: What did I use the equipment for? What did the clicking sounds mean? What language did the computer speak? But after I gave him very rudimentary lectures on the benefits of computers and how I used them to communicate and record information, he also asked questions of a spiritual and supernatural nature: What did I feed the computer? Which spirits did I talk to? What tribe was I a shaman for? And others, which confused me almost as much as my answers seemed to confuse him. I tried to explain to him again the basic concepts of a

computer as a tool and stressed that humans had built—*invented*—this machine.

Tantu truly seemed to grasp the basic functions of some of the components (keyboard, monitor, etc.), but he did so by personifying them. For instance, at one point I let him press some keys on the keyboard and watch the corresponding letters appear on the screen. He was able to understand the cause and effect relationship and even recognized that the picture of the letter on a pressed key matched that which was displayed on the monitor. However, when I unplugged the keyboard to demonstrate the flow of information from the input device to the computer, Tantu did not understand why the letters would not still appear on screen. I tried to explain, and he nodded knowingly then and said something to the effect of, "Yes, the voice of Keyboard is very quiet and Keyboard must pull on the tail of Computer to make Monitor listen." He pulled on the unplugged keyboard cable to demonstrate. In spite of the metaphorical (and zoological) overtones, I told him he was basically right. I was too tired of explaining the operation of the computer and too amazed at the general situation to try to convince him otherwise.

Finally, he made his way towards the open cabin door as the day turned to dusk. He looked back at me and told me that he would come back tomorrow with gifts if I would let him talk to the spirits. He pointed vaguely at the computer and the radio. I reminded him that they were not spirits and that he would probably have to learn to write and read English to use my equipment. He asked me if I would teach him. I said yes without thinking.

I wish I would have taken a picture of Tantu while he was here in the cabin. The sight was so odd. Tantu has shoulder-length dark hair, trimmed to straight bangs at his eyebrows, but otherwise unstyled. There is no sign of a beard on his brown chin, but I know he is well past puberty from the thin growth of pubic hair (it seems this may be trimmed periodically) and the way he handles himself.

I've grown used to his "cat whiskers" in one afternoon. They consist of six- to seven-inch-long stalks or spines of some dried plant similar to the spine grass that is so prevalent around the river. The spines seem to cause Tantu little pain although they look to me to be forcefully stuck into the soft tissue of each nostril. They truly give his round face a catlike appearance.

The characteristic blue tattoo around Tantu's lips is actually the easiest feature to overlook. Its lines flow naturally along the contours of his lips and sport smaller perpendicular lines about a quarter of an inch long which give the impression of a large mouth lined with square teeth. I suppose a simple picture couldn't capture these facial details, the awed and curious expression on his face, plus his nearly naked body leaning over the glowing computer monitor, but it certainly could convey the entirely strange image of an Indian confronting a modern computer in a darkened room. Incredible.

I've grown used to his "cat whiskers" in one afternoon. They consist of six- to seven-inch-long spines and seem to cause Tantu little pain, although they lookto be forcefully stuck into the soft tissue of each nostril.

I spent the rest of the evening writing the day's events in my official journals and eating a cold supper. I was too tired to write in this journal until this morning. Now, I sit here sipping scalded coffee, listening to the generator, and wondering if I should have agreed to teach Tantu about computers or reading English. I'm not sure what impact this could have on his culture. Would it be more than what Tantu's Leticia experiences might have already brought to the tribe? I guess that if Western culture and technology is going to be assimilated by the Mayoruna, then my teachings would perhaps accelerate that acculturation by a degree, not spark it initially. The spark has already been created by Indians such as Tantu. Besides, maybe it is better that Tantu learn from me than from the disgusting, exploitative loggers in Bolognesi.

So I guess I will attempt to teach Tantu. I'll have to remember to tone down my showmanship as I teach, however, and try to dispel the computer's mystique. Plus I'm going to have to teach him to say my name correctly; he pronounces it "Kane" rather than "Ken." Teaching him will be a long process but hopefully one that will yield an open invitation to their village, which will be useful when more researchers are assigned here. I would much rather we were invited and welcomed in Tantu's community than having to barge in on our own.

In two days I'll receive a radio digital packet transmission from the outside world. I'm eager to hear up-to-date news from a perspective other than the Armed Forces network, and to find out what is going on with the nova transmission studies. I'm also suffering slight anxiety attacks thinking about receiving e-mail from you. I'd like to hear from you, but afraid of what I might read. I have composed an e-mail message to you and saved it with the other materials I will transmit on Tuesday. When I read over the message it strikes me as a bit cold and unfeeling. I do still feel for you, but after what you said when we parted, it may be best to try to carry on without that emotional baggage.

FEBRUARY 24, 1994 21:48:01
Catherine,

Mohammed stood good to his word and relayed a digital package to me a few days ago. However, nowhere in that package was a message from you. I guess my anxieties will have another week to fortify their ramparts in my ego. Their main battle plan seems to revolve about my ignorance of the reason for your message's absence. I'm sure that in all the excitement of the nova transmissions you may have forgotten to send a note to me; however, my darker half tells me that you have purposefully ignored me. There could have been a technical error in the communication process, of course, but my family's birthday wishes came through unimpeded, and I gave them the same information I gave you.

I spent most of the day pouring over the package. My family is well and sends their best. My father is incredibly proud of me and my "gumption" to stick it out alone in the Amazon Basin. Mother claims that he can't shut up about it, even in casual conversation to mere acquaintances and fellow churchgoers. He's even bought a subscription to National Geographic again. I hope he reads them this time around. When I gave him a subscription four years ago for his birthday, the inside pages never saw anything but their facing neighbors as the issues accumulated in a fanned stack on the low coffee table by the settee.

I spent a good deal of time following arcane threads in the newsgroups that I requested. Most were just flame wars elevated to a seemingly intelligent level, but it was fun to read the newsgroups in this isolated environment. It will be a while before that novelty wears off.

The sci.seti.anthro group was indeed included in the package. I didn't see any posts or references about you however. What I did see was a bunch of messages all complaining that the anthropology and sociology couldn't start until the semiotics and semanticists figured out the alien pictographs a little better. I'm going to post a note there to you next week, just in case there is a problem with your e-mail.

Tantu came by again today, as usual. Today he brought me some sort of dried gourd that rattles lightly. He said that it was a "keyboard" from his village. I placed it next to the howler monkey paw that he had brought the day before. When he saw the dried and burnt paw, he asked me why I had not eaten it yet. I told him the truth; that even had I known I was supposed to eat the paw, I probably wouldn't have. Tantu looked at me oddly then and crossed to the table on which I had laid out his gifts to me. In a sudden darting motion he grabbed the paw and threw it out an open window. When he turned to face me again I was afraid he was angry, and I'm sure that fear showed on my face. However he just walked by me and sat down at the computer for another lesson.

Tantu's three English lessons have followed a consistent pattern. I begin with the alphabet and after about ten minutes he becomes obviously confused and begins to ask questions about the computer and the radio. I had planned to try to teach Tantu how to read phonetically, but he doesn't seem to *want* to get past the alphabet. He can recognize letters and pronounce them, but he seems to lack the motivation to continue. It is as if he doesn't understand that the letters are the building blocks, even though I have shown him how I can assemble words from the letters. I guess the greatest breakthrough is that he can now recognize his name when typed on the computer and even type in the password to the partition I have created for him on the hard drive.

The biggest surprise of Tantu's training is that he can actually manipulate the computer quite easily, without being able to read! He understands directories and folders and can steer himself to picture files that he likes to view. He likes to zoom in and out of images, watching how the image is made up of individual pixels. I have not shown him games yet—I don't want to be known as the sociologist who enslaved naïve cultures with the shackles of Tetris!

I am very concerned, however, that Tantu will never surpass the spiritual fraud that I seem to have perpetuated by shock-treating him with the computer the first time. For instance, I read aloud to him the mail messages I received from my family and even some of the newsgroup messages. He was completely enthused with the idea of mass communication and I felt a sense of elation that perhaps here was a way I could motivate Tantu to learn how to read and write English. However, he immediately asked how the computer could talk to shamen so far away, and how those shamen could know where we were. I explained that the shamen were just people and that we communicated via the radio (slight lie, but close to the truth). He looked at the radio and smiled knowingly. He said, "The spirit of the monkey is in your radio."

I asked him what he meant but he would only reply that monkeys talk the same way my computer does; therefore the monkey spirit is in my radio. I began to explain that the radio worked on principles of science, but I had to halt when he asked me to talk about those principles. I must confess I don't know much beyond the basics about those electromagnetic principles. Tantu then smiled again, his whiskers pointing at the cabin's loose rafters. I realized then how much like a religion my "science" must sound to him.

MARCH 6, 1994 14:11:48
Catherine,

Tantu just left the cabin suddenly and without warning. He was sitting at the computer staring at the screen

when his back stiffened slightly. Then he simply got up and left. I called out to him from the porch but he had disappeared. I wouldn't be surprised except that, from the way he suddenly jumped to attention, he seemed to have heard something or someone call his name. I wonder if his hearing is more acute than mine; I wouldn't doubt it.

I am looking at the screen Tantu was staring at just moments ago. It's just a jumble of characters… ah, perhaps they are a jumble because they are meant to be a jumble—indecipherable. Tantu must have been engaged in what seems to be one of his favorite past times, composing a very crude sentence, or sometimes just a word, and using a cipher to encrypt it. He appears to derive some sort of meaning from the encrypted letters and symbols; I have witnessed him pondering an encrypted sentence for minutes or more, sometimes tracing his fingers over the glass. Just the other day I saw him encrypt an entire Usenet message and then scroll through it several times, as if looking for something. I've asked him why he does it, but his answers are vague and he seems surprised that I should ask. Luckily, I have access to his partition and can run the cipher in reverse.

The line of letters decrypts as, "It is mine."

I wonder if I am teaching him about greed and envy as well as English and computers.

Earlier today I upgraded the memory in the computer with chips that arrived by boat yesterday from Leticia. Tantu watched my every move as if I were performing a ritual. He seemed particularly intrigued by the grounding wrist strap. I took the opportunity to try to show him that the computer was really a machine and not a spirit manifestation, but I think I failed. I'm beginning to think it doesn't matter if he believes that spirits of nature drive the machine rather than human-guided electrons; in a way, I guess they are the same sort of force. At least he seemed to understand that, by replacing the chips, the computer now could hold more "thoughts" in its "fast brain" without having to resort to the "slow brain." I demonstrated by showing him how much faster the computer could switch back and forth between two full-color images of the Chicago skyline. He seemed elated.

Still no word from you, Catherine. My mail message didn't bounce back, nor did you respond to my post on sci.seti.anthro. I don't know what to think. I know you are still with SETI because I have seen your name mentioned many times in the newsgroup now, although I have yet to see a message there from you. I am pleased at the success your team has had deciphering the transmissions, but why are you ignoring me?

I think I'm better off just not thinking of you. But without any friends in this place except for Tantu, I have a hard time of thinking of anything but you. I am going to have to push Tantu to introduce me to his village. I have hesitated so far—I'm actually afraid of following Tantu into the forest—but I need to see a family again, I need to see humans interacting with each other. A once-a-week feed of flame wars from Usenet is not enough.

I just noticed that the static wrist band and my old memory chips are missing. Maybe that is what Tantu meant by, "It is mine."

Scientists puzzled by Alien home star emissions

UNITED NATIONS (AP)—Scientists studying Gibbons' Star, the home star of the aliens who broadcast the message to Earth that was received two years ago, are puzzled about a stream of subatomic particles coming from the star.

A representative of the United Nations Committee on Extraterrestrials said yesterday that researchers around the world have detected an increase in the levels of neutrinos, massless subatomic particles, coming from the aliens' star.

"We're not quite sure what to make of the [neutrino] hits," said Janice Yan, an astronomer coordinating alien research efforts for the U.N. "They may be coming from the star as a side effect of the aliens' solar mining operation, or they may some alien technology that we don't understand yet."

But Mark Hirsch, an astronomy professor at the University of Hawaii, said that the neutrino emissions may be much more sinister in nature.

"Traditionally, we see neutrinos right before a star goes nova," Hirsch said. "If this were any other star, I'd probably say we should watch it carefully. But considering this is the aliens' star, we'll be watching it carefully in any case."

Anton Zallian, an astronomer at the University of California, raised a stir last week when he told users of the Internet that he expects the star to go nova in the next few months.

"The neutrino levels continue to go up, and the U.N. doesn't want to admit the truth," Zallian said. "The aliens' star is going to go, and it's probably because of their solar mining."

Zallian predicted on the Internet that the star would go nova in early May, based on calculations he refused to reveal. "I will explain my methods when I pin down an exact date," he said. "It will take a few more weeks."

Bright Time, Dark Time

Eric Skjei

9:29:17 EST, April 20, 1994

Honey is driving down the road. Cole is in the seat beside her. Outlaw Willie's on the radio. Honey and Cole have their swimsuits on. Cole has outgrown his car seat, but he's still too small for the seat belt. Even when he's sitting on his heels, like he is now, it hangs around him like an oversized coat. Honey wonders what would happen if they got into a wreck. A picture of him crashing through the windshield comes to mind and she shakes her head to get rid of it.

The day is warm but clouds are starting to roll in. When he woke up this morning Cole had a cough, one with that awful cracking sound in it. The doctor said he was fine, but she took the day off anyway. She thought she'd take him to the reservoir for a little sun. What the hey.

The car's engine misses and smooths out again. Probably needs a tune-up. Joe's old yellow Camaro, not in such bad shape on the outside except for the ding in the fender. She had to buy new tires but couldn't afford the big wide ones, so now it looks like a fat old lady on toothpick legs. Inside, the floor is full of candy wrappers and toys that Cole doesn't want to play with anymore. It still has the California plates on it. She hasn't gotten around to doing anything about that, even though they're in Ohio now. Maybe they'll wind up in a place with white plates or yellow plates. Not Arizona with those ugly red plates. She thinks about when she was a kid, driving down the road in the back seat, with her folks, going on vacation, searching for plates from different states.

She looks down at Cole again. He doesn't look anything like Joe at all. He's got her blond hair and blue eyes, not Joe's fuzzy red hair and thick neck. Not yet, anyway.

A beeping sound comes from the floor. It beeps again, then again, then again. "Huh," she says out loud. "It can't be." She hauls up the purse, fishes around in it, finds the beeper. Yup, it's her graduate assistant. She checks the readout. Eleven events in ten seconds.

Her hands start to shake and she grabs the wheel just as the car drifts over the yellow line. She pulls to the side of the road, stops. If this is real, she's one of the first to know about it. Maybe *the* first. If it's real. She wonders whether they know in Japan yet. She needs to get back. She's got a lot to do.

She turns to look at Cole. For a second, she'd completely forgotten he was there. He'll have to wait, as usual. She sighs, then laughs, feeling like she's going 11,000 miles a second. Cole laughs too, grinning up at her, happy to play along. She looks out the windshield. "We're going to take a bath, sweetie," she says, wondering if it might have been nothing but background noise. "An invisible bath, in hundreds of billions of neutrinos. Good thing we have our bathing suits on." She wonders if it'll be bright enough to be visible with the naked eye.

She sighs again. Then she twists in her seat to look over her shoulder and pulls back out onto the road, heading back the way she came. She reaches for the radio and turns it up real loud. "Nothing I can do about it now," whines Willie.

Tell me about it, she thinks.

Little Sun *Part Two*

Patrick Hurh

March 17, 1994 08:31:22
Catherine,

I've just returned from my first trip to the Mayoruna village! It happened suddenly after one of Tantu's lessons yesterday afternoon. The experience remains dreamlike in my mind, perhaps because I actually slept there, in the village! Not until I began the return trip through the steaming morning did I even think about how I would record the experience. It would probably make more sense to start recording my thoughts in the official journals, but it seems easier and will probably be a more vivid account if I write it here first, as if I'm talking to you.

I met Tantu in Bolognesi early in the afternoon, he was by the boat dock as usual, looking for "parts." I was there to give the boat hands a stack of letters and packages that I wanted mailed from Leticia. (Yes, one of them is for you, maybe that handwritten note will be too hard for you to ignore….) The crew took the mail and I stepped back and looked for Tantu. Instead of squatting over discarded, broken log clasps and tabs of rusted iron, he was standing among a small group of loggers near where the heavy-timbered dock met the river shore. His head was

bobbing swiftly so I could tell he was talking to them and, when a logger produced a long package from an orange duffel bag, Tantu's form bent to the ground to study it.

By the time I had walked over, the group was dispersing. I shouldered my way through the loggers who were headed back along the dock to the boat behind me. Tantu was standing with his back to me, the long package now in his hands. He grasped it near the center and, when the edge of the rough cloth that bound the package flipped off one of the protruding ends, I saw the dull gleam of a rifle barrel.

"Tantu!"

He turned to face me. He pushed the gun at me and said, "See? Here is our gun." I took the rifle from him. It was heavier than I thought it would be and I almost dropped it as the weight shifted inside the scratchy cloth. Tantu grabbed it back and, holding the gun in one hand, waggled a finger at me. "Careful," he said seriously.

"Tantu!" He turned to face me. He pushed the gun at me and said, "See? Here is our gun."

"You be careful, Tantu. That is a dangerous weapon. What will you use it for? Hunting?" I wanted to hear him say yes, but instead he turned and headed quickly down the path that led to my cabin. I followed.

When we arrived Tantu placed the gun on the porch and went inside. I started to follow, but then hesitated and unwrapped the rifle. It looked in good condition—no missing "parts" that I could discern. I wanted to check if the rifle was loaded, but I know almost nothing about rifles, so I put it away.

Tantu was already at the computer, watching it start up. I asked him if he wanted a lesson and he replied that he did.

We started the lesson as usual but after about ten minutes of phonetically pronouncing words, Tantu looked up at me and smiled. "I think I can read now!" He said this with such joy that I had to agree with him.

"Yes, I think you can. But you still have a lot of work to do."

"No," he said, grabbing my forearm. "Now, you do not know! I can read the letters and see… pictures! The words do not look like the pictures, but I see the pictures."

Looking back now, I understand what he meant. But at the time, I wasn't sure what he was so overjoyed about, only that some breakthrough had occurred. The written Mayoruna language consists of crude pictograms, generally outlining some event or fable. Its "letters" are direct representations of their meanings and are only roughly standardized into a small handful of characters. I believe now that Tantu didn't understand the written English language because it consists of collections of letter-characters that have no reference to meaning except when grouped together and mentally pronounced. It must have finally dawned on him the true phonetic nature of the written word. This must be why he said what he said next.

"Come, Kane. You must enjoy with us tonight!"

I didn't understand what he meant at first, but moments later, when we were rapidly trotting over the spine grass path that led to his village, I realized that this was it, the invitation I'd been waiting for. And I wasn't prepared at all. No camera, no paper to take notes, nothing but myself and Tantu. I didn't even bring the last of my cache of gifts for the village.

"Tantu," I said to the naked back in front of me. "Tantu, I have no gifts for your village…. Come back with me to the cabin so I can get some."

"Kane," he said after a moment and without breaking his stride, "this will be your gift." He raised the rifle with one hand over his head. The burlap covering fell to the ground. I bent down and picked it up. When I had straightened, Tantu was well ahead of me.

"Tantu! Wait! I didn't give you the rifle. That rifle… that gun is yours." For some reason I was desperate to cleanse myself of the weapon. "Tantu, that gun is yours!"

He turned his head and barked, "Yes, I know! Thank you!" Before I had a chance to respond he lifted the rifle and placed the end of the stock directly in the center of his chest and bent backward at the waist. His body recoiled slightly with the gun as it fired a round into the tree branches overhead. I jumped at the cracking sound.

Immediately rustling appeared in the thick plant life around us and I caught the color of brown skin as it disappeared behind the foliage. A loud crashing noise erupted to my right. I spun my head and just caught sight of an Indian man scrambling away from where he had landed after dropping from a huge low-branched tree. The Indians must have been all around us for minutes as we had walked the path. I would have never known had it not been for Tantu's surprise shot in the air.

"Are they from your village?" I turned to ask. But Tantu was gone. I just caught sight of him taking a turn in the path ahead. I ran after him, my panic building quickly.

I turned the corner and just managed to avoid running into Tantu's back. He was walking slowly forward into a large clearing; the rifle raised over his head casually, supported by one small arm. A few indigenous men were gathered in the clearing in front of a small fire. They too were waving their arms as if each of them carried a rifle aloft. Their cheeks were painted red and their faces were somber, yet they still wore a joyful countenance.

Other men stood near a circle of thatched huts that ringed the periphery of the clearing. They did not look as cheerful as the others and, as we strode slowly toward the

men at the fire, several more appeared from the doorways of the surrounding huts. I glanced between the two sets of men and sensed a distinct tension. I reached out to touch Tantu's back; he turned quickly and caught my wrist with his free hand and raised the two together over his head. Because of my height, the feeling was odd—I could feel his arm strain, outstretched as it was, while my arm hung limply by the side of my head. I tried to jerk my arm back, but Tantu held it there with surprising strength. I felt like comically waving at the staring men to alleviate the tension.

Tantu turned and caught my wrist, raising the two together over his head. Because of my height, I could feel his arm strain while my arm hung limply by the side of my head. Tantu held it there with surprising strength.

As Tantu led me in this manner about the fire and talked in indecipherable bursts to the gathered men, I looked more deeply into the dark fringes of the clearing. Despite the growing twilight, I spied young children crouched there and, clumped about the opening of the largest hut, a group of four women spitting into the open mouths of dried gourds. Tantu swung me around again and released my hand. I held my breath for a response from the seemingly disturbed men that had formed a loose circle around us at the fire.

If there was one, however, I didn't notice it, for at that moment a cry like a bird of prey thwarted sliced through the clearing. I turned my head with the others and saw a party of Mayoruna hunters emerge from the dense brush. Two of them carried the fur-covered forms of inert howler monkeys on their backs. An answering cry from the spitting women filled the air and suddenly a flurry of activity erupted. From the edges of the small village children and adolescents convened on the hunters, their joy evident through the bounce in their steps and the chatter of their voices. After a moment, the men surrounding us went forward to greet them also.

Tantu started forward and I called to him so he would not forget me. He turned and gestured for me to follow. He was heading for the open doorway of the large hut rather than attempting to approach the successful hunters. I followed him into the hut, noticing that the women sitting in front of it were chewing on some type of root and spitting a white juice into numerous dried gourds set about the ground around them. One of the gourds looked curiously like the top of a human skull.

The hut was dark but, as my eyes adjusted, enough twilight was able to penetrate the double filter of the trees outside and the loose thatched roof above to recognize the shapes of several Indians sitting on the ground and a dark central mass ahead of us. Tantu approached the dark form and held the gun horizontally in front of him. He spoke a few words and then sat down on the ground. I felt his hand around my calf as he motioned for me to join him. I did, surprised to feel the soft toughness of grass mats beneath me rather than the hard dirt I had anticipated.

"This is our head man… our chief," Tantu whispered to me. I actually looked about me for an instant until I realized he was referring to the dark shape in front of us. The form spoke in a deep voice and the noise from outside the hut seemed to fade away. My eyes started to pick out details of the chief's form and my mind attempted to fill in the dark spots.

The head man was a withered man sitting in a grass hammock that hung low to the ground. I remember thinking that the hammock must have been hung so low so that the chief could easily climb in and out of it. The chief was as naked as all the Indians around me; his gnarled legs draped over the edge of the hammock and his feet were folded against the floor so that the outsides of his ankles scraped the grass matting. I saw, or imagined I saw, numerous warts protruding from the loose skin of his legs, some as large as the end of my thumb. His face was hidden in shadow, but I could make out the characteristic wide shape of his head and the long white glow of his spine whiskers.

In a pause of his speech to us—and it was a speech lasting almost half an hour—I asked Tantu in a whisper to translate the chief's message. Tantu whispered back that the chief was telling them of the great sorrow that he felt he had brought to the tribe. "What sorrow?" I asked.

"The sorrow of being both head man and shaman for the village. Now that he is dead, we have no one to lead."

After the chief's voice subsided, Tantu and the others stood up. I stood up with them and followed them out of the hut. By now night had fallen. In the clearing, the fire had been built up and I could see that a meal had been in preparation.

"Tantu," I said. "If what the chief said was true, shouldn't the rest of the villagers been there to listen?"

Tantu turned to me and said, "The chief… he tells this story many times a day."

"You mean it is just a story? He's not really dying?"

Tantu looked at me puzzled. "No, it is true. He is dead. We must find a new shaman." He moved away from me and toward two young women who were stripping the monkeys of their fur.

I looked down at my feet then and found myself staring into the gourds of white juices that I had seen the women spit. I picked one up and swirled the contents around in

the base of the gourd. In the firelight I could see that the juice consisted of a very fluid liquid, which I assumed to be the women's saliva, and a mash of plant fibers. I took it over to Tantu and asked him what it was.

"Beer!" he barked at me. Then he smiled and said, "Do you like beer? This will not be good for a few days, but you can try it now."

"No thanks," I said quickly, recalling the sound the women made when they spit. "I'll wait." I gave the gourd to him. He smiled and took a drink of it.

When he was finished he produced one of the white roots that the women had been chewing on. It looked like a manioc root, the kind the Indians also make a sort of pancake out of. "Here," he said, offering it to me. "The beer… *masato*… is made of this." I took the root. "Chew on it," he said and then knelt back down to watch the young women work.

I put the root in my mouth and began to chew on it lightly. It was a bit pungent but not a bad taste. I returned to the area around the fire and watched the various activities around me. It was then that I noticed the children looking at me.

Several children, male and female, would walk up behind my back and watch me. When I would turn to greet them they would giggle and run away. This occurred several times before I sat down about ten yards from the hot fire. Four of the children then sat down around me. They stared at me with smooth skinned faces and glinting eyes. None of them wore the spine whiskers or the blue mouth tattoo. I smiled at them and tried to think of something to give them or do for them. The children simply stared at me. Finally I settled on a trick my uncle used to play on me. I doubled the thumb of my left hand within a fist and positioned my right hand so that it looked like my right thumb was actually the continuation of my left. Then with the same sneaky expression of a thousand goofy uncles I performed the time-honored trick of removing my left thumb. The children screamed and ran away.

I laughed then and leaned back so that I lay on the ground and could look up into the thin canopy of tree branches overhead. The flickering light from the fire reflected on the broad leaves and shone hypnotically back down at me. I must have lain there for some time because the next thing I remember is Tantu prodding me with his foot to rouse me for the meal.

The meal was quick and I actually ate very little. For the number of villagers present there really wasn't that much food. I limited myself to the manioc pancakes and didn't drink anything. I spent most of the time trying to watch how the Indians interacted with each other, trying to identify influences of western society on their interaction. About all I noticed was Tantu taking his new rifle with him wherever he went. I was relieved to see him reprimanding the young children when they attempted to touch it.

It was then that I noticed the first RAM necklace. One of the children, a young boy, was fingering the beads of one of the necklaces which Tantu wore about his neck. Whenever the child would tug on the beads Tantu would let out a sharp bark. Finally Tantu pushed the boy away and scolded him. When Tantu removed his hand from his neck I looked closely to see what had so attracted the child. I expected to see a jaguar tooth or a worn stone. Instead I saw a silicon chip still attached into a broken piece of epoxy circuit board. Tantu must have taken my discarded computer memory, broken them into pieces and woven them into his necklace. The sight made a chill run down my spine. I looked at the necklaces of some of the other villagers. To my surprise I found that at least four other men had similar necklaces. All of them were seated in an area between myself and Tantu.

I stood up and asked to speak with Tantu. He basically ignored me until I pulled on his necklace. Then he turned and smiled at me. I noticed that several of the other necklaced men turned their heads to look at me.

"You like it?" Tantu asked. "I made you one also… It is my gift to you."

My first reaction was to refuse the gift. But as he produced the necklace and held it up to me in front of the other men, I realized I was obligated to accept the necklace. I couldn't embarrass Tantu in front of his tribe. I reached for the limp ring of fiber and silicon but suddenly Tantu jerked it back, yelling something in Mayoruna and then in English, "Careful!"

I took my hand back. Tantu dug around in the folds of his waist belt and pulled out the grounding wrist strap that I had used when installing the memory in my cabin. He wound it carefully around his right wrist with great deliberation, then clipped the end to one of the chips on his necklace. He stood up, said a few words in Mayorunan, and draped the necklace over my head.

Sensing the ceremony of the event, I bowed my head and attempted to say thank you in Mayorunan. I only heard a few chuckles at my mispronunciation and I sat back down, this time next to Tantu.

Throughout the next hour Tantu told a story in Mayorunan, occasionally gesturing at me, at the chips hung around his neck, and himself. I caught the words for "shaman," "spirits," and "monkey," I attempted to speak to him during his numerous pauses but whenever I would begin, he cut me off with another loud sentence.

By the time he was done, more men had joined our small circle. Some of them did not wear chip necklaces, but seemed eager to hear Tantu's story. I became drowsy with the heat of the fire and the drone of Tantu's voice. I

hoped my drowsiness wouldn't be noticed, but Tantu had to shake my shoulder to gain my attention when he was ready to leave the fire.

He pulled me to one of the huts and told me that I could sleep in the hammock. He made a big fuss over assuring me it was safe. I was not up to the walk through the jungle to Bolognesi and from there back to my cabin, so I agreed to sleep there. I attempted once more to talk to Tantu about the necklaces, but he left me in the hut, ignoring my attempts at discussion.

I slept fitfully—as did the rest of the village. It seemed the site was never quiet. Some villagers slept while others tended the fire and moved about the huts. When the active ones would retire it seemed that others roused themselves to take their place. It was as if the night was respected as a time to rest, but that resting did not necessarily entail uninterrupted sleep. My dreams were filled with the sounds and sights of the Mayoruna village. I often woke thinking it to be dawn, only to find darkness outside the door of the hut.

Sometime during the very early morning I dreamt that the Mayoruna chief was talking to me. Not in Mayoruna, but in clear, unaccented English. I was standing before his hammock in the large, dark hut. I could feel rough grass beneath my bare feet and I realized that I was no longer wearing my Vibram-soled boots. Now the chief was lying in his hammock and I assumed he was asleep; however, moments later I heard a voice address me. I was convinced it was his voice, though I'm not sure because the figure did not even seem to breathe.

"Do you follow our path?" he questioned slowly.

In my dream I was not afraid and did not find it odd to reply aloud. "What path is that?"

"The path of the Little Sun."

I thought a moment before answering.

"I do not know that path," I said finally.

"Then you do not follow the path."

"Where does the path lead?" I hurriedly questioned, trying to prolong the unearthly dialogue.

"To the beginning, to the *Nascente*… It is a long journey and we must move quickly."

"If you must move quickly, why have you stopped here for so long? Why do you not move on?"

"We have not stopped moving. I lead always to the Source, the *Nascente*. I have not halted; perhaps you have begun moving… perhaps you follow the path…"

The next words I spoke woke me with a start. I said, "I am not moving at all!" I looked about me and realized I was in the chief's hut. His dark, prone form lay before me in the low slung hammock, apparently still asleep.

I backed out of the hut then, fright crawling up my neck, and walked quickly to the dying fire. I looked about me, but for once in the night, no one seemed to be awake. I stared at the fire for a long while. Perhaps the root I had chewed earlier was some sort of psychoactive and it had triggered my already-troubled mind into a state of wakeful dreaming.

Attempting to find Tantu, I came back to the ashes of the central fire. There, charred and half melted, were my boots. They were completely ruined.

Whatever had caused my dream, I felt drained and exhausted. I left the fire and peered into the hut that I thought I had first slept in. It was hard to remember exactly which hut that was. But the center hammock was empty and I climbed into its rough fibers. I fell asleep quickly and dreamlessly until light, when the sound of the waking Mayoruna village roused me.

I forgot about the dream until I stepped on a patch of spine grass near the dead fire. The bristles scraped at my feet and I realized I had lost not only my boots but also my socks. The memory of the dream rushed upon me then and my mind reeled with its flood. Even now, as I recount this to you, Catherine, I am overcome with the tingling feeling that I really did converse with the Mayoruna chief.

After attempting to find Tantu, I came back to the ashes of the central fire. There, charred and half melted, were my boots. I poked at them with a twig and finally lifted them with my hands. They were completely ruined. Who would do such a thing? Why they would burn them, I have no idea. Perhaps it was one of the village's men who seemed at odds with Tantu and his rifle when we first entered the village?

I finally left the village after again trying unsuccessfully to find Tantu. I also stopped at the chief's hut, but his hammock was empty. In his place were a few dried gourds. I could see the milky residue of the masato beer from the night before.

The walk back here was slow and almost painful without my boots. I hadn't realized before how pampered my feet are. At least I have a pair of Reeboks in one of my trunks. Still, without the boots I feel more exposed to the dangerous environment around me.

The fantastic events of the last day are still with me. I feel charged, yet reluctant to record every detail in the journals. I wish you were here so I could talk the events over with you. I need someone to converse with, someone who can talk back to me and offer an opinion besides my own on what my experience—my dream—really could mean. I cannot believe that after this much time, UIC has not assigned other researchers to this station. On the other hand I'm almost afraid to relate these events to my peers.

I failed to make any scientific observations, notes, or photos. And what is probably my own personal highlight of the trip, the dream, will probably be scoffed at as pure fabrication! I will have to go back to the village soon and make better record of the social fabric and indications of western influence. But how do I explain (or even mention) the necklaces?

APRIL 19, 1994 21:05:23
Catherine,

It looks like this journal is the closest I will come to actually talking to you. Today's radio packet once again contained plenty of news about the aliens, the Hebron massacre, the price of grain, my uncle Greg, the family dog and even the weather—but nothing from you. Maybe it's because Tantu hasn't been by in two days, but it suddenly hit me. You're gone from my life completely. I can see your life continue on in the sci.seti.anthro posts and in the news about solar mining and the undeciphered parts of the alien message. Yet my life is invisible to you. I don't even feel like you're ignoring me. I feel like I'm dead to you.

During one of Tantu's lessons, I read on Usenet that someone from the University of California announced that he thinks the alien star is going to explode on May 14. I'm sure the Christian fundamentalists are having fun with that one. I can't believe the stance some of them have taken over this whole alien race thing. It seems like after the lenient sentencing of the abortion protest shootings, these people have decided to take an even more inane "literal" translation of the Bible. If there is only room for one intelligent species in their universe, perhaps they should question if humans are that one intelligent species! "God created one true people!" they yell. I wonder if they realize that only they created their one true God.

Tantu seemed to fixate on the announcement, asking me to explain it to him repeatedly. He wanted to know "how many cycles" until May 14, so I took the opportunity to introduce him to the calendar program and how we measure time. It confused him until I displayed two months and counted out the "cycles" for him one by one. He then smiled and counted them himself. "What happens when computer has no more days?" Tantu asked, pointing at the end of the month.

I put that off for another lesson, and I'm almost glad that Tantu hasn't been by lately. He's progressing quickly and his patience with the computer is increasing, but he scares me with his ritualistic approach and the way he treats me if other villagers are around. I'm sure the tension I experience when I am with him is contributing to my bad dreams also.

I had the dream again last night. I was speaking to the chief of the Mayoruna and, once again, I can't remember what we talked about except that it involved "walking the path to *Nascente*." At least this time I woke up in my cabin and not in the chief's hut. I don't know what it means and when I talk about it with Tantu I receive no other response than a disquieting look that seems to say, "Why shouldn't you be talking to the chief in your dreams?"

I've made eight trips to the village so far. I've tried to be diligent and record as much of the social interaction as I can. The village is run like an open commune with a shallow hierarchy. In fact, the hierarchy seems to consist of just the chief and two Indian men beneath him. One of the two men is Tantu and that is where the real tension seems to lie. He and the other "second" seem to be in a low-key power struggle. Low-key, but pervasive. Tantu's competitor is taller and the blue tattoo that surrounds his mouth is exceptionally thick and bright. I have come to think of him as Blue Mouth because I don't know his name. Both men have a small group of followers who interact normally with each other when Tantu and Blue Mouth aren't around, but who become antagonistic when forced to take sides by a leader's presence. All of Tantu's followers wear some piece of western technology around their necks—usually a fragment of my computer—and they respectfully ask for more 'parts' whenever I visit.

I have rarely seen the chief. He keeps inside the large hut most of the time and I hesitate to enter again. When I ask Tantu about the chief he always replies that the chief is dead and should not be angered.

I have learned a little about Tantu's background. I know that he learned English while living with missionaries in Leticia. I've tried to ask him about the mission, with hopes of locating his previous teacher via radio, but he refuses to talk about his time there. Once he glared at me with barely muted hatred. I have tried not to talk about it since then.

I know that Tantu has purchased more rifles from the loggers. The other men in his group sometimes carry them in the village and I once saw a young woman inspecting one while Tantu looked on. I have not heard a shot from the village though, at least not yet.

Most of these things—the necklaces, the power struggle between Blue Mouth and Tantu's techno-Indians, the rifles—I have barely mentioned in the technical journals I send upline. I feel like I'm responsible for this fast influx of dangerous change. I cannot bring myself to confess my involvement to my peers and mentors, so I write down only the mundane and send it upline. I can tell by the feedback that they aren't impressed. I haven't been telling them anything new, and with all the attention the SETI groups have been receiving, my filtered work here must seem like an ant farm.

MAY 2, 1994 11:14:21
Catherine,

Tantu came by earlier this morning to tell me that the Mayoruna chief has left. He wanted me to come with him to the village to "enjoy the return." I took this to mean that the ailing chief had finally died during the night. When I asked Tantu if this was the case he didn't seem to understand. He carefully repeated that the chief has "gone over" and that he wanted me to "enjoy the return." I agreed, but told him I wanted to prepare myself first. Tantu went back to the village agitated that I didn't drop everything and return with him.

It's odd… Tantu did not seem disturbed at all by the chief's death. He actually looked excited, almost eager. I wonder if, now that the chief has gone on, if Tantu believes he will become the next chief. Surely it will either be him or Blue Mouth. They are the only ones who seem ready for the task, although they are both very young. I almost hope Blue Mouth wins. It would help relieve my sense of guilt. Especially after Tantu's reaction yesterday to my explanation of the possibility of a nova. He obviously saw the nova as an omen of his ascent to power in the village. I wonder if he has told any others in the village about it.

I am concerned about going to the village for the chief's funeral celebration. I have done a little more research and also witnessed firsthand evidence of the Mayoruna death rituals. They recycle almost the entire body, putting the last of the spirit's earthly remains to work for them. Several parts of the body are eaten, including some of the bones which are ground up and used to make a type of hot broth. Often the skull is cleaned out and used as a container for liquids, and I have seen necklaces made of what look like human vertebrae. I'm not sure I am up to this type of ritual. I remember my glimpses of the chief's wart-covered legs and my stomach turns. I hope I will not be made to feel obliged to eat anything I do not readily recognize or find repulsive.

I will take my new digital camera along and also a small pouch of crackers and dried beef. I cannot think of anything else that will be of use. I may have to spend the night in the village again tonight. Hopefully with the chief "gone over" I will not dream myself into his hut again.

MAY 3, 1994 13:48:42
Catherine,

Just got back from the village and I am exhausted. I do not think I slept more than three hours last night. Like the first overnight trip to the Mayoruna village, this last trip is clouded in my memory. The smoky heat of fires, strange tastes of unidentifiable foods, and hours of dizzy observation of the villagers have combined to reduce my recollection to quick flashes of images, smells and sounds.

When I arrived in the village it was nearly empty. Only a handful of women were there preparing food and caring for children. Even with the children, it was strangely quiet. I looked in several of the huts but only found empty hammocks and the natural litter of habitation.

Returning to the women, who sat away from the smoldering central fire on this hot day, I tried to communicate as best I could my wonder at where all the men of the village had gone. One of the woman pointed further to the east and I looked in that direction. I spotted a trampled path jutting from the main clearing. As I stepped upon it I noticed that the machete wounds on the surrounding vegetation were fresh and new.

"I wait for you. You not come for many cycles, Kane," he said seriously. Then he smiled. "But now you are here. Now you can see how we talk to the spirits. You can see our radio."

I followed the trail for about twenty minutes. I was glad that it was still mid-afternoon and that I could see easily in front of me. Soon I became aware of human voices ahead, some speaking, others sounding as if they were singing or barking. I increased my pace and made sure my camera was handy and powered on.

Soon I broke into a small natural clearing filled with about more than a dozen Indian men. Some seemed to be sleeping, curled into balls on the jungle floor while others talked to themselves loudly, occasionally calling out in crude imitations of animal noises. Only three men were standing: one of them was Tantu. When he spotted me he stepped around the others' bodies and approached me quickly. He looked angry.

"I wait for you. You not come for many cycles, Kane," he said seriously. Then he smiled. "But now you are here. Now you can see how we talk to the spirits. You can see our radio." He grabbed me by the forearm and pulled me towards the other two standing men. One was holding a small box made from loosely-bound twigs. I asked Tantu about the other men in their trancelike states. He told me that some were talking to their animal ancestors and others were preparing for their great hunts.

I panicked then for a moment, picturing some sort of mass suicide. I asked Tantu if these men were "going over." He said, "No. They are just looking over. Some of us need help from our fathers. Some of us talk to the animals we will hunt on a new sun."

"Why?" I asked with apprehension.

"To make good peace with the animals so their spirits do not hunt us after we kill them."

His answer did not completely allay my fears, but for some reason I felt confident that any danger these men might face was not a new one.

We reached the two men in the center of the clearing and I saw that the small box contained a slick, wet-looking animal—a frog. "What is this?" I asked, but Tantu did not reply. Instead he took the box while one of the other men bent over and pulled a twig from the ground. Carefully he reached into the box with the twig and stroked the animal's back. A thick, clear syrup clung to the twig.

Quickly, Tantu handed the box to the third Indian and pulled out a small sharp knife. Before I could stop him he cut into his own forearm, dangerously near the arteries and veins on the inside of his wrist. The man with the twig grabbed Tantu's wrist and pulled open the wound with his free hand. With the other he dripped the frog syrup off the end of the twig and into the bleeding gash.

I think I was shocked into silence because I don't remember making any other protestations as the two Indians continued to scrape fluid from the frog's back and place it directly into Tantu's bloodstream. I knew some tribes used poisonous mucous from a particular frog for their darts or arrows, but I suddenly realized I didn't know if the Mayoruna had such a practice, or if this was one of those frogs. I continued to watch in a kind of paralyzing horror: maybe this *was* some sort of suicide ritual. When they were finished they wrapped a thick green leaf around the cut and tied it off with a piece of fibrous twine.

Tantu turned to look at me. There was a thin trail of saliva oozing from one corner of his mouth and his eyes started to glaze over. He asked me to join them then, but I balked as the other two Indians approached me. "No," I protested. "I am not one of you."

The Indians hesitated and Tantu spoke again, obviously angered again with me. "You only taste it, Kane. Only I do this…" He shook his bound wrist at me and then fell to the ground slowly, as if through water.

I went over to him, concerned for his life, when one of the last two Indians caught me by the shoulder. He held out the twig to me and smiled. I reached out and took hold of his wrist lightly and pulled it to my mouth. I placed my tongue as lightly as I could on the twig and then pushed the twig back away. The Indian, apparently satisfied, turned away from me. I bent back down to examine Tantu and, as I did so, spit out as much of the saliva in my mouth as I could. The other two Indians didn't seem to notice.

Tantu was curled in a loose fetal position and seemed to be sick to his stomach. He eyes were closed tightly and when I tried to pull on his arm he did not respond. His arm snapped back to his chest when I released it. His breathing was deep and regular.

The two Indians that had administered the frog potion to Tantu were inhaling some sort of powder out of a small pouch. I immediately thought of cocaine, but after inhaling the substance, both men wandered quietly to the outskirts of the clearing and sat on the ground. One of them leaned against a tree and seemed to immediately go to sleep.

After a time, I began to wander around the clearing, taking pictures and trying to listen to the soft ramblings of the hallucinating Indians. This is the last cognizant thing I remember. My vision through the camera's viewfinder was extremely clear and I think I probably stared through it for quite some time. I remember at one point the batteries drained.

I became sick and had to lay down. My vision had now begun to blur and I think some of the other Indians were actually moving around then. At least I heard the crashing of bodies through the dense foliage. I remember seeing close up images of howler monkeys playing in the trees overhead. One fell to the ground and when I went over to it, I saw that its hands and feet were burnt and charred.

I recall being nudged and prodded along the trail to the main village and sitting in front of the fire where men and women seemed to address me in foreign tongues—not Mayoruna, but French, German, Chinese and others.

At some point, I ate. If I ate some of the chief's body last night, it did not seem to upset me. For some reason, I accepted all these odd sights and tastes. I felt secure in the midst of the villagers for the first time. Even the heat and he rain did not seem to bother me, although today it is so oppressively hot and I cannot seem to drink enough water to satiate my thirst.

One image stands out in my mind clearly: it is Tantu and Blue Mouth standing on opposite sides of the fire yelling at each other. Tantu is pointing at me with three outstretched fingers; his other arm is pointed to the sky overhead. Blue Mouth is grasping something long and snakelike in one hand and shaking it madly.

Whatever happened that night between the two did not resolve their differences because, when I woke late in the morning, I saw two very tired-looking men standing outside of the hut Tantu was sleeping in. They wore silicon about their necks and held rifles in their crossed arms.

After checking my clothes and body for insects (I had slept on the ground like a fool), I went to Tantu's hut to check on him. The guards there would not let me enter although they seemed to respect my approach. I could just see Tantu's form lying in a hammock from the doorway.

I hobbled back to the cabin and—after splashing some water on my face—began to write this. Straining to remember what happened last night has tired me even further. I must sleep.

NOVALIGHT *PART TWO*

GREG KNAUSS

May 1994

THE MESSAGE STOPPED, SUDDENLY AND COMPLETELY. The computers were recording the 488TH repetition when things went silent, in the middle of the third part.

Speculation appeared in the papers and newscasts and none of it meant anything. The group suffered through a myriad of useless, unanswerable questions until it convinced the reporters that the best thing—the only thing—everyone could do was to wait.

Novalight

THE NOVA LIT THE EVENING SKY ALMOST LIKE A FULL moon. And it was documented all the way because, after the message had stopped, every radio astronomer on the planet had been watching that piece of sky.

What they ended up with was the most complete record of any celestial event in the history of man—a near perfect picture of a supernova, from initial appearance to slow fade three months later. It was beautiful and terrifying and almost infinitely sad.

The aliens were dead, every one of them. Their technology and their culture and their art and their ideas, all totally gone. An entire species had been wiped out in a single moment, hundreds of years before we had even begun to record their message. The nova pictures were startlingly beautiful if one didn't imagine the billions of intelligent beings that had been consumed, broken down into atoms.

The message, only a third translated, was the only record we had of them, strange gray shapes moving across a computer screen, tracing out an engineering project we couldn't yet begin to undertake. A gift for our future.

Linguists, anthropologists and physicists worked feverishly with the new information they had from the nova. Within months, they had deciphered the second part of the message. With the nova still bright in the sky, the conclusion was obvious.

The nova was an *accident*, an industrial accident, almost certainly caused by solar mining. The second part of the message depicted the sudden and total breakdown of a star from its normal life-cycle to complete collapse in the space of a few years. The message was stylized and iconic, much less intuitive than the first part, but its physics were exactingly precise.

The core of the star lost stability—the computer simulation showed a number of processes, any or all of which may have been finally responsible—and the star collapsed in on itself, compressing to an infinitely hot ball before exploding, shedding layers in sequence and boiling off its planets.

It was over. Mankind's first contact with extraterrestrial life began and ended with a single message—a greeting that translation turned into a gift, a gift that disaster turned into a warning.

Stellar explosion continues to be heard around the world

MAY 16, 1994: Tensions continue to mount worldwide as the effects of yesterday's supernova explosion of Gibbons' Star are felt. Many nations' militaries have been placed on alert due to the nova's impact on many types of radio communications, and airports, shipping and other transportations systems are struggling to cope with the phenomenon. Delays are frequent, and some transport and communication systems aren't functioning at all.

Last night, the nova had an apparent brightness of a half- or three-quarter moon. It roughly follows the path of the sun across the sky and is highly visible during daytime hours. While experts say the nova should present no immediate health danger from radiation or other effects, they are advising the public to be cautious until more information is available.

Public reaction has been enormous. On the west coast of the United States where the nova appeared in the late evening, streets were crowded with people even before the news officially broke. In Tokyo, Japan, nearly everything ground to halt when the nova appeared high overhead. There have been reports of large religious gatherings in Delhi, India, and street parties in Washington, D.C.

Most experts have refused to comment on the accuracy of University of California astronomer Anton Zallian's prediction of the explosion, but preliminary observations seem to indicate that this nova is much larger than it should be. "Stars that size can explode, but theoretically they can't supernova," said one researcher. "This is much brighter and more powerful than it ought to be." At this time, there have been no estimates released regarding how long the nova may be visible in the sky.

TRACKS

DANIEL K. APPELQUIST

THE DAY THAT STAR EXPLODED, I WAS OUT BACK killing my dog. I looked up and there it was, outshining everything in the sky, exposing me and my crime to the world, lighting me harsher than sunlight could have. When I looked back down the dog was dead, its head having been held under the water too long. I looked down and it looked back up at me with those sad eyes, eyes brightened by that exploding star. Eyes that said "I wasn't such a bad dog—you didn't give me a chance. Now you've killed me. Let that be on your head, on your neck like a flea that you'll never gonna be able to scratch off."

And I said "Fuck you," because I knew that he was right. Though the truth is that he was a bad dog. At night, he yelped and yelped and you never heard the end of it. Putting a pillow over your head was no help, because this mongrel made the most piercing, tortured sound you ever heard. It traveled through walls, doors, pillows, blankets, ear plugs—any substance known to man. It could be heard for blocks.

And this dog was mean, too. He had mauled a kid once; he endlessly jumped our neighbors, frightened small children and elderly women, ate like a horse, and refused to admit that the kitchen was not his personal shit-hole. He was a dumb, mean son-of-a-bitch, and I wasn't sorry to see him go, even if I was a bit surprised at myself for having the balls to do it.

Over the fence next door I heard a clang, the sound of metal against metal. For a second I thought I'd been caught, but I realized it was just old man Davis building his damned track. Davis was a hoot. This guy had been building a track—a real, regulation railroad track—through his back yard ever since I'd been living there. Strangest shit you ever saw.

"Where does he get the supplies?" I asked my friend Harvey once at the Brass Knuckles, this little bar down on H Street. I remember the air was smoky and old Harvey was working on a cigar.

"He steals 'em! That's the kicker," Harvey replied, taking another giant puff, leaning back and behaving like a rich landowner instead of the shit insurance salesman he was. "He steals every last bit of it. Most of it's scrap, of course, stuff that's lying around. I've heard he steals from the Metro tunnels. He goes down there with a flashlight when the trains aren't running, cuts himself a length of track or whatever, then comes back up."

"I've heard he steals from the Metro tunnels. He goes down there with a flashlight when the trains aren't running, cuts himself a length of track or whatever, then comes back up."

"You're crazy," I remarked, taking Harvey as seriously as I ever did. "How could that guy carry all that track, or any track at all? Track's heavy stuff. He's gotta have it delivered."

"Suit yourself," Harvey retorted blandly while sucking another gout of smoke. "But my source is *reliable*."

So anyway, here was this guy out in his yard at night, installing another length of the mysterious track. Was it art? Certainly he couldn't be expecting them to build a Metro line through here and he was just preparing. Or perhaps he thought they would pay a premium for his plot of land, which already had a regulation track on it, ready for use. Peering over the fence, I could see that the track did indeed look good. No third rail, though, but I wasn't about to tell Davis that. Davis, being my neighbor, hated me because of my damned dog.

So this particular night, after drowning my hound, I walked back into the low porch of my one bedroom rowhouse, where I would never have to put up with the smell of fresh dog shit again, and gave my friend Harvey a call.

"Hey Harvey! Do you… Yes… Uh huh… Just so, it was… Yeah… Right… And then I… Uh huh? Okay." *Click*. Harvey never was one to let a guy get a word in edgewise. Not when he could be spouting the shit he spouts instead. Harvey had said that a friend had told him that they'd seen on the news that the new light was a supernova, that a star was exploding somewhere in space, that all those aliens were dead. I was going to ask Harvey if he thought there was any danger being outside, what with the radiation and all, but Harvey cut me off to tell me that it was perfectly safe, or at least that's what this guy at the deli counter had said. Some shit. Imagine a star exploding like that, taking all the light it was gonna give out over the next billion or whatever years, and spending it all at once, like it was at Vegas or Atlantic City or something.

Still, the star brought with it something strange, a thrill that crept into the street, infiltrated even the low-life scum that populated some of the tenements down by the old post office, where the sneakers were slung over the telephone wire. I couldn't remember seeing much of those kids—they were usually in and out in a flash, with their oversized pants and hats, crazy-looking kids. But who am I to judge? This crazy star business brought them out onto the street. Goddamn if they weren't all out there,

gawking and laughing. I hadn't imagined that there were this many of them, hanging out in that old building with half the windows boarded up. Thought I'd heard a gunshot once from inside when I was walking past, but I stopped and listened and I didn't hear anything more, so I kept walking.

That night, though, they were all outside. It would have made me nervous, except that for some reason, I knew it was safe. I knew they weren't gonna hassle anybody. I knew they weren't gonna bother an old man as he walking toward the bus stop, past the abandoned cars, out to the street to catch a bus over to meet his friend Harvey at a bar down on H Street. They were too busy talking, like they never really knew nothing about each other. Talking, and looking up at that bright star, gawking, wondering.

Waiting for the bus, an old man caught my eye, hooks where his hands might have been. He swaggered over to me, a big burly fellow, about twice my size. I froze, unsure whether I was being attacked—should I stand my ground? Run? The man asked me for directions to the train station. "Going to visit my mother," he said. "Haven't seen her in fifteen years, but I just got the urge." His eyes had the look of a man who hadn't seen much joy. "We might die any time, you know." He looked up, knowingly. "Gotta take our joy where we can." He took the next bus, my bus, following my hasty directions. "There's nothing in this world but pain," the man said. I told him about the kids in front of the crack house, laughing, looking up at the sky. "I used to think that way too," he said. "Look where it got me." He lifted up his hooks as if they were the final answer, as if they were supposed to signify something, as if there were nothing else in the world. "I lost these on a railroad track in '67. Train cut 'em right off."

"I'm… I'm sorry," was all I could say.

I got off at H Street and Harvey was waiting for me there. I told him about the kids in front of the crack house, and the man with the hooks, and old man Davis making his tracks. He was silent through all this, which is strange for Harvey. He's always talking, always got something on his mind, something to say, something to tell you. All he said through this whole thing was "Yeah—that crazy old man'll be building his tracks 'til Doomsday," which was an awful strange thing for Harvey to say, because he never talks about Doomsday or anything else like that. Harvey's real cheerful.

"Something bothering you, Harvey?"

The crowd in the bar at H street was different that night, different from the way it had been the million and one times I'd been there before. A bit younger, more lively. Some guys in the corner, over by the piano, were trying to sing. That was no real surprise, but after the song, they started up with a new one. Soon some other voices joined them.

Harvey wouldn't tell me why he wasn't being himself, so I told him what I'd done before, how I finally killed my damned dog. That brightened his face a bit.

"Well, damned good for you!" he said. "I'll buy you a drink for that." And he did. Always stuck to his word, Harvey did. "I saw a woman die yesterday," Harvey blurted out. "I can't get it out of my fucking head. She was just standing there, just standing there."

"Whoa, Harvey! What the hell are you talking about? Who? Where?" Harvey had given me no warning.

"I can't keep it in any more. I can't keep it in any more." He kept repeating this phrase. "She was standing there," he sobbed. "On the tracks. And the train just come by and took her right along with her. It looked like she didn't even notice, like she didn't even care."

"Harvey, calm down. Where was this? I didn't hear nothing about it."

Harvey just rested his head in his hands on the bar. "It doesn't matter," he sighed. "It doesn't matter. She's gone now. Gone." He downed another shot. "Did you ever notice, when you're riding in a train, and you're looking out the window at the other set of tracks out there…?" His voice turned all dreamy, like he wasn't really talking to me at all. "Did you ever notice how everything rushes by so quickly, but that track just stays there, like it ain't moving at all? That track just keeps going and going, while everything changes around it so quick."

I took Harvey out of the bar, out onto the street. "Easy, Harvey. Easy."

Harvey quickly turned on me. "What do *you* know about tracks? Fuck you!" He tore away from me and ran off raggedly down the street, weaving in and out of light poles and fireplugs like some kind of slalom skier.

What was up with him? All I could think of was his story, about the woman on the tracks. What possesses a person to do something like that, to make such a final decision?

On the corner of the street, there was a man with no arm, with a sign around his neck: "Homeless please help." He looked hungry and afraid. He wasn't wearing anything more than a T-shirt and some ripped up jeans, and he was shivering. His eyes caught the light from the star and it seemed to me that he turned into a monster, some kind of sci-fi nightmare creature, with eyes that were gonna burn a hole straight through me. I just walked on by, to the gentle sound of jingling change.

I kept walking, damning myself and everyone else I could think of, trying to keep those eyes and those thoughts out of my mind. Finally, I broke into a run. I didn't know where I was going until I found myself back on my street, struggling to open the front door like there

was something after me, something evil. I'd never been so afraid, and I can't think of *what* I was afraid of.

It was when I closed the door that I heard it. My mind still wasn't working right. The noise was building, grinding, metal against metal. It was coming from out back, so I crept out there real slow. I peered over the fence and there was old man Davis, standing by his tracks. As I watched, the tracks shook back and forth before him and I swore I heard the sound of an engine getting nearer. With a crash, this train was coming through old man Davis's yard, gunning through there like a bat out of hell. Car after car appeared on one side of the yard and disappeared on the other. That train kept on coming and making that awful noise, and I didn't know whether it was a dream. I don't know when it stopped—I don't remember anything more from that night, but we never saw old man Davis again.

A few weeks later, the building manager came around asking questions about him, but I didn't know any more than anyone else and I didn't tell no one about what I saw. I guess he didn't have any family, because they threw his stuff out into the street. The star was still in the sky, but those crackhead kids were back to their old tricks and Harvey was back to being as much of an asshole as ever.

"They just tore out those tracks old man Davis spent so much time putting down," I remember telling him. "Then they paved it all over for the new tenants. It's a shame. A damned shame."

Harvey just laughed. "What a nut!" he said, his face all screwed up, like it was the funniest thing he ever heard. "What a fucking nut."

"Yeah," I said. Yeah.

LITTLE SUN *PART THREE*

PATRICK HURH

MAY 14, 1994 22:39:13
Catherine,

The nova didn't appear today as predicted by your fellow researcher. I waited outside on my porch for about two hours in anticipation. According to the radio it should have been visible overhead at midday, but… nothing. Perhaps the sun blocked it out, but the radio has not reported its appearance anyplace else.

I am of course concerned for what this means to your research, although I have seen the widespread debate and skepticism about this scientist's prediction. However, my first thoughts are consumed with how this nonevent will affect Tantu and his village.

Tantu stopped by during late afternoon. He was very upset. It seems he told—announced, really—the entire village of the coming of the "Little Sun." He claimed that this would be a message from the spirits to show the villagers he was the chosen one to lead the Mayoruna to the *Nascente*. When the nova did not appear, Blue Mouth and his followers pronounced Tantu a fake and a liar.

Tantu yelled all this at me, clearly blaming me for his own haste and greed. I tried to be as honest as I could and explain that sometimes this was the way things happened with science… that he shouldn't place so much faith in it. This did not seem to help. He looked at me incredulously like I was uttering blasphemy. The only thing I could say that seemed to calm him was that the date and time may have simply been calculated incorrectly, that the nova—the "Little Sun"—may yet appear.

I felt almost evil telling him this—the prediction could have been off by months, or even years. Since I could not make Tantu realize that he had deliberately led his village to think of science as a faith, I simply encourage him further in his plot for power? Still, what was I to do? Tell him the truth? Tell him that I secretly hoped the nova would never appear?

Yes, I think that is the truth. Without the physical nova, Catherine, there's a chance your research would become suspect and mocked. And without the "Little Sun," Tantu's techno-fetish leadership doesn't have a prayer. These things would satisfy my vengeful thoughts of your betrayal and cleanse my conscience of the guilt of inadvertently corrupting Tantu's tribe. Admitting this is not easy, but perhaps it is the first step towards understanding myself.

MAY 16, 1994 16:08:57
Catherine,

The nova appeared today! It appeared early this morning, rising maybe an hour and a half after the sun. It was incredibly bright for an object so far away. Later in the day, the moon was visible through the foliage, and I think the nova is brighter than its crescent, even during daylight! Despite my misgivings about what the nova could mean, it has filled me with awe and excitement.

Of course I immediately turned on the radio to see if there was coverage of the event but the radio was useless. Nothing but static with rare snatches of signal. Perhaps it

is the nova itself that is creating the interference. If that's true, maybe I can raise Leticia when the nova has set.

Later, with the star high overhead, I picked my way through the forest to the Mayoruna village. I was very anxious about what I would find, but I was immensely curious also.

The village was a beehive of activity. Blue Mouth and a few of his followers were huddled together on one side of the village, surrounded by angry men who held spears and blow-gun reeds. But the vast majority of villagers were not paying them much heed—women were hurriedly rushing between huts carrying the cups of dried gourds. Shouts and sounds of laughter could be heard from the nearest huts.

I crossed the compound to the old chief's hut where there was a large crowd of men talking loudly. As I passed by Blue Mouth's group a few of his men shouted and stared at me defiantly. Their faces and shoulders looked bruised and swollen, as if they'd been beaten.

Tantu was in the large hut. As I approached, the talking men clustered about the doorway parted and I entered. Tantu was sitting in the hammock. A man I recognized him as the one who had administered the frog potion to Tantu days earlier, rubbed white paste into Tantu's shoulders gingerly. I could see gashes in his skin and dried blood in his hair. Tantu's face was bruised and one eye was almost swollen shut.

Tantu smiled when he recognized me and stood to greet me.

"Kane! It has happened! The Little Sun is here…"

"Yes," I replied. "It has happened… but it has brought a lot of pain also." I pointed to his face and the white paste drying on his shoulders.

"This is good, Kane. This is because we were bad to not believe it would happen." He looked at me as if I should have known that.

"What? This is… your punishment?" I tried not to raise my voice too loud. Suddenly, I thought of Blue Mouth and his men outside. "Did those others do this to you when the nova—the Little Sun—didn't appear?" I looked around at the faces of other Indians in the hut: many of them displayed cuts and bruises. "Did they do this to all of you?"

"We were bad to not believe the Little Sun would come," Tantu explained again, smiling. I leaned forward and examined Tantu's eye; it looked very painful, but in the dim light it was difficult to tell if any permanent damage had been done. "When Little Sun leaves the sky, we will be forgiven."

"And what happens when the Little Sun comes tomorrow?" I said without thinking.

Tantu's smile disappeared. "The Little Sun will come here again?"

I looked around the hut. All eyes were on me. "Yes," I said. "It could come every day for the next few months…." I paused, not knowing what to say. "They really don't know how long the nova will be active or visible."

"Who is *they?"* Tantu asked.

I tried to think of a way to explain it, but I was starting to get sick of the whole situation. I felt guilty and responsible, not for the beatings, but for Tantu and the village's perception of the nova. I had made the supernova into a false god.

"I don't know, Tantu. Just some scientists…." In the hut, all the faces were watching me expectantly, as if I were supposed to perform some ritual or feat of magic. "I have to go," I said, and started to leave.

The only thing I could say that seemed to calm him was that the date and time may have been calculated incorrectly, that the nova may yet appear.

"Kane." Tantu stopped me with a hand on my back. "I am chief now of the tribe. I want you to be our shaman."

I froze then. It had all come down to this… I didn't know what to say. I knew I couldn't refuse, but I don't think there was anything I could say. Tantu began to speak again, but all I heard was the blood rushing through my head. I brushed his hand off and left the hut.

I heard a muffled yell from the hut and then nothing more as I marched away from that crowd and out of the village. I wanted to get away from Tantu and the hysterical religion I had helped instigate. I walked faster, swatting at the leaves and branches along the trail as I went. I felt sick to my stomach.

Behind me, I heard a gunshot.

MAY 18 1994 04:21:37

Catherine,

I am kept awake now by my dreams and thoughts of what I have done. In the afternoons I become drowsy with the heat and humidity, and it is during these times that I try and rest. My dreams are filled with visions of the lacerated flesh of the Mayoruna and Tantu's swollen eye. Each morning, when the nova appears in the strip of sky over the river, I see Blue Mouth punishing the Mayoruna again because the Little Sun has not yet forgiven them.

I have stayed inside almost the entire time since I returned from the village. Yesterday evening I went to Bolognesi, hoping to find some diesel fuel for the generator and perhaps a way to contact Mohammed in Leticia.

I haven't been able to raise anyone on the radio, even though the static isn't as bad at night.

Bolognesi was virtually empty when I arrived, making the trip almost useless. I found a dock foreman and asked where everyone had gone. He was sitting atop a stack of crates with a rifle over his shoulder and a pistol beside him, smoking cigarettes and watching the nova. He said they heard no boats or planes would be coming while the radios weren't working, so the boat men had left for Leticia when they learned they wouldn't be paid. He and a few men were staying to guard the shipments and lumber that were still here and earn a reward, or take what they could if it turned out to be a long wait. He said they had heard shots from the east, in the direction of the Mayoruna village, and had seen Indians peering at them from the jungle. He didn't have any diesel, so I returned to the cabin, increasingly agitated.

I am afraid to go back to the village. I am afraid to go outside. Soon I will run out of fuel, then batteries.

MAY 20, 1994
Catherine,

Tantu and his followers came to my cabin today. They ransacked the place and took almost everything—that is why I am writing this by hand—I think I am just lucky to be alive.

I heard gunshots from the east last night. So I knew something was happening. Then at about noon today Tantu appeared at my door with five other men. All of them carried guns, and Tantu's eye looked infected.

Tantu approached me and asked me again to be his tribe's shaman. I think I must have chuckled at the absurdity of the situation because he stepped forward and grabbed me by the shoulders and demanded that I use the radio to tell the Little Sun to leave. He stared at me and yelled something incomprehensible.

I removed myself from his grip slowly, assured him that I would help with his eye and I went over to one of my small trunks. I pulled out a first aid kit and walked back toward him.

Tantu looked at the box, clearly dismayed. He pointed his rifle at my chest and demanded I use the radio. I tried to explain that I couldn't, that there wasn't enough electricity and that the nova prevented it from working anyway, but he wouldn't listen. He pushed me across the room and started to search the cabin. I moved to stop him, but I suddenly realized that other guns were pointed in my direction. I backed off to a corner.

Tantu tore through my belongings, moving from shelf to box to trunk with increasing frustration. Just when I thought he would give up, his body froze. Slowly he stood up from the trunk where I had stored the first aid kit. In his hand was a beaded rosary that my mother had given me. Tantu stared at it and then glared at me. His hand began to shake then and he suddenly erupted, tearing the rosary apart. Black plastic beads flew across the room. Tantu threw what was left at my face.

Tantu barked out commands to the other men and they began to dismantle my computer and radio equipment. When I protested, Tantu struck me across the jaw with the butt of his rifle.

He then went through a fit of rage and yelling. Most of it was in Mayoruna and incomprehensible to me, but several times he broke into English and called me a liar and a shit. He yelled out the words "Jesus Christ" with fierce hatred. He shook his gun and then pointed it at me. I thought he was going to kill me and I shut my eyes.

Instead, Tantu barked out commands to the other men and they began to dismantle my computer and radio equipment. They roughly carried it outside in loads. When I protested, Tantu struck me across the jaw with the butt of his rifle. I collapsed to the floor.

When they left Tantu said nothing to me. He just walked outside, off the porch, and back towards Bolognesi. I peeked out the doorway and saw his small group of followers pulling and pushing the small generator trailer behind him. It was piled with my computer, radio, and a rough jumble of cables.

Now I am here writing on the blank pages of computer manuals like a pathetic idiot. But I can't go to the village, and I fear to follow Tantu toward Bolognesi.

MAY 22, 1994
Catherine,

I learned of your death today in a hissing report over the A.M. transistor radio. You've been dead for a week and I didn't know until now. I feel so empty. I was dead to your life and now… now you are dead to mine.

I didn't feel empty when I heard the report this morning, though. I was full of screaming rage and hatred of the zealots and murderers that drove that bombed the SETI research center. But now the red has faded from my eyes. I look around me at the remnants of the cabin interior. I finished destroying what Tantu and his men hadn't destroyed in their rampage earlier. There is almost nothing of any value left… at least nothing that I can make myself care about.

I threw the broken rosary and the transistor radio out into the river as far as I could. The radio bobbed for a moment before being pulled under by the Javari's strong

current. I then went to the Mayoruna village. I wasn't sure what would happen there. I was a mixture of rage and loneliness, and beyond caring

It didn't matter, because the village was gone. Empty huts and discarded gourds were all that were left. And the bodies… the gunshot bodies of Blue Mouth and his followers.

Blue Mouth was draped over the body of another in a makeshift funeral pyre. The fire had never really caught and the bodies has smoldered for some time before cooling. Now they were half-burnt, bloated and crawling with insects.

I returned here. After seeing that, your death somehow fits in neatly…. It's as if there is nothing left for me now.

When I listened to the radio's news report this morning after the anchor recited your name in a list of the dead, I heard who claimed responsibility for the bombing. My parents give money to that group.

If I leave quickly I may be able to catch Tantu and the Mayoruna before they become completely immersed in the rain forest. They'll be traveling slow, dragging that generator with them. It should make them easy to track. I may not last long in the forest, but if I return to the world I used to know, I won't last even that long.

Goodbye, Catherine.
Maybe I will see you on a new sun.

Kenneth James Mayhew

THIS LIGHTED DARK

CHRIS KMOTORKA

MAMA TIPPET CALLS ALL THIS A SIGN, ANOTHER thing coming as sure as the Lord has risen. All I know is it's a thing that's driving the world crazy. Animals round here don't seem to know day from night no more and things as never seen another since God done put 'em on the planet is passing each other and scaring each and each alike. Two moons, two daytimes, and ain't nothin knowing what to make of it.

The hounds is having a hell of a good time with it all. Running possum and coon half blind with the light, not a shadow of darkness unexplained. Their path both clear and free. Seems me and these dogs is the only things not drove crazy by all this strange going on. But I'll be damned of the rest of 'em ain't just about tossed it all in the creek.

I WENT TO SEE MAMA TIPPETT TO ASK IF SHE COULD HELP me locate something of mine that done run off. Blame it all on this here astronomical aberration is what I do. But Mama Tippett is looped these days, too. Giving me the hellfire and brimstone rap afore I even get a chance to explain it all to her. Telling me the meek shall inherit the Earth, but they have to escape that what's holding 'em back first. Telling me this here is the time when all that will happen. When all the meek and mild'ns will be seeking their vengeance. The hand of the Lord comes quietly she says. I simply thanked her and backed on out and got the dogs running again. Somewhere on this mountain I'm going to find what it is I'm looking for. And when I do…. Let's just say it had better be alone. And it better smell alone, too.

I hear Blue. She's not on a scent. Not yet. But I can hear her, keeping tabs on the others, rounding them up, keeping things in order. A real-take charge gal, that bitch. Finest dog I ever had. Probably never find another like her. Keenest nose on this mountain. I could probably make a decent price on her if I ever decided to sell her off. Should probably get a litter out of her before long. Just hate to have her down for any length of time. Hell of a lead dog. Absolute music to the ears to hear her work.

EVERY YEAR IT'S HARDER TO THINK WHY I WANT TO KEEP things the way they are. And now, waiting for a sign from the dogs that they've found she's out here, I wonder how long I'll be able to keep my life steady and sure.

I know she's been thinking on this for a long time now. Known it a long, long time. Could see it in her eyes. Hear it in her voice, in the way she moans at night. Taste it in the things she cooks. I don't know what it is she expected. Maybe if I knew what she was thinking when I brought her up here I'd have some idea of why she was so dissatisfied with it all. Maybe I'd be able to see it from her view. But as it is, all I know is what I am, the way I always been, and that's just what she got, just what she should have expected to get. No more, no less. I never once presented myself in any way but the truth. The essence of my being. The straight perfume. If that ain't what she was looking to be smelling till death do us part, then she shouldn't have latched on to the bottle, so to speak.

I suppose I can't help but think of her as a liar, now what with all that's happening. Said *I do,* and here she is operating on a definite *I don't* basis. Took off for who

knows what. Straight through the woods as if she'd have a chance out there alone, as if I wouldn't find her just as easy as if she had headed off down the road with her hip cocked, her thumb strutting, and her suitcase by her side. Me, I almost prefer it this way. Give the dogs a chance to get a run. Work 'em up. Like to keep an edge on 'em. Nothing worse than a dog that lost its edge.

She couldn't have picked a more foolish time to be running. I guess she was figuring she'd have time while I was out, take advantage of this lighted dark. No sense being alone in the woods in the real dark. She'd never get nowhere then. Simply find her huddled up, staving off the creeping crawlies. Course, she had no way of knowing hunting would be a bust. Everything run crazy, no challenge, not knowing whether the dogs is running coon or deer. Ain't no sense in taking deer now, not with it so light out. No way of sneaking something that big around in the broad night light.

Come home and she's gone. Drawers pulled out, clothes hanging down. And of all things, the cloth missing right off the kitchen table. Who knows what that's all about.

Come home and she's gone. Not in the smokehouse. Not in the outhouse. Sure as hell not in the main house. Drawers pulled out, clothes hanging down. And of all things, the cloth missing right off the kitchen table. Who knows what that's all about.

The dogs was all razzed up, just itching. Had to run 'em on something. No way of knowin' how long she was gone. Day or two. Probably one. Would have taken her a while to get her nerve up. I can see her now, nails all chewed up on those red and roughed-up hands of hers. Sitting there all flustered, leaning forward, rocking back and forth, knocking her knees together, weighing it all out best she can. Finally getting up the nerve and rushing around like a wounded pig, knocking into every which thing. Pulling out underwear, stuffing it all on the table, finally wrapping it all up in the oilcloth, not knowing how else to carry it all.

IT AIN'T GONNA BE A PROBLEM. IT'S JUST TAKING longer than I expected. Expected her to have lit out on the road. Lost a bit of time on that one. Brung the dogs back and they finally picked her up back by the spring. Probably shouldn't have taken so much time before heading out. Eating and all. Just never expected her to get so far. Never would've guessed she moved like this.

Don't know where she's headed. Doubt she does. Only thing this way is mountain and forest and Kincaid's place. Damn well better not be heading for Kincaid's. Ain't no reason for her to be 'round that son of a bitch.

Kincaid's been eyeing her for a long time. Ain't no secret in that. Seen her looking at him one time in the grocery. All I could do to keep from taking her out right there and then. As it was, I slapped the dope from her hands, watched it spill all over, puddle up at her shoes while she just stood there wide-eyed and about to wet herself. Kincaid stiffened, started to step forward. I just turned around and faced him and smiled pretty as could be. He backed right off. Just dropped his eyes to the floor and walked out. Left his groceries right on the counter. Ended up doing most of my shopping right from his stuff there. Said to her, you like looking at that? Some little polecat too scared to say a thing when he sees something he don't like? She didn't say nothing either. Kindred spirits, I said. Drug her on out to the pickup and back home.

THROUGH THE WOODS I TRAIL THE DOGS. FAINT THRILL of anticipation. Of finding what I never wish to find. Night has fallen. Two moons in the sky, east and west, replace the sun. There is no darkness to speak of. I have not slept in two days, but I feel no exhaustion. So many hours in the day. Time enough to sleep when darkness finally comes.

Into a clearing. I halt. There in the midst of the field a buck stands alert. Listening to the hounds. Glad for their increasing distance. I take the rifle up from the crook of my arm and hold the deer in my sights. The tawny coat bristles in the slight chill of the evening breeze. A muscle twitch runs from shoulder to knee and nostrils flare. A snort like horse's coughing breaks the silence and he lowers his head to graze once more. I slide the safety catch into place and I lower the rifle. A slight smile and I half yell hup-deer and in one sleek moment he breaks to his left, nearly dropping himself to the ground, and disappears into the wood in a blur of white tail flash and crashing vegetation. I laugh and walk on. There is no hurry. There is no secret where the dogs will lead now.

I BROUGHT HER TO THE MOUNTAIN A BRIDE OF SIXTEEN. A blush still on her. Skin still soft with baby fat. For three years she has sullenly gone about her duties as I see them. Not once a whisper of thanks for providing for her. For saving her from spending her life with a crazy mama and a drunked-up daddy. Three years and nary a child to show for it. A woman can't be too much good to a man if she can't do what she's called to do, whether it be tending a house or bringing up a son or two. I barely get one, and damn near nothing of the other. One malformed bloody mess of a miscarriage nearly two years ago and not a hint of nothing since. Meanwhile, she's just going about her

business and biding her time for God knows what to come. For a sign, I suppose. Two moons to light the way. As good a sign as any.

THE BAYING OF THE HOUNDS RISES TO A FEVER PITCH. They strangle on their voices. The hunt is on and they have their prey. What the hell holds them back, I wonder. But I know: years of training, generations of dogs bred to withstand the temptation to tear it all apart. To seek and find, but not destroy. To stand at the ready, their whole bodies, their entire beings aquiver with it all. The stench of bloodlust driving them mad, waiting for the master to come along and dispatch it all with a bullet. The sudden explosion of the report the climax of a heated onslaught. Over. An instant.

I walk over the rise and look down over the black geometry that is Kincaid's field and feel that rush in my belly again. That wicked half sense of fear and anticipation. Blue leads. She swings the dogs in a wide, perfect arc down the slope of the hill around to the house. Seven shapes, black against the grasses, moldy green in the odd night light. The rising pitch of baying hounds. The intensity increases. I see her come running from around the back of the house, hand holding up the hem of her dress. Blue is nearly on her as I walk down slow, easing my way down to claim what's rightfully mine.

About a hundred yards out, she makes it to the door and slips in. Blue nearly knocking herself senseless crashing into it. A half scream above the rising howl of dogs. I yell up to the house, "You'd best come out here Sher-lynn," and the front window slides up about six inches. Kincaid.

"What you want, Harris?" he yells out. Too much of a chicken-shit to come out and face what he's got coming.

"I want what's mine, Kincaid, and I aim to have it. Now send her on out here so as we can talk."

I'm trying to yell over the hounds all this time and it's making things edgy. Too much tension. More than we could want anyhow. All I want is to have her come out. Talk some sense to her and get on with it all. The damn gun's getting heavy and my hands is getting nervous. All this waiting.

"Send her out, Kincaid. So as we can talk. We need to talk this over."

"Ain't no harm gonna come to her, is there, Harris?" I'm surprised how sure of himself he sounds.

"Harm's already been done, Kincaid. All we can do now is hope to make less of it. You hear me?"

"You get them dogs offa there and she'll come out to the porch. You can talk from where you stand."

I called up the dogs as best I could. But they was running at fever. The whole thing was anticlimactic for them. You just don't run a dog to its prey and then not do something to satisfy 'em. It just don't work that way. But I got Blue to come down off the porch and the rest followed her. They was trotting back and forth the length of the porch. An occasional whine. A low growl. Finally, I yelled back up at the house.

"Okay, Sher-lynn. The dogs is off the porch. Now get your ass out here."

Kincaid again. "Don't try nothing, Harris. I'm watching from right here."

The door began to open slowly and Sher-lynn's hand come out first. Way slow. She slipped out, half her body showing, a wary eye shifting between me and the dogs. Finally she come right out and stood there in front of the door, not quite letting it close behind her.

"What you think you doing, girl?" I asked.

"I's leaving you, Tilton Harris. Sure as shine is clear." She wasn't anywhere near as confident as she wanted to sound.

"What makes you think you can up and leave, girl? We's married, if you ain't forgot."

"Ain't not forgetting that, Tilton. I remember that every minute of every day. I'd sure like to start forgetting it, though."

"That ain't goin to be so easy, child. Cause you're coming back with me. Sure as shine is clear. Sure as blood is red."

I started walking toward the door and I heard a rifle click in the house. Sher-lynn heard it, too, because I saw her turn her head toward the window and her eyes get real big. I hupped up the dogs and they rushed up the porch and were on her in no time. Pinned her back up against the door. No way for her to open it. All she could do was stand there, hands fluttering up about her face, and scream like it was the end of the world. Next thing I know there's a gunshot. I hit the ground, thinking Kincaid was shooting at me, but as soon as I looked back up toward the house I seen Blue laid out on the dirt patch afront the porch. Blown off the porch by the shot. The other dogs were yelping and hollering, swarming all over Blue. Crazy with the smell of blood.

I leaped up, stumbled and caught myself and lifted up my rifle. I levered off a round through the window and heard something heavy hit the floor and Kincaid's rifle discharged. But no bullet came out of the cabin. Hit a wall or the ceiling. Sher-lynn's just screaming and the dogs are yapping and I'm standing there unable to move. Somehow I know Kincaid ain't going to be firing back out that window.

After a few seconds, I move toward the door. Sher-lynn's screaming out a name—Nathan. Must be Kincaid, I'm thinking, cause it sure as hell ain't me. I push her out of the way and swing open the door and enter rifle first and ready, but there lay Kincaid, tumbled back in a chair and a hole ripped right through his throat. Blood was

pooling everywhere. And then Sher-lynn's there at my elbow and her screaming gets even louder. She ain't screaming nothing that makes sense now. It's just noises. Terror and grief and who knows what. The dogs are going crazy over Blue, and Sher-lynn's screaming, and Kincaid's laying there dead—just as well dead—and I'm standing there not knowing what to do, just knowing I need some quiet. Everything was moving too loud and too fast and I couldn't much take it any longer.

I backed out of the cabin, pushing Sher-lynn along with me and she won't stop screaming. She's yelling "You kilt him, you kilt him!" Like I don't already know that. Calling me up for murder. Calling down God and the law, calling them down from wherever to take me off. Finally I turned and held the rifle out straightarmed away from me and pulled the trigger. Her head jerked back and her eyes rolled up as if she was looking for the top of her skull and she fell back slow and straight, like a felled tree. When the report from the rifle stopped echoing in my ears all that was left was the baying of the damned dogs. I pointed the gun to the sky and fired, yelling at the dogs, hup dogs, get, get, and fired again and they scattered and took off up the hill toward the wood. I walked over to where Blue lay and she was still breathing, but it wasn't a gentle breath. There was a death rattle in her breath and every lowering of her chest was followed by a coughing up of bubbling blood. I lowered the rifle just behind her ear, cocked the lever, and put out of her misery.

NO SOUND BUT MY LABORED BREATHING, NOTHING around but me and the death that surrounds me. And I stood in the silence of this lighted dark. And I walked off into it, not knowing where I was going, or for how long. Only knowing I could not stay here. Maybe Mama Tippet is right. Maybe it is a time of judgment. Maybe there is a second coming, some kind of judgment come down for us all. I don't know. I only know I will walk until I find darkness and a time for sleep has come.

WINE AND CHEESE

ROBERT HURVITZ

HAROLD WAS RUNNING LATE. HE HAD SEEN A matinee with his housemate, done a large pile of laundry, and finally gone down to the burrito place for some dinner. By the time he was home and ready to go to his boss' six o'clock wine and cheese party, it was past seven. He hurried to his car and drove off, sweating slightly.

Parking was worse than he thought it would be—he ended up blocking a fire hydrant three blocks from his destination. He walked briskly, casting nervous glances from side to side. His boss had mentioned that he had heard gunfire in this neighborhood. Harold clenched his jaw and quickened his pace. Almost at the front door, he realized that he'd forgotten to set the Club on his steering wheel. After a few moments' hesitation, he decided that he was too late already, so he trudged up the front steps and rang the bell.

"Hi!" His boss' wife, Paula, opened the door. Her eyes were red and she held a long-stemmed glass in her hand. "You must be one of Freddy's friends from work," she said, laughing a little.

"Uh, yes. My name is Harold. Sorry I'm late." He motioned vaguely with his hands.

"Oh!" She clapped her free hand on his shoulder and pulled him into the house. "So you're Harry! Freddy's told me about you. Please come in and have some wine." She pushed him toward the living room and shut the front door with her foot. Harold guessed she was drunk.

He walked into the living room and looked around. There were a handful of people he didn't recognize, but all the rest were from work. His boss, Fred Wasserman, ambled out of the kitchen. "Harry! So you decided to show up?" Harold had never seen Fred in anything but a suit and tie: jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt made him look like a regular guy. "Here, let me take your coat."

Harold shrugged out of his leather jacket, which he had anxiously bought with his Christmas bonus. Fred took it and said, "The wine's in the kitchen," then disappeared into the hallway.

AT LEAST IT HADN'T RAINED. IT HAD BEEN OVERCAST and cold for the three days that Fred and Paula had been hiking, but, as they kept telling each other, at least it hadn't rained. They'd been looking forward to this vacation for a month and they were determined to have a good time. They marched on through the forest.

Around the time they were beginning to think seriously about dinner, they found a pleasant clearing and decided to regard it as a sign from God to set up camp. They pitched their tent and had dinner; by the time they

were done it was very dark, very cold, and the clouds were starting to disperse overhead. The wind was methodically seeping its way through their layers of clothing. They huddled together next to their small, faithful campfire.

"Well, we might freeze to death, but at least we'll be able to see the stars," Fred said.

Paula smiled slightly, leaned a little more into him, and looked up at the sky. The clouds had thinned out enough to let a few stars peek through.

They weren't sure how long it took them to notice how bright the ambient light was, especially with only a crescent moon. For a while they were enjoying the beauty of nature, trying to ignore the cold. Then suddenly they realized they were staring at a bright point of light in the sky, just above the trees. They watched in silence for several moments; the light didn't move or change intensity. They looked at each other, confused, then they both laughed because they knew they were going to ask each other the same question.

Paula looked back up, and Fred became enraptured by her face. The intense starlight illuminated her skin, her eyes and her lips in a way he had never seen before. Her face seemed amazingly soft and natural, as if the whole time he'd known her she'd been covered with a coat of makeup and only now had taken it off.

"You know what?" she said. "I think it's that nova."

He stared at her. "What?"

"That nova." She motioned to the light overhead. "It must be that supernova."

"Oh. Yeah. Hey, Paula, will you marry me?"

It was her turn to stare. "What?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Fred…" She started to smile.

"Hmm?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I will."

NODDING TO HIS CO-WORKERS, WHO POLITELY NODDED back, Harold crossed the living room to the kitchen. Plenty of wine still available: although half a dozen empty bottles lay in the recycling bin, several reds and whites were lined up on the counter, waiting to be uncorked.

"Hello, Harold. Want some wine?"

Harold lifted his eyes from a particularly delicious-looking Merlot and tried to be social. There were four people in the kitchen, only one of whom he knew.

"Hi, John." John was the Accounts Payable manager. They didn't talk much in the office, partly because their cubicles were on different floors, but also because of their twenty-year age difference and the disparaging comments John made when they'd both tried to get a date with an attractive temp. Harold looked away. "That Merlot looks pretty interesting. Do we just help ourselves?"

"Glasses and corkscrew are on the counter." John looked around at the three others: a good-looking, dark-haired woman in her mid-twenties standing next to him and an older couple. "Anyone else want some?" asked John. "This'll be your best chance to meet Harry, tech support extraordinaire."

Harold frowned and picked up the corkscrew.

The man in the older couple cleared his throat. "I think I could use a refill." He placed his empty glass on the counter. "My name's Vic, and this lovely lady is my wife, Abby. We live next door."

Abby nodded. "How do you do?"

The cork came out with a wet, resonant pop and Harold said, "I'm doing all right." He poured himself a glass, then one for Vic. He held up the opened bottle for the dark-haired woman at John's side. "How about you?"

She shook her head, holding up a glass of white. "No, thanks. I'm still working on this. But I do think it's time I got some more cheese. If you'll excuse me…" She smiled and walked out of the kitchen. Both John and Harold watched her leave.

Harold tilted his head toward the door and asked, "Who's your friend, John?"

"Her name's Jennifer. She's a friend of Paula's." John smiled. "It's always nice to meet Paula's friends." He raised his eyebrows and nodded.

Harold nodded back and took a sip of Merlot. He looked appraisingly at the glass. "Good wine."

"Yes," said Abby. "Fred and Paula have such good taste. Such nice friends. I'm so glad they moved in here. Some of the others who came by…" Her smile faded away as she shook her in disapproval.

"How long have they been living here?" Harold asked.

"Oh," Vic said, "At least four months now."

"Closer to five," Abby added. "I'm so glad they moved in. This neighborhood needs more people like them. These last few years…" She shook her head again. "It's gone downhill, really."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, then Abby laughed. "Gee, I didn't mean to get so melancholy!" She put her hand to her forehead. "Whew! Too much wine for me." She laughed again.

"A regular lush, eh?" John said. He picked up his wine glass. "I think I'll get a few finger foods." He bowed slightly and gestured with the glass before heading out of the kitchen.

Abby sighed. "Such nice people," she said, nodding and smiling.

JOHN ENTERED THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF THE corporate office, briefcase in hand, and smiled up at the clock that read 11:00. He felt excited, happy. His feet barely moved; he floated across the empty reception area

toward the long line of cubicles. The handle of his briefcase throbbed in his hand.

Halfway to the end of the hall, to the bright, glowing windows of his manager's private office, he looked into a cube and saw a ten-year-old boy sitting in front of a monitor, tapping deliberately at a keyboard. It didn't seem the least bit odd that it was his old friend from fifth grade, Michael Buckler, aged not a day.

"Hi, Michael!" John said.

Michael glanced at John. "You're late. Fred wants to see you."

John's heart started beating faster. "Good. I want to see him."

The ten-year-old nodded. "Lunch afterward?"

John looked at his watch: 12:00. "Sure." He turned and continued down the hall, which now stretched out to infinity before him. The more he walked the further away Fred's office seemed to be.

He stopped, hunkered down, and opened his throbbing briefcase. In it was a life-like rubber mask of his face. He gingerly picked it up and fitted it completely over his head. Smoothing out the wrinkles, he stood up and, after taking a few steps, reached the door to Fred's office.

John stopped and opened his throbbing briefcase. In it was a life-like rubber mask of his face. He gingerly picked it up and fitted it completely over his head.

Fred sat behind his desk, arms folded severely across his chest, crushing his tie. The light from his black, halogen lamp cast sharp shadows against his face.

John tossed his briefcase onto Fred's credenza. Fred's mouth dropped and his arms began unfolding.

"Fred," John said intently, "I quit."

Fred's hands fiercely gripped the edge of the desk. "You—you—" The sound of splintering wood filled the office. "You—"

The sudden buzzing of the alarm clock cut through the quiet bedroom, jarring John awake. He lay motionless on the bed for a moment, breathing quickly, then shut off the alarm.

He felt different somehow. He turned his head and saw a note on his wife's pillow. His entire body seemed to sink down into the bed, break through the bottom, crash through floor, and bury itself somewhere deep in the cold dirt below their house.

He stared at the note, licked his lips, blinked. Then he struggled out of bed and took a shower. The note was still there when he trudged back into the room. Sighing, he picked it up: his eyes danced over the words, glanced away, came back again, until he finished reading.

John stood in the bedroom for a long time, not aware he was crying, and then dressed for work.

He wandered into the backyard and sat on a stone bench. Everything outside appeared sharper, harsher, as if the sun were more intense that morning. He looked up and saw a of light shining away, right above the horizon, a little behind the morning sun. He stared at it, transfixed, as it climbed into the sky. His mind stalled and hours passed until it kicked back into gear.

As he left his house, he blinked at the afterimage of the light that had seared itself into his eyes. When he arrived at work the accounting supervisor shook his head and glanced at the clock in the reception area that read 11:00. "Isn't it nuts, John? One little supernova and traffic's screwed up completely. I didn't get here until 10:30 myself. Absolutely nuts."

John nodded and headed off to his cubicle.

FIVE MINUTES OF ANECDOTES ABOUT THE NEIGHBORhood from Vic and Abby were more than Harold could handle. Fortunately, Fred, leading an entourage of three Human Resources people and their significant others, came into the kitchen to get some wine. When the HR group asked Harold if he was having a wonderful time, Harold assured them that he was. As they refilled their glasses, he excused himself and exited the kitchen.

The kitchen's earlier escapees, Jennifer and John, were standing by the snack table with Paula, Grace, Michelle, and Tony. Grace was the company's system administrator. Michelle was the receptionist and Tony was her fiancé. Harold took a sip of wine and walked toward them.

"You were born in '68?" John was saying to Jennifer. "Let's see… in 1968 I was living in L.A. and, yeah, that's when I saw the Doors in concert. Amazing show. I think I can safely say it was the best concert I've ever seen."

"The Doors?" Harold said. "Isn't that the band with the dead singer?"

John looked at him and paused. "Why, yes, Harold. I'm surprised you've heard of them, considering you hadn't even been born when Jim Morrison was alive." There were a few chuckles.

"Yeah, well, I saw the movie, by Oliver Stone. Wasn't very good."

Jennifer laughed.

Paula reached out and touched Jennifer's arm. "Hey, I want to talk to you." She turned to John and said, "Excuse us." She smiled at Harold, and the two of them walked away.

"Shucks," said Grace. "Just when it was starting to get interesting."

John frowned and picked up his empty wine glass. Clearing his throat, he retreated to the kitchen.

Grace took a bite of cheese-topped cracker and looked over at Harold. "I didn't know you and John were such good friends. The two of you've been talking up a storm since you came in."

"Yeah," Harold said. "It's a very well-kept secret. In fact, not even John or I know about it." Harold surveyed the food. There were several varieties of cheese as well as an assortment of crackers, breads, and pita wedges. He noticed that Grace was not holding a glass. "You're not drinking?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Never on Sundays."

Michelle laughed and said, "Don't worry. That means more for us." She lifted up her glass and took a sip.

Tony smiled sheepishly.

"There you go," Grace said. "Anyway, why'd it take you so long to get here? I was the first one to show up, you know. I had to hang out with Fred and Paula all alone for half an hour before anyone else showed up." She ate the rest of her cracker. "So where were you?"

"I had some errands to run. Nothing too exciting."

"Errands never are."

The doorbell rang and Paula got up to answer. Jennifer stayed in her chair and stared out the window. John re-emerged from the kitchen, looked around, and seated himself on a couch near Jennifer. Harold sighed and sipped at his wine.

Grace looked back and forth between Harold and John, then smiled innocently. "Is round three about to begin?" she asked.

Harold squinted. "I'm glad someone's enjoying this. I guess." He drank some more wine.

THE PHONE RANG, BUT JENNIFER WAS IN NO MOOD TO answer it. She'd been out with a few friends earlier, but she couldn't stop thinking about her father. It had became too much of an effort to keep up her facade, so she'd excused herself and gone home.

The phone let out a second ring.

It's amazing my friends still put up with me, she thought. *This happens every time I go out. They must be sick of it.*

There was a third ring and the answering machine took the call. "Hi. Can't answer the phone just now, so leave a message. Thanks." Beep.

"Hi, Jen. It's your brother, David. It's about nine right now. Just calling to see how you're doing. Hope you're out having fun." A pause. "Well, guess I'll call—"

Jennifer picked up the phone. "Hi—"

Feedback burst from the answering machine speaker. Growling, she slapped the machine's buttons. It beeped a few times and stopped howling. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry about what? The noise, or that you're screening your calls?"

"Hey, at least I answered, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," David said. "You're in a bad mood, aren't you?" He paused. "About Dad?"

Jennifer sighed. "I don't know how you do it. I can't get over it."

Four months before, their father had checked into Kaiser for an appendectomy. The operation went well, but the next day while he was asleep he developed an aneurysm, which burst. There was a half hour of confusion until a doctor arrived—by then, their father had died.

Lawyers were still gathering information for a malpractice suit. Their father had been a partner in a Los Angeles law firm and lived in Beverly Hills, and while neither of them would have to worry about money for a long while, settling the estate was immensely complicated. David inherited all of the house because Jennifer felt she couldn't set foot in it again.

"Jesus, Jen," David said. "It's not something I got over. It's—I don't know—it's just something I accepted, I guess. I don't think I'll ever get over it, but I have to keep living my own life, you know? Otherwise I'll just go nuts."

Jennifer realized she was winding the phone cord around her finger, and she shook it loose. "David, I feel like everything's changed. The whole world's changed—*my* world has changed. Nothing seems real anymore. There's nothing… solid. Everything's hollow, just trying to hide the… the pain of reality."

"Wow," David said. "Heavy."

Jennifer smiled a little. "See?"

"Jen, I hope you don't get offended when I say this, but you have to get out more, be around people. Sitting in your apartment alone all the time, not answering the phone, isn't good for you. I've been worried about you."

"Please, David, don't. You don't have to worry. I'll be okay. It's just taking a while."

"What about going back to school? You mentioned a college up there with a masters program—what happened to that?"

"Oh, it's still there. I haven't gotten around to filling out the forms." Jennifer sighed. "I don't know."

Through the open window, she suddenly heard car horns and shouts, the indecipherable noise of many people talking at once.

"Hey, Dave, something's going on outside. I'll call you back in ten, fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Huh? Well, okay."

"Bye." She hung up the phone, went to the window, and looked out. Cars were stopped, some with their doors open and the drivers and passengers standing in the street, others honking and flashing their high beams. People

were staring at the sky, pointing west toward the ocean, and shouting.

She left the window and went downstairs, out onto the sidewalk. A brilliant point of light shone in the sky, not far from the moon. It was painful to look at directly. People kept glancing at it, then back at everyone else, at completely baffled but happy faces.

People talked excitedly, asked each other questions, laughed. Traffic was stopped—there were groups wandering in the street, half the cars were parked. Eventually, those who were honking gave up and got out of their cars to look up at what was causing the commotion.

Jennifer realized she was smiling, maybe because everyone else was smiling. A warm feeling slowly started to grow inside her.

The word "nova" began to be heard as soon as everyone realized it wasn't a plane or a UFO, and soon everyone was saying it, laughing, pointing at the sky, smiling. There was a shout and someone began to spray champagne over part of the crowd.

The warm glow spread all the way through her, and Jennifer felt her whole body tingling with something she hadn't felt in a long time. She stayed outside on the sidewalk well past midnight, talking to passers-by. even after the star disappeared below the horizon.

As Harold sauntered over to join Jennifer and John, Fred came out of the kitchen and headed over to the hallway to meet the new arrivals.

"Tim! Sarah! Glad you could make it. Here, let me take your coats. The wine's in the kitchen," he said as he disappeared into the hallway.

Harold sat down on the hardwood floor and put his back against the couch. Tim and Sarah nodded at Harold, who politely nodded back, and exchanged greetings with John. "So," Tim said to John, "I hope all this wine won't give you a hangover, make you late for our meeting tomorrow morning."

John laughed. "I thought that was the general idea here. Hangover excuses for everybody."

Harold leaned forward and said to Jennifer, "So, hey, how do you know Paula?"

Jennifer turned, surprised. "Through school. We're in the same program."

"And that is…?"

"Anthropology."

John joined in with, "Which university?"

"Oh, it's a small private college. You probably haven't heard of it. They have a very progressive curriculum."

Paula came back over and sat in a chair next to Jennifer.

"What does that mean?" John asked, smiling. "You don't have to study?"

"No." Jennifer didn't smile back. "They take a more holistic approach to education. They look at interactions between what we study and the real world, to make sure nothing we do screws up the community, unlike most of academia, which stomps around studying things and then leaves them in a shambles."

"Yeah!" Paula said. "That's telling him, Jen."

Jennifer grinned. "Hey," she said, glancing at Paula, "I'm on a roll."

Paula reached over and patted her on the knee, then said to John and Harold, "Enough about us. Hey, Harry, say something about yourself. What did you major in?"

Harold scratched his head. "Okay. I was a bio major, graduated last June."

"So, naturally," John said, "you pursued a career in tech support."

"Well, I took some computer classes, and biology wasn't something I saw myself doing for the rest of my life, you know? Besides, I'd just graduated and needed to pay rent." He shrugged. "Either that or get evicted."

"Ah," John said. He looked at Jennifer. "Is it safe for me to assume, then, that you're a part-time student? You have a regular job, to keep from, ah… "—he glanced at Harold—"getting evicted?"

"No, I'm full-time. I take on temp jobs and get financial aid."

"From the school?" John asked with a wry smile. "Or from the parents?"

"A little from both." She pursed her lips and looked at Paula. "Have you been talking about me?"

"No," said Paula, and hiccuped. "No, of course not."

Grace walked up and sat on the couch between John and Harold. "Hi, guys," Grace said. "What have I missed?"

Jennifer grabbed her glass and said, "Maybe I should get some more wine."

"Nonsense," Paula said. "You and I have been drinking the house dry, and, look, Grace hasn't even had any yet. What's wrong, Grace? Don't you like our wine selection?"

"Oh, sure," Grace said quickly. "Sure I do. It's fine—I just don't feel like drinking, is all."

"No?" said Paula, giggling a little. "Why? Is the memory of your last hangover still too recent?"

Grace smiled, nodded. "You could say that." She tilted her head to the side. "It was about a year ago, When the supernova first appeared. Almost a month before had I started working with these two bozos." She stuck her thumbs out to her sides, pointing at John and Harold. "It was at a silly supernova party, and, yeah, I drank a little bit too much."

"That long ago, huh? Wow. Must have been some hangover."

"Yeah," Grace said, nodding. "It was."

NOISE. SO MANY LOUD THINGS GOING ON AT ONCE IT overwhelmed her.

Grace stood in the doorway of the system administrator's house in the heart of Silicon Valley. A banner reading "Welcome To The End Of The World!" hung on the opposite wall. People stumbled in one door and out another, laughing and spilling drinks.

She walked into the living room, sorting through the noise. They Might Be Giants blasted from the stereo, on top of which five of their compact disks were propped in front of a "Now Playing…" sign. Four televisions, their volumes up to compete with the stereo, played taped episodes of *Doctor Who, Star Trek, Star Trek: The Next Generation,* and *Blake's 7.* Groups were clustered around the sets, quoting lines and cheering each other on. A blender in the kitchen grated away at full force. More people gathered around the pool table and amused themselves by making fun of drunk players, the billiard balls snapping as they hit each other, ricocheting.

The blender stopped and Greg—the owner of the house and the party's host—walked into the living room holding a pitcher in one had and a stack of plastic cups in the other. "Hey!" he shouted, spotting her. "Grace!" He held out the stack of cups: she took the top one and he filled it from the pitcher. "Drink up, for tomorrow we die!"

"What am I drinking?"

"Margarita!" In the kitchen, the blender started up again. "Oh, hey, you can put your coat on my bed. It's down the hall, last door on the right. The door on the left's the bathroom." He strode away, topping off other peoples' cups.

Sipping her drink, she found his room right where he said it was. There was already a huge pile of jackets on the bed, so she draped her coat over a chair. She gulped some more or her margarita and went back to the party.

In the kitchen, some guy dressed in black with a ponytail reigned over the blender, filling it with ice, mix, and tequila, whipping it all up, then pouring the result into the emptied pitchers which were constantly returned and picked up by peripatetic party guests. It struck her as an alcoholic ballet, and she felt it was only proper when one of the pitcher-carriers refilled her cup.

"Hello!"

Grace turned around and saw an overweight man with a bushy beard standing next to the snack table. He wore a plaid flannel shirt and seemed to be in his late twenties. He held a over-flowing plastic cup and was swaying a little on his feet.

"My name's Phil. Whaddya think of the party?" Phil's eyes were caught in a cycle of staring at the snacks, her breasts, then finally glancing up at her face before starting over again. Grace decided to consider it amusing.

"Pretty good." Grace washed down some salsa with her margarita. She could feel a slight buzz coming on. "It certainly is loud, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" Phil said with a quick laugh. More of his drink sloshed out of his cup.

Shouts rang out from the living room. "Outside! A toast! To the supernova!" Hordes of people streamed in from the living room and out the back door, sweeping Grace and Phil along with them. "A toast!"

Grace lost Phil in the crowd. There must have been fifty or sixty people outside, milling around in the back yard. About a dozen carried pitchers, and they made sure everyone's cup was full.

"Okay, listen up!" It was Greg making the toast. He climbed up on a picnic table and lifted up his cup towards the supernova, just visible between the clouds, beneath the gibbous moon. Everyone followed suit. "Praised are you, O supernova, tireless bringer of light! We raise our glasses in honor of the alien civilizations you have wiped out and the *wonderful* excuse for a party you give us. To the end of the world!" People shouted, cheered, howled. Greg lowered the cup to his lips, drained it, and everyone else followed suit.

"So, about five billion years from now, they'd know that the sun was ten billion years old and that at any moment it would be going giant, thereby wiping them out. There'd be no way around it. Pretty wild, huh?"

Grace smiled and stared into her empty cup. The buzz was going pretty strong.

The man standing next to her, she noticed, was the margarita master himself, ponytail and all. He had pale skin, thin lips, and a pitcher in his left hand. He swished it around, said, "Not much left," and poured the last of its contents into her cup and his own.

"I had an interesting thought," he said. "The earth and the sun have been around for five billion years, give or take a few, right? So, if there's an apocalyptic nuclear disaster or something similar that completely wipes out everything on the planet, then whatever sort of life evolves after that—say, giant sentient cockroaches—it'll probably take about the same amount of time for them to get to our current level of technology as it has for us."

"Yeah," said Grace, blinking. "So?"

"So, about five billion years from now, they'd be doing what we're doing. They'd know that the sun was ten billion years old and that at any moment it would be going giant, thereby wiping them out. There'd be no way around it." He drained his cup. "Pretty wild, huh?"

"Yeah. That's funny," she said. "I wonder what their worldview would be like."

Ponytail shrugged. "Hey, wanna go play pool? Looks like the table's open."

Over the next couple of hours, Grace played eight ball and hung out by the pool table, drinking constantly—her cup was never empty for long. She kept trying to put it someplace out of the way and lose it, but it invariably made its way back to her hand, full.

She suddenly realized that her eyes were closed, and she opened them to find herself leaning against a wall in the dining room. How long she'd been like that, she didn't know. She laughed and looked around. It seemed like even more people had arrived at the party, but she may have only been seeing double. She didn't know. She didn't care. She thought it was funny.

Greg was in the living room, talking to someone holding a pitcher. She clumsily grabbed a cup that she hoped was hers and deliberately made her way towards Greg, step by step.

Greg and the pitcher-bearer watched her as she staggered over to them, then as she raised her hand and wiped the sweat off her forehead. When she came nearer, Greg said, "Hey, Grace, you doing okay?"

"Oh yeah," she mumbled. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just fine. Who's your friend with the pitcher?"

"This is Bill." Greg grinned at him. "Bill, this is Grace."

She draped her arm on his shoulder, letting him support her weight, and held out her cup. "Hiya, Bill," she said. "Fill 'er up, please."

Bill obliged as Greg said, "Uh, Grace, maybe you've had enough…"

"Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no. No, I haven't even started, yet." She took a healthy swallow and smiled.

Bill cleared his throat. "Well, I was just telling Greg how ironic it would be if the Big One hit tomorrow, what with this end-of-the-world party going on tonight."

"Oh, yeah," Grace said. "What's-his-name, he was talking about that. Something about cockroaches."

Bill frowned. "Uh, cockroaches?"

"No, Grace," said Greg. "No cockroaches here. We're talking earthquakes."

"Yeah," said Bill. He looked at Grace, who was still hanging onto his shoulder. "Were you here back in '89, for the Loma Prieta quake?"

"No. East Coast. Missed all the fun." She drank some more of her margarita.

A couple of other guys joined the conversation. "I was here during the earthquake," said one. "I'd just moved here a month before to start a job at Amdahl. Great way to be introduced to California, huh? Funny thing was everybody else in my apartment complex had stuff break or pipes burst or something, but nothing happened to me—a few CDs fell over on the shelf, that was it."

Grace stopped smiling. Her stomach didn't feel well at all. She stood up straight, taking her arm off Bill, and inhaled deeply, trying to get everything to settle down.

"I was in a little conference room," said another guy, "up on the ninth floor of our building. I was in a meeting with this woman, see, and everything starting shaking. We looked at each other as if to say 'Oh, God, this is it!' and I thought, 'This is who they'll find me with, when they dig my body out of the rubble.' I wondered what my wife would think." He laughed. "Crazy, what can go through your mind during a disaster, huh?"

Grace closed her eyes and continued drawing deep breaths. She could sense she was fighting a losing battle, so she opened her eyes, mumbled something and headed off to the bathroom as quickly and carefully as she could. She thought, down the hall, last door on the… right? Or the left?

She stumbled along the hallway, one hand on the wall to keep herself from falling, the other on her mouth. The door on the right was open, and she staggered through it and saw she was in the bedroom. She tried to turn around, but the room was spinning, the ceiling falling forward and down, the floor slipping behind her. The best she could do was stand still and run her hands through her hair.

"Grace…"

Her nausea overcame the last of her resolve. She tipped forward, onto the bed, onto the hundreds of jackets, and lost the battle.

She then rolled off and landed on the floor. The last thing she saw before passing out was Greg standing in the doorway, looking on in horror.

The next morning, she barely managed to get to her car and drive home. On Monday, she showed up to work just long enough to turn in her letter of resignation.

THEIR HOST FRED JOINED THE GROWING GROUP ON THE couch and chairs. "Hello! What's going on here?"

"Oh, Fred, you missed it!" Paula said gleefully. "I got Grace to admit she's still recovering from a hangover she had during the supernova!" Grace looked away.

"Is that so?" Fred said, turning to Grace. She nodded. "Hmm," he continued. "You know, that was when I proposed to Paula, when it appeared. We were out in the woods, camping. It was all very romantic."

Paula laughed. "Oh yeah. There we were, freezing our asses off, and all filthy and smelly after three days of hiking. Very romantic."

"Well, I meant the supernova."

"Yeah, yeah. That was. And then, to sustain the romance, we hurried back to the car and drove to Las Vegas, so we could get married."

Fred frowned, and Paula reached over and squeezed his hand. "Oh, come on, Fred, that's my favorite part of the story!"

John cleared his throat. "Jennifer, did you do anything interesting during the supernova?"

Tim and Sarah walked over to the group. "Trading supernova stories, eh?" Tim asked, smiling. He motioned politely with his wine glass for Jennifer to begin.

She sighed. "Nothing exciting happened to me. It was during one of those directionless phases, you know? I didn't know what I wanted to do. Then, *bang!,* there was the supernova and I decided to go back to school. And now here I am." She looked around at everyone. "Quid pro quo, John."

He furrowed his brow and cleared his throat again. "Oh, there's not much to say. I had a very boring supernova experience."

"Oh, come now, John," Tim said. "I remember you showed up late for work that morning. You must have something to tell."

John shifted on the couch, glanced at Tim. "Not really. I'd gone to sleep early and didn't even see the damned thing the night before. I woke up and tried to go to work, but the traffic was miserable. There must have been something in those supernova rays that made people drive slowly and bump into each other."

"That's it?" Tim asked, a little smile on his face.

"Yep."

"What about you, Harold?" Paula asked. "Tell us your supernova story."

"My story?"

"Yeah. It's got to be better than John's, at least."

"Okay, okay. Let's see… It was toward the end of Spring Semester, and I was busy writing final papers and cramming for exams and all. The night before my last final, though, my roommate dragged me up into the hills to celebrate his finishing his finals, and he promptly disappeared into the bushes with his girlfriend, leaving me all alone with nothing to do but stare at the supernova. That's my clearest memory of it. Needless to say, I didn't do very well on my final the next morning."

Paula laughed. "That has to be one of the best supernova stories I've heard."

Harold smiled. "Really."

THE METALLIC CRUNCH AND THE HISS OF THE ESCAPING carbon dioxide made Harold's mouth water. He took a few gulps of Coke and stared back down at the textbook, at the same page he'd been staring at for twenty minutes. His last final of the semester was the next morning and all he wanted was for it and the academic year to be over.

He wasn't completely ready for the exam. Math had always been his weakest subject, and there were several key chapters he needed to review. Plus, he'd been averaging three hours of sleep each the past three days and he desperately wanted to catch at least five hours that night. He rubbed his eyes, took another sip of Coke, and turned the page.

The dorm room door banged open and Harold's roommate, Mike, bounded in.

"A-ha! Yes! *I'm done!!"* Mike tossed his backpack on the floor, jumped up in the air, let out a another whoop and collapsed on his bed. "I'm done, Harry! Summer, here I come!"

"That's great, Mike. Tomorrow afternoon I'll be just as happy as you." He stretched his arms out, arching his back, and then downed some more Coke.

"Oh yeah, you've still got one more to go." Mike swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. "But, man, you've been studying your ass off— you've got nothing to worry about, you'll do fine. Listen, Christine's coming over with her roommate—you met her, didn't you? Jill?"

"They're coming over here? Mike, I need to study."

"No, wait, I'm gonna drive us all up to the lookout so we can get a good view of the nova, you know, and rejoice about the end of finals!"

"Ah. Sure." Harold hunched over his book. "Sounds like a plan."

"Yeah. And, you know, I want you to come along, Harold."

"No, I'm staying right here. I *really* have to do some more studying."

"Aw, man…"

Harold looked up, exasperated. "Tomorrow night. I'll do it tomorrow night, okay?"

"Tomorrow night? I'm not gonna be here! I'm jetting after lunch. Come on, man! You gotta come along. Really, you've studied more than enough for the test. And Jill's gonna be coming along, too. You've met her, right? She's a total babe. It'll be just me and Christine and you and Jill."

Harold ran his hand through his hair. "I really should study."

"Hey, I swear, it'll only be for a half hour, forty-five minutes tops. We'll go up there, bask in the supernova—every day you wait, you know, it just fades away that much more! It'll be hella romantic, man. Then I'll bring you back, you can do your last little bit of studying, and tomorrow you'll ace the exam. I tell you, this is exactly what you need."

"Well…"

There was a knock at the door.

"That's them, man. You in or out?" Mike skipped over and opened the door. "Christine! Hey! Time to party!" He gave her a big hug.

Harold looked up from his desk. Rolling her eyes, Jill stepped around them and into the room. She had long black hair and had on jeans and a jacket. Harold *did* remember her.

"Hey, Harold." Jill sat down on Mike's bed. "Still studying?"

"Um, yeah. I've got my last final tomorrow morning." Harold paused, looked over at Jill, then closed his book. "But I'm getting pretty burned out. I think maybe I should take a little break."

The next thing he knew, Harold was in the back seat of Mike's car with Jill, heading up the windy, hillside roads to Lookout Point. Fifteen minutes later they parked in a clearing and everyone piled out.

"It's kinda chilly," Christine said, rubbing her arms.

"I've got a sweatshirt somewhere in the trunk." Mike went around to the back of the car. "You two go on ahead. We'll catch up."

Harold and Jill walked up the road, around a bend, and then they were at Lookout Point. There was another group of people off to one side but they were keeping pretty quiet. The two of them headed further from the road and sat down on a rocky outcropping.

The lights of the city stretched out before them, twinkling in the rising heat. Strings of white and yellow outlined the streets and clusters of rectangles where houses and buildings squatted; splashes of red, blue, green and yellow shown from store signs and traffic lights. The full moon was rising in the east and seemed larger than it should be. At the west horizon was the supernova, an intensely bright pinprick of light.

Harold took a deep breath. "It's beautiful out," he said.

"Yeah. Aren't you glad you came?"

"Definitely." He sat there for a moment, stargazing. "I read that the supernova is about eight hundred light years away. So, it took that light eight hundred years to get here." He laughed a little. "Spending a few minutes appreciating it is the least I can do."

Jill hugged her knees. "We'll always remember it."

They sat a moment, and Harold gestured up at the sky. "You know, that supernova is *ours.* It belongs to our generation. It's something we'll tell our kids about."

"The Summer Recess Supernova?"

"Exactly. And I can tell, you know, I can tell that this is going to be our most memorable summer."

"I hope so. My boyfriend and I going to take a trip together. There'll definitely be some serious celebrating going on."

Harold's hand clenched into a fist. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I wish he were here now, you know? But he's got two finals tomorrow, so he's in the library, studying."

Harold's fist unclenched. "Oh." He stared out at the supernova.

Jill looked back at the road. "Hmm… I guess Mike and Christine are taking their time getting here, huh?"

"Guess so." Harold lowered his gaze to the city lights and sighed. "Man, I knew this would happen."

THE PARTY WOUND DOWN QUICKLY. PEOPLE WANDERED back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, emptying the last of the wine bottles into their glasses and polishing off the remaining edibles. Vic and Abby had already left, as had the Human Resource group.

Harold was standing by the snack table, wondering if he should have one last bite of brie, when he heard, "Bye, Harold. Nice meeting you." He looked around and saw Jennifer, smiling, wave at him as she disappeared into the hallway. "Bye," he said, walking after her.

He reached the hall as she was buttoning up her coat. "Hey," he said. "Need a ride?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I drove." She finished fiddling with her coat and picked up her purse. "I got a great parking spot, right out in front."

"Lucky you. I had to park blocks away."

She started towards the door. "Well, hey, be careful. See ya." She walked out the door.

Harold sighed and walked back into the living room, where he found John hovering over the snack table, eating the last of the brie.

"Get her phone number?" John asked.

"Yeah," he lied. "I did." Harold looked past John and found the party's host. "Hey, Fred, thanks for having me over. It was fun."

"Good! Glad you had a good time."

Harold went back to the hallway, donned his jacket, and headed outside. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and stared down at the sidewalk as he walked to his car. *Why do I bother going to things? Swapping nova stories… Jeez. At least Jennifer was there. Could've been worse, I guess. Fred could have pulled out an acoustic guitar and played folk songs all night.*

Three blocks. He reached the fire hydrant and stopped. His mouth dropped open and he blinked a few times as he stared at the empty asphalt. Fire hydrant, curb, empty asphalt. No car. His car was gone.

Harold let out a strangled cry and looked around. He ran his hands through his hair. *Oh, man,* he thought despairingly, *not tonight! Why would this have to happen to me? Tonight?*

He kicked the hydrant and winced as pain shot up through his leg. After a few moments, he turned back towards Fred's house, intending to call the police. A taxi came down the street; Harold stopped, swallowed and flagged it down. He gave the driver directions and went home, the whole time staring out the window at an empty space in the sky, expecting another supernova.

NOVALIGHT *PART THREE*

GREG KNAUSS

August 1998

IT WASN'T OVER.

A second nova appeared, not as bright and as powerful as the first, but as beautiful and terrible all over again. It had the same spectral progression as the other nova, the same radiation flares, and was in the same piece of the sky. No barrage of information had preceded this one—nobody tapping out a message before being consumed by fire.

Reporters flooded the group with phone calls, asking why they hadn't warned them about this.

They hadn't warned them because they hadn't known it was coming.

The astrophysicists gave press conferences re-explaining everything they had said four years ago, but this time they started hearing questions they couldn't answer. What were the odds of two novae occupying the same portion of space? Are they related? Will there be more?

One could start a panic, answering questions like that.

The group went over the second part of the message again and re-ran the models they'd built, expanding them beyond a single solar system. They input information about the nova's five nearest neighbors and coded them into the model.

Eventually, it happened in the computer, too.

The neighboring stars felt the effects of the nova, felt it and suffered for it. It was something beyond radiation or simple shock waves or even some hypothetical space-time compression. The simulation somehow duplicated it, but they didn't have a real theory as to how it happened.

There was a harmonic in the original nova that seemed incidental when they first ran the models, something that went on deep in the star's core. It started subtly, then built until the center of the star literally tore itself apart, allowing the surface to collapse inward. The sudden compression caused the nova.

In the model, that same harmonic showed up in the neighboring stars. It wasn't immediate, but it built over time. After being exposed to the original nova, the harmonic began in the new star, eventually causing it to collapse and explode as well.

Distance played a factor. The star closest to the first nova suffered the first collapse—almost exactly like the second nova that burned in the sky—while the furthest didn't show any significant change until it was showered by the remains of the second star.

Like dominos.

October 2041

THE SKY IS ON FIRE.

Novas have been blossoming across the horizon for months, the number increasing exponentially. Even our sun is showing signs of internal deterioration and collapse, following the cycle laid out in the second part of the message. The physicists say we have another century or so before it goes nova as well. By then, it will be a blessing. The radiation will have done enough damage.

We decoded the third part of the message, not that it makes much of a difference. Abstract concepts are the hardest things to express across cultures, much less across species, but the linguists are fairly sure of what they have. The group is divided about whether to announce what we found, because it all seems so sad.

The message we received from the aliens, almost fifty years ago now, isn't a greeting. We were naïve to think so. It's not a gift, either, or a warning.

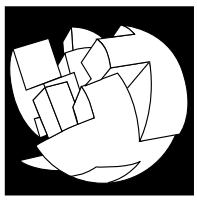
Fluid, exaggerated movements mime an act of horror. A small group of aliens gracefully disassembles a sphere, carefully sliding out interlocking puzzle pieces, dropping each to the floor to shatter. Halfway through, the sphere can no longer support itself and it collapses, falling and splintering, shards sending dizzying reflections to play off the muted walls.

An alien stands a moment, staring at the shattered wreck at its feet, and drops to its knees to begin shifting among the pieces, hopelessly trying to fit them back together. The pieces large enough to pick up crumble to sand as it fumbles for them and the alien is eventually left moving long, slender fingers through a pile of dust.

Finally, it scoops up a handful of the dust and slowly lets it drain through its fingers.

The aliens didn't send us a greeting, or a gift, or a warning.

They sent us an apology.



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