

New Light On The Drake Equation

by Ian R MacLeod

As he did on the first Wednesday of every month, after first finishing off the bottle of wine he'd fallen asleep with, then drinking three bleary fingers of absinthe, and with an extra slug for good measure, Tom Kelly drove down into St. Hilaire to collect his mail and provisions. The little town was red-brown, shimmering in the depths of the valley, flecked with olive trees, as he slewed the old Citroën around the hairpins from his mountain. Up to the east, where the karst rose in a mighty crag, he could just make out the flyers circling against the sheer white drop if he rubbed his eyes and squinted, and the glint of their wings as they caught the morning thermals. But Tom felt like a flyer of sorts himself, now the absinthe was fully in his bloodstream. He let the Citroën's piebald tires, the skid of the grit and the pull of the mountain, take him endlessly downwards. Spinning around the bends blind and wrong-side with the old canvas roof flapping, in and out of the shadows, scattering sheep in the sweet hot roar of the antique motor, Tom Kelly drove down from his mountain towards the valley.

In the *bureau de poste*, Madame Brissac gave him a smile that seemed even more patronising than usual.

"Any messages?" he croaked.

She blinked slowly. "One maybe two." Bluebottles circled the close air, which smelled of boiled sweets and Gitanes and Madame Brissac. Tom swayed slightly in his boots. He wiped off some of the road grit which had clung to the stubble on his face. He picked a stain from off his tee-shirt, and noticed as he did so that a fresh age spot was developing on the back of his right hand. It would disappoint her, really, if he took a language vial and started speaking fluent French after all these years-or even if he worked at it the old way, using bookplates and audio samples, just as he'd always been promising himself. It would deprive her of their small monthly battle.

"Then, ah, *je voudrais ...*" He tried waving his arms.

"You would like to have?"

"Yes please. *Oui. Ah-s'il vous plaît ...*"

Still the tepid pause, the droning bluebottles. Or Madame Brissac could acquire English, Tom thought, although she was hardly likely to do it for his sake.

"You late." She said eventually.

"You mean-"

Then the door banged open in a crowded slab of shadows and noise and a cluster of flyers, back from their early morning spin on the thermals, bustled up behind Tom with skinsuits squealing, the folded tips of their wings bumping against the brown curls of sticky flypaper which the bluebottles had been scrupulously avoiding. These young people, Tom decided as he glanced back at them, truly were like bright alien insects in their gaudy skinsuits, their thin bodies garishly striped with the twisting logos of sports companies and their wings, a flesh of fine silk stretched between feathery bones, then folded up behind their backs like delicate umbrellas. And they were speaking French, too; speaking it in loud high voices, but overdoing every phrase and gesture and emphasis in the way that people always did when

they were new to a language. They thought that just because they could understand each other and talk sensibly to their flying instructor and follow the tour guide and order a drink at the bar that they were jabbering away like natives, but then they hadn't yet come up against Madame Brissac, who would be bound to devise some bureaucratic twist or incomprehension which would send them away from here without whatever particular form or permission it was that they were expecting. Tom turned back to Madame Brissac and gave her a grin from around the edges of his gathering absinthe headache. She didn't bother to return it. Instead, she muttered something that sounded like *I'm Judy*.

"What? *Voulez-vous répéter?*"

"Is Thursday."

"Ah. *Je comprends*. I see ..." Not that he did quite, but the flyers were getting impatient and crowding closer to him, wings rustling with echoes of the morning air that had recently been filling them and the smell of fresh sweat, clean endeavour. How was it, Tom wondered, that they could look so beautiful from a distance, and so stupid and ugly close up? But *Thursday*-and he'd imagined it was Wednesday. Of course he'd thought that it was Wednesday, otherwise he wouldn't be here in St. Hilaire, would he? He was a creature of habit, worn in by the years like the grain of the old wood of Madame Brissac's counter. So he must have lost track, and/or not bothered to check his calendar back up on the mountain. An easy enough mistake to make, living the way he did. Although ...

"You require them? Yes?"

"*S'il vous plaît ...*"

At long last, Madame Brissac was turning to the pigeonholes where she kept his and a few other message cards filed according to her own alchemic system. Putting them in one place, labelled under Kelly; Tom-or American; Drunk; Elderly; Stupid-was too simple for her. Neither had Tom ever been able to see a particular pattern which would relate to the source of the cards, which were generally from one or other of his various academic sponsors and came in drips and drabs and rushes, but mostly drabs. Those old brown lines of wooden boxes, which looked as if they had probably once held proper old-fashioned letters and telegrams, and perhaps messages and condolences from the World Wars, and the revolutionary proclamations of the sans-culottes, and decrees from the Sun King, and quite possibly even the odd pigeon, disgorged their contents to Madame Brissac's quick hands in no way that Tom could ever figure. He could always ask, of course, but that would just be an excuse for a raising of Gallic eyebrows and shoulders in mimed incomprehension. After all, Madame Brissac was Madame Brissac, and the flyers behind him were whispering, fluttering, trembling like young egrets, and it was none of his business.

There were market stalls lined across the Place de la Révolution, which had puzzled Tom on his way into the *bureau de poste*, but no longer. The world was right and he was wrong. This was Thursday. And his habitual café was busier than usual, although the couple who were occupying his table got up at his approach and strolled off, hand in hand, past the heaped and shadowed displays of breads and fruits and cheeses. The girl had gone for an Audrey Hepburn look, but the lad had the muscles of a paratrooper beneath his sleeveless tee shirt, and his flesh was green and lightly scaled. To Tom, it looked like a skin disease. He wondered, as lonely men gazing at young couples from café tables have wondered since time immemorial, what the hell she saw in him.

The waiter Jean-Benoît was busier than usual, and, after giving Tom a glance that almost registered surprise, took his time coming over. Tom, after all, would be going nowhere in any hurry. And he had his cards-all six of them-to read. They lay there, face down on the plastic tablecloth; a hand of poker he had to play. But he knew already what the deal was likely to be. One was blue and almost plain, with a

pattern like rippled water, which was probably some kind of junk mail, and another looked suspiciously like a bill for some cyber-utility he probably wasn't even using, and the rest, most undoubtedly, were from his few remaining sponsors. Beside them on the table, like part of a fine still-life into which he and these cards were an unnecessary intrusion, lay the empty carafe and the wine glasses from which the lovers had been drinking. Wine at ten in the morning! That was France for you. *This* was France. And he could do with a drink himself, could Tom Kelly. Maybe just a pastis, which would sit nicely with the absinthe he'd had earlier-just as a bracer, mind. Tom sighed and rubbed his temples and looked about him in the morning brightness. Up at the spire of St. Marie rising over the awnings of the market, then down at the people, gaudily, gorgeously fashionable in their clothes, their skins, their faces. France, this real France of the living, was a place he sometimes felt he only visited on these Wednesday-this Thursday-mornings. He could have been anywhere for the rest of the time, up with the stars there on his mountain, combing his way through eternity on the increasing offchance of an odd blip. That was why he was who he was-some old kook whom people like Madame Brissac and Jean-Benoît patronized without ever really knowing. That was why he'd never really got around to mastering this language which was washing all around him in persibilant waves. Jean-Benoît was still busy, flipping his towel and serving up crepes with an on-off smile of his regulation-handsome features, his wings so well tucked away that no one would ever really know he had them. Like a lot of the people who worked here, he did the job so he could take to the air in his free time. Tom, with his *trois diget pastis merci*, was never going to be much of a priority.

Tom lifted one of the cards and tried to suppress a burp as the bitter residue of absinthe flooded his mouth. The card was from the Aston University, in Birmingham, England, of all places. Now, he'd forgotten *they* were even sponsoring him. He ran his finger down the playline, and half-closed his eyes to witness a young man he'd never seen before in his life sitting at the kind of impressively wide desk that only people, in Tom's experience, who never did any real work possessed.

"Mister Kelly, it's a real pleasure to make your acquaintance ... " The young man paused. He was clearly new to whatever it was he was doing, and gripping that desk as if it was perched at the top of a roller-coaster ride. "As you may have seen in the academic press, I've now taken over from Doctor Sally Normanton. I didn't know her personally, but I know that all of you who did valued her greatly, and I, too, feel saddened by the loss of a fine person and physicist ... "

Tom withdrew his finger from the card for a moment, and dropped back into France. He'd only ever met the woman once. She'd been warm and lively and sympathetic, he remembered, and had moved about on autolegs because of the advanced arthritis which, in those days at least, the vials hadn't been able to counteract. They'd sat under the mossy trees and statues in Birmingham's Centenary Square, which for him had held other memories, and she'd sighed and smiled and explained how the basic policy of her institution had gone firmly against any positive figure to the Drake Equation several decades before, but Sally Normanton herself had always kept a soft spot for that kind of stuff herself, and she'd really got into physics in the first place on the back of reading Clarke and Asimov. Not that she imagined Tom had heard of them? But Tom had, of course. They were of almost of the same generation. He'd developed a dust allergy from hunching over those thrilling, musty analog pages as a kid. They chatted merrily, and on the walk back to the campus Sally Normanton had confided as she heaved and clicked on her legs that she had control of a smallish fund. It was left over from some government work, and was his to have for as long as it took the accountants to notice. And that was more than twenty years ago. And now she was dead.

"... physicist. But in clearing out and revising her responsibilities, it's come to my attention that monies have been allocated to your project which, I regret to say ... "

Tom span the thing forward until he came to the bit at the end when the young man, who had one eye

green and one eye blue-and nails like talons, so perhaps he too was a flyer, although he didn't look quite thin enough and seemed too easily scared-announced that he'd left a simulacrum of his business self on the card, which would be happy to answer any pertinent questions, although the decision to withdraw funds was, regrettably, quite irrevocable. The ai was there, of course, to save the chance that Tom might try to bother this man of business with feeble pleas. But Tom knew he was lucky to have got what he got from that source, and even luckier that they weren't talking about suing him to take it all back.

Aston University. England. The smell of different air. Different trees. If there was one season that matched the place, a mood that always seemed to be hanging there in the background even on the coldest or hottest or wettest of days, it had to be fall, autumn. How long had it been now? Tom tried not to think-that was one equation which even to him always came back as a recurring nothing. He noticed instead that the wineglass that the pretty young girl had been drinking from bore the red imprint of her lipstick, and was almost sad to see it go, and with it the better memories he'd been trying to conjure, when Jean-Benoît finally bustled up and plonked a glass of cloudy yellow liquid, which Tom wasn't really sure that he wanted any longer, down in front of him. *Voilà. Merci.* Pidgin French as he stared at the cards from Madame Brissac's incomprehensible pigeonholes. But he drank it anyway, the pastis. Back in one. At least it got rid of the taste of the absinthe.

And the day was fine, the market was bustling. It would be a pity to spoil this frail good mood he was building with messages which probably included the words *regret*, *withdraw*, or at the very least, *must query* ... This square, it was baguettes and Edith Piaf writ large, it was the Eiffel Tower in miniature. The warm smells of garlic and slightly dodgy drains and fine dark coffee. And those ridiculous little poodles dragged along by those long-legged women. The shouts and the gestures, the old widows in black who by now were probably younger than he was muttering to themselves and barging along with their stripy shopping bags like extras from the wrong film and scowling at this or that vial-induced wonder. And a priest in his cassock stepping from the church, pausing in the sunlight at the top of the steps to take in the scene, although he had wings behind him which he stretched as if to yawn, and his hair was scarlet. Another flyer. Tom smiled to think how he got on with his congregation, which was mostly those scowling old women, and thought about ordering-why not?-another pastis ...

Then he noticed a particular figure wandering beside the stalls at the edge of the market where displays of lace billowed in the wind which blew off the karst and squeezed in a warm light breeze down between the washing-strung tenements. It couldn't be, of course. Couldn't be. It was just that lipstick on the edge of that glass which had pricked that particular memory. That, and getting a message from England, and that woman dying, and losing another income source, all of which, if he'd have let them, would have stirred up a happy-sad melange of memories. She was wearing a dark blue sleeveless dress and was standing in a bright patch of sunlight which flamed on her blonde hair and made it hard for him to see her face. She could have been anyone, but in that moment, she could have been Terr, and Tom felt the strangely conflicting sensations of wanting to run over and embrace her, and also to dig a hole for himself where he could hide forever right here beneath this café paving. He blinked. His head swam. By the time he'd refocused, the girl, the woman, had moved on. A turn of bare arm, a flash of lovely calf. Why *did* they have to change themselves like they did now? Women were perfect as they were. Always had been, as far as Tom was concerned-or as best he could remember. Especially Terr. But then perhaps that had been an illusion, too.

Tom stood up and dropped a few francs on the table and blundered off between the market stalls. That dark blue sleeveless dress, those legs, that hair. His heart was pounding as it hadn't done in years from some strange inner exertion of memory. Even if it *wasn't* her, which it obviously wasn't, he still wanted to know, to see. But St. Hilaire was Thursday-busy. The teeming market swallowed him up and spat him out again downhill where the steps ran beside the old battlements and the river flashed under the willow trees, then uphill by the bright, expensive shops along the Rue de Commerce, which offered in their

windows designer clothes, designer vials, designer lives. Fifteen different brands of colloquial French in bottles like costly perfumes and prices to match. Only you crushed them between your teeth and the glass tasted like spun sugar and tiny miracles of lavish engineering poured down your throat and through the walls of your belly and into your bloodstream where they shed their protective coating and made friends with your immune system and hitched a ride up to your brain. Lessons were still necessary (they played that down on the packaging) but only one or two, and they involved little more than sitting in flashing darkness in a Zen-like state of calm induced by various drug suppositories (this being France) while nanomolecules fiddled with your sites of language and cognition until you started *parlez vous*-ing like a native. Or you could grow wings, although the vials in the sports shops were even more expensive. But the dummies beyond the plateglass whispered and beckoned to Tom and fluttered about excitedly; Day-Glo fairies, urging him to make the investment in a fortnight's experience that would last a lifetime.

Tom came to an old square at the far end of the shops. The Musée de Masque was just opening, and a group of people who looked like late revelers from the night before were sitting on its steps and sharing a bottle of neat Pernod. The women had decorated their wings with silks and jewels; although by now they looked like tired hatstands. The men, but for the pulsing tattoo-like adornments they'd woven into their flesh and the pouch-like g-strings around their crotches which spoke, so to speak, volumes, were virtually naked. Their skin was heliotrope. Tom guessed it was the color for this season. To him, though, they looked like a clutch of malnourished, crash-landed gargoyles. He turned back along the street, and found his Citroën pretty much where he thought he'd left it by the *alimentation générale* where he'd already purchased next month's supplies, and turned the old analog key he'd left in the ignition, and pattered slowly out across the cobbles, supplies swishing and jingling in their boxes, then gave the throttle an angry shove, and roared out towards midday, the heat, the scattered olive trees and the grey-white bulk of his mountain.

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Dusk. The coming stars. His time. His mountain. Tom stood outside his sparse wooden hut, sipping coffee and willing the sun to unravel the last of her glowing clouds from the horizon. Around him on the large, flat, mile-wide slightly west-tilted slab of pavement limestone glittered the silver spiderweb of his tripwires, which were sheening with dew as the warmth of the day evaporated, catching the dying light as they and he waited for the stars.

He amazed himself sometimes, the fact that he was up here doing this, the fact that he was still searching for anything at all at the ripe nearly-old age of near-seventy, let alone for something as wild and extravagant as intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Where had it began? What had started him on this quest of his? Had it really been those SF stories-dropping through the Stargate with Dave Bowman, or staggering across the sandworm deserts of Arrakis with Paul Atreides? Was it under rocks in Eastport when he was a kid raising the tiny translucent crabs to the light, or was it down the wires on the few remaining SETI websites when he wasn't that much older? Was it pouring through the library screens at college, or was it now as he stood looking up at the gathering stars from his lonely hut on this lonely French mountain? Or was it somewhere else? Somewhere out there, sweet and glorious and imponderable?

Most of the people he still knew, or at least maintained a sort of long-distance touch with, had given up with whatever had once bugged them some time ago; the ones, in fact, who seemed the happiest, the most settled, the most at ease with their lives-and thus generally had least to do with him-had never really started worrying about such things in the first place. They took vacations in places like St. Hilaire, they

grew wings or gills just like the kids did and acquired fresh languages and outlooks as they swallowed their vials and flew or dived in their new element. He put down his cup of coffee, which was already skinned and cold, and then he smiled to himself-he still couldn't help it-as he watched more of the night come in. Maybe it was that scene in *Fantasia*, watching it on video when he was little more than a baby. The one set to the music he recognized later as Beethoven's Pastoral. Those cavorting cherubs and centaurs, and then at the end, after Zeus has packed away his thunderbolts, the sun sets, and Morpheus comes over in a glorious cloak of night. The idea of life amid the stars had already been with him then, filling him as he squatted entranced before the screen and the Baltimore traffic buzzed by outside unnoticed, filled with something that was like a sweet sickness, like his mother's embrace when she thought he was sleeping, like the ache of cola and ice cream. That sweet ache had been with him, he decided as he looked up and smiled as the stars twinkled on and goosebumps rose on his flesh, ever since.

So Tom had become a nocturnal beast, a creature of twilights and dawns. He supposed that he'd become so used to his solitary life up here on this wide and empty mountain that he'd grown a little agora-or was it claustro?-phobic. Hence the need for the absinthe this morning-or at least the extra slug of it. The Wednesdays, the bustle of the town, had become quite incredible to him, a blast of light and smell and sound and contact, almost like those VR suites where you tumbled through huge fortresses on strange planets and fought and cannon-blasted those ever-imaginary aliens. Not that Tom had ever managed to bring himself to do such a thing. As the monsters glowered over him, jaws agape and fangs dripping, all he'd wanted to do was make friends and ask them about their customs and religions and mating habits. He'd never got through many levels of those VR games, the few times he'd tried them. Now he thought about it, he really hadn't got through so very many levels of the huge VR game known as life, either.

Almost dark. A time for secrets and lovers and messages. A time for the clink of wine-glasses and the soft *puck* of opening bottles. The west was a faint red blush of clouds and mountains, which glimmered in a pool on the fading slope of the mountain. Faint grey shapes were moving down there; from the little Tom could see now from up here, they could have been stray flares and impulses from the failing remaining rods and cones in his weary eyes-random scraps of data-but he knew from other nights and mornings that they were the shy ibex which grazed this plateau, and were drawn here from miles around along with many other creatures simply because most of the moisture that fell here in the winter rains and summer storms drained straight through the cave-riddled limestone. Sometimes, looking that way on especially clear nights, Tom would catch the glimmer of stars as if a few had fallen there, although on the rare occasions he'd trekked to the pool down across difficult slopes, he'd found that, close up, it was a disappointment. A foul brown oval of thick amoebic fluid surrounded by cracked and caked mud, it was far away from the sweet oasis he'd imagined where bright birds and predators and ruminants all bowed their heads to sip the silver cool liquid and forget, in the brief moments of their parched and mutual need, their normal animosities. But it was undeniably a waterhole, and as such important to the local fauna. It had even been there on the map all those years ago, when he'd been looking for somewhere to begin what he was sure was to be the remainder of his life's work. A blue full stop, a small ripple of hope and life. He'd taken it as a sign.

Tom went inside his hut and span the metal cap off one of the cheap but decent bottles of *vin de table* with which he generally started the evenings. He took a swig from it, looked around without much hope for a clean glass, then took another swig. One handed, he tapped up the keys of one of his bank of machines. Lights stuttered, cooling fans chirruped like crickets or groaned like wounded bears. It was hot in here from all this straining antique circuitry. There was strong smell of singed dust and warm wires, and a new dim fizzing sound which could have been a spark which, although he turned his head this way and that, as sensitive to the changes in this room's topography as a shepherd to the moods of his flock, Tom couldn't quite locate. But no matter. He'd wasted most of last night fiddling and tweaking to deal with the

results of a wine spillage, and didn't want to waste this one doing the same. There was something about today, this not-Wednesday known as Thursday, which filled Tom with an extra sense of urgency. He'd grounded himself far too firmly on the side of science and logic to believe in such rubbish as premonitions, but still he couldn't help but wonder if this wasn't how they felt, the Hawkings and the Einsteins and the Newtons-the Cooks and the Columbuses, for that matter-in the moment before they made their Big Discovery, their final break. Of course, any such project, viewed with hindsight, could be no more than a gradual accumulation of knowledge, a hunch that a particular area of absent knowledge might be fruitfully explored, followed generally by years of arse-licking and fund-searching and peer-group head-shaking and rejected papers and hard work during which a few extra scraps of information made that hunch seem more and more like a reasonably intelligent guess, even if everyone else was heading in the opposite direction and thought that you were, to coin a phrase once used by Tom's cosmology professor, barking up the wrong fucking tree in the wrong fucking forest. In his bleaker moments, Tom sometimes wondered if there was a tree there at all.

But not now. The data, of course, was processed automatically, collected day and night according to parameters and wavelengths he'd pre-determined but at a speed which, even with these processors, sieved and reamed out information by the gigabyte per second. He'd set up the search systems to flash and bleep and make whatever kind of electronic racket they were capable of if they ever came upon any kind of anomaly. Although he was routinely dragged from his bleary daytime slumbers by a surge in power or a speck of fly dirt or rabbit gnawing the tripwires or a stray cosmic ray, it was still his greatest nightmare that they would blithely ignore the one spike, the one regularity or irregularity, that might actually mean something-or that he'd be so comatose he'd sleep through it. And then of course the computers couldn't look everywhere. By definition, with the universe being as big as it was, they and Tom were always missing something. The something, in fact, was so large it was close to almost everything. Not only was there all the data collected for numerous other astronomical and non-astronomical purposes which he regularly downloaded from his satellite link and stored on the disks which, piled and waiting in one corner, made a silvery pillar almost to the ceiling, but the stars themselves were always out there, the stars and their inhabitants. Beaming down in real-time. Endlessly.

So how to sort, where to begin? Where was the best place on all the possible radio wavelengths to start looking for messages from little green men? It was a question which had first been asked more than a century before, and to which, of all the many many guesses, one still stood out as the most reasonable. Tom turned to that frequency now, live through the tripwires out on the karst, and powered up the speakers and took another slug of *vin de table* and switched on the monitor and sat there listening, watching, drinking. That dim hissing of microwaves, the cool dip of interstellar quietude amid the babble of the stars and the gas clouds and the growl of the big bang and the spluttering quasars, not to mention all the racket that all the other humans on earth and around the solar system put out. The space between the emissions of interstellar hydrogen and hydroxyl radical at round about 1420 MHz. which was known as the waterhole; a phrase which reflected not only the chemical composition of water, but also the idea of a place where, just as the shy ibex clustered to quench themselves at dusk and dawn, all the varied species of the universe might gather after a weary day to exchange wondrous tales.

Tom listened to the sound of the waterhole. What were the chances, with him sitting here, of anything happening right now? Bleep, bleep. Bip, bip. Greetings from the planet Zarg. Quite, quite impossible. But then, given all the possibilities in the universe, what were the chances of him, Tom Kelly, sitting here on this particular mountain at this particular moment with this particular bank of equipment and this particular near-empty bottle of *vin de table* listening to this frequency in the first place? That was pretty wild in itself. Wild enough, in fact-he still couldn't help it-to give him goosebumps. Life itself was such an incredible miracle. In fact, probably unique, if one was to believe the odds of which was assigned to it by the few eccentric souls who still bothered to tinker with the Drake Equation. That was the problem.

He forced himself to stand up, stretch, leave the room, the speakers still hissing with a soft sea-roar, the monitor flickering and jumping. The moment when the transmission finally came through was bound to when you turned your back. It stood to reason. A watched kettle, after all ... And not that he was superstitious. So he wandered out into the night again, which was now starry and marvelous and moonless and complete, and he tossed the evening's first empty into the big dumpster and looked up at the heavens, and felt that swell in his chest and belly he'd felt those more than sixty years ago which was still like the ache of cola and ice cream. And had he eaten? He really couldn't remember, although he was pretty sure he'd fixed some coffee. This darkness was food enough for him, all the pouring might of the stars. Odd to say, but on nights like this, the darkness had a glow to it like something finely wrought, finally polished, a luster and a sheen. You could believe in God. You could believe in anything. And the tripwires were still just visible, the vanishing trails like tiny shooting stars criss-crossing this arid limestone plain as they absorbed the endless transmission. They flowed towards the bowl of darkness which was the hidden valley, the quiet waterhole, the flyers sleeping in their beds in St. Hilaire, dreaming of thermals, twitching their wings. Tom wondered if Madame Brissac slept. It was hard to imagine her anywhere other than standing before her pigeonholes in the office de poste, waiting for the next poor sod she could make life difficult for. The pigeonholes themselves, whatever code it was that she arranged them in, really would be worth making the effort to find out about on the remote chance that, Madame Brissac being Madame Brissac, the information was sorted in a way that Tom's computers, endlessly searching the roar of chaos for order, might have overlooked. And he also wondered if it wasn't time already for another bottle, one of the plastic liter ones, which tasted like shit if you started on them, but were fine if you had something half-decent first to take off the edge ...

A something-a figure-was walking up the track towards him. No, not a fluke, and not random data, and certainly not an ibex. Not Madame Brissac either, come to explain her pigeonholes and apologize for her years of rudeness. Part of Tom was watching the rest of Tom in quiet amazement as his addled mind and tired eyes slowly processed the fact that he wasn't alone, and that the figure was probably female, and could almost have been, no looked like, in fact was, the woman in the dark blue dress he'd glimpsed down by the lace stalls in the market that morning. And she really did bear a remarkable resemblance to Terr, at least in the sole dim light which emanated from the monitors inside his hut. The way she walked. The way she was padding across the bare patch of ground in front of the tripwires. That same lightness. And then her face. And her voice.

"Why do you have to live so bloody far up here Tom? The woman I asked in the post office said it was just up the road ..."

He shrugged. He was floating. His arms felt light, his hands empty. "That would be Madame Brissac."

"Would it? Anyway, she was talking rubbish."

"You should have tried asking in French."

"I *was* speaking French. My poor feet. It's taken me bloody hours."

Tom had to smile. The stars were behind Terr, and they were shining on her once-blonde hair, which the years had silvered to the gleam of those tripwires, and touched the lines around her mouth as she smiled. He felt like crying and laughing. Terr. "Well, that's Madame Brissac for you."

"So? Are you going to invite me inside?"

"There isn't much of an inside."

Terr took another step forward on her bare feet. She was real. So close to him. He could smell the dust on her salt flesh. Feel and hear her breathing. She was Terr alright. He wasn't drunk or dreaming, or at

least not that drunk yet; he'd only had-what?-two bottles of wine so far all evening. And she had and hadn't changed.

"Well," she said, "that's Tom Kelly for you, too, isn't it?"

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The idea of sitting in the hut was ridiculous on a night like this. And the place, as Tom stumbled around in it and slewed bottles off the table and shook rubbish off the chairs, was a dreadful, terrible mess. So he hauled two chairs out into the night for them to sit on, and the table to go between, and found unchipped glasses from somewhere, and gave them a wipe to get rid of the mold, and ferreted around in the depths of his boxes until he found the solitary bottle of Sanernay le Chenay 2058 he'd been saving for First Contact-or at least until he felt too depressed-and lit one of the candles he kept for when the generator went down. Then he went searching for a corkscrew, ransacking cupboards and drawers and cursing under his breath at the ridiculousness of someone who got through as much wine as he did not being able to lay his hands upon one-but then the cheaper bottles were all screw-capped, and the really cheap plastic things had tops a blind child could pop off one-handed. He was breathless when he finally sat down. His heart ached. His face throbbed. His ears were singing.

"How did you find me, Terr?"

"I told you, I asked that woman in the post office. Madame Brissac."

"I mean ..." He used both hands to still the shaking as he sloshed wine from the bottle. "... here in France, in St. Hilaire, on this mountain."

She chuckled. She sounded like the Terr of old speaking to him down the distance of an antique telephone line. "I did a search for you. One of those virtual things, where you send an ai out like a genie from a bottle. But would you believe I had to explain to it that SETI meant the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence? It didn't have the phrase in its standard vocabulary. But it found you anyway, once I'd sorted that out. You have this old-fashioned website-thingy giving information on your project here and inviting new sponsors. You say it will be a day-by-day record of setbacks, surprises and achievements. You even offer tee-shirts. By the look of it, it was last updated about twenty years ago. You can virtually see the dust on it through the screen ..."

Tom laughed. Sometimes, you had to. "The tee-shirts never really took off ..." He studied his glass, which also had a scum of dust floating on it, like most of his life. The taste of this good wine-sitting here-everything-was strange to him.

"Oh, and she sent me across the square to speak to this incredibly handsome waiter who works in this café. Apparently, you forgot these ..." Terr reached into the top of her dress, and produced the cards he must have left on the table. They were warm when he took them, filled with a sense of life and vibrancy he doubted was contained in any of the messages. Terr. And her own personal filing system.

"And what about you, Terr?"

"What do you mean?"

"All these years, I mean I guess it's pretty obvious what *I've* been doing-"

"-which was what you always said ..."

"Yes. But you, Terr. I've thought about you once or twice. Just occasionally ..."

"Mmmm." She smiled at him over her glass, through the candlelight. "Let's just talk about *now* for a while, shall we, Tom? That, is, if you'll put up with me?"

"Fine." His belly ached. His hands, as he took another long slug of this rich good wine, were still trembling.

"Tom, you haven't said the obvious thing yet."

"Which is?"

"That I've changed. Although we both have, I suppose. Time being time."

"You look great."

"You were always good at compliments."

"That was because I always meant them."

"And you're practical at the bottom of it, Tom. Or at least you were. I used to like that about you, too. Even if we didn't always agree about it ..."

With Tom it had always been one thing, one obsession. With Terr, it had to be everything. She'd wanted the whole world, the universe. And it was there even now, Tom could feel it quivering in the night between them, that division of objectives, a loss of contact, as if they were edging back towards the windy precipice which had driven them apart in the first place.

"Anyway," he said stupidly, just to fill the silence, "if you don't like how you look these days, all you do is take a vial."

"What? And be ridiculous-like those women you see along Oxford Street and Fifth Avenue, with their fake furs, their fake smiles, their fake skins? Youth is for the young, Tom. Always was, and always will be. Give them their chance, is what I say. After all, we had ours. And they're so much better at it than we are."

Terr put down her glass on the rough table, leaned back and stretched on the rickety chair. Her hair sheened back from her shoulders, and looked almost blonde for a moment. Darkness hollowed in her throat. "When you get to my age, Tom-*our* age. It just seems ... Looking back is more important than looking forward ..."

"Is that why you're here?"

A more minor stretch and shrug. Her flesh whispered and seemed to congeal around her throat in stringy clumps. Her eyes hollowed, and the candlelight went out in them. Her arms thinned. Tom found himself wishing there were either more illumination, or less. He wanted to see Terr as she was, or cloaked in total darkness; not like this, twisting and changing like the ibex at the twilight waterhole. So perhaps candlelight was another thing that the young should reserve for themselves, like the vials, like flying, like love and faith and enthusiasm. Forget about romance-what you needed at his, at their, ages, was to *know*. You wanted certainty. And Tom himself looked, he knew, from his occasional forays in front of a mirror, like a particularly vicious cartoon caricature of the Tom Kelly that Terr remembered; the sort of thing that Gerald Scarfe had done to Reagan and Thatcher in the last century. The ruined veins in his cheeks and

eyes. The bruises and swellings. Those damn age spots which had recently started appearing-gravestone marks, his grandmother had once called them. He was like Tom Kelly hungover after a fight in a bar, with a bout of influenza on top of that, and then a bad case of sunburn, and struggling against the influence of the gravity of a much larger planet. That was pretty much what aging felt like, too, come to think of it.

Flu, and too much gravity.

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He'd never been one for chat-up lines. He'd had the kind of natural not-quite regular looks when he was young which really didn't need enhancing-which was good, because he'd never have bothered, or been able to afford it-but he had a shyness which came out mostly like vague disinterest when he talked to girls. The lovelier they were, the more vague and disinterested Tom became. But this woman or girl he happened to find himself walking beside along the canals of this old and once-industrial city called Birmingham after one of those parties when the new exchange students were supposed to meet up, she was different. She was English for a start, which to Tom, a little-traveled American on this foreign shore, seemed both familiar and alien. Everything she said, every gesture, had a slightly different slant to it, which he found strange, intriguing ...

She'd taken him around the canals to Gas Street Basin, the slick waters sheened with antique petrol, antique fog, and along the towpath to the Sealife Centre, where deep-sea creatures out of Lovecraft mouthed close to the tripleglass of their pressurized tanks. Then across the iron bridges of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal to a pub. Over her glass of wine, Terr had explained that an American president had once sat here in this pub and surprised the locals and drunk a pint of bitter during some world conference. Her hair was fine blonde. Her eyes were stormy green. She'd shrugged off the woolen coat with a collar that had brushed the exquisite line of her neck and jaw as she walked in a way that had made Tom envy it. Underneath, she was wearing a sleeveless dark blue dress which was tight around her hips and smallish breasts, and showed her fine legs. Of course, he envied that dress as well. There was a smudged red crescent at the rim of the glass made by her lipstick. Terr was studying literature then, an arcane enough subject in itself, and for good measure she'd chosen as her special field the kind of stories of the imaginary future which had been popular for decades until the real and often quite hard to believe present had finally extinguished them. Tom, who'd been immersed in such stuff for much of his teenage years, almost forgot his reticence as he recommended John Varley, of whom she hadn't even heard, and that she avoid the late-period Heinlein, and then to list his own particular favorites, which had mostly been Golden Age writers (yes, yes, she knew the phrase) like Simak and Van Vogt and Wyndham and Sheckley. And then there was Lafferty, and Cordwainer Smith ...

Eventually, sitting at a table in the top room of that bar where an American president might once have sat which overlooked the canal where the long boats pattered past with their antique petrol motors, bleeding their colors into the mist, Terr had steered Tom away from science fiction, and nudged him into talking about himself. He found out later that the whole genre of SF was already starting to bore her in any case. And he discovered that Terr had already worked her way through half a dozen courses, and had grown bored with all of them. She was bright enough to get a feel for any subject very quickly, and in the process to convince some new senior lecturer that, contrary to all the evidence on file, she finally had found her true focus in medieval history or classics or economics. And she was quick-incredibly so, by Tom's standards-at languages. That would have given her a decent career in any other age; even as she sat there in her blue dress in that Birmingham pub, he could picture her beside that faceless American

president, whispering words in his ears. But by then it was already possible for any normally intelligent human to acquire any new language in a matter of days. Deep therapy. Bio-feedback. Nano-enhancement. Out in the real world, those technologies that Tom had spent his teenage years simply dreaming about as he wondered over those dusty analog pages had been growing at an exponential rate.

But Terr, she fluttered from enthusiasm to enthusiasm, flower to flower, sipping its nectar, then once again spreading her wings and wafting off to some other faculty. And people, too. Terr brought that same incredible focus to bear on everyone she met as well-or at least those who interested her-understanding, absorbing, taking everything in.

She was even doing it now, Tom decided as they sat together all these years later outside his hut on this starlit French mountain. This Terr who changed and unchanged in the soft flood of candlelight across this battered table was reading him like a book. Every word, every gesture: the way this bottle of wine, good though it was, wouldn't be anything like enough to see him through the rest of this night. She was feeling the tides of the world which had borne him here with all his hopes still somehow intact like Noah in his Ark, and then withdrawn and left him waiting, beached, dry and drowning.

"What are you thinking?"

He shrugged. But for once, the truth seemed easy. "That pub you took me to, the first time we met."

"You mean the Malt House?"

Terr was bright, quick. Even now. Of course she remembered.

"And you went on and on about SF," she added.

"Did I? I suppose I did ..."

"Not really, Tom, but I'd sat through a whole bloody lecture of the stuff that morning, and I'd decided I'd had enough of it-of any kind of fiction. I realized I wanted something that was fabulous, but real."

"That's always been a tall order ..." Terr had been so lovely back then. That blue coat, the shape of her lips on the wineglass she'd been drinking. Those stormy green eyes. Fabulous, but real. But it was like the couple he'd seen that morning. What had she ever seen in him?

"But then you told me you planned to prove that there was other intelligent life in the universe, Tom. Just like that. I don't know why, but it just sounded so wonderful. Your dream, and then the way you could be so matter-of-fact about it ..."

Tom gripped his glass a little tighter, and drank the last of it. His dream. He could feel it coming, the next obvious question.

"So did it ever happen?" Terr was now asking. "Did you ever find your little green men, Tom? But then I suppose I'd have heard. Remember how you promised to tell me? Or at least it might have roused you to post some news on that poor old website of yours." She chuckled with her changed voice, slightly slurring the words. But Terr, Tom remembered, could get drunk on half a glass of wine. She could get drunk on nothing. Anything. "I'm sorry, Tom. It's your life, isn't it? And what the hell do I know? It was one of the things I always liked about you, your ability to dream in that practical way of yours. Loved ..."

Loved? Had she said that? Or was that another blip, stray data?

"So you must tell me, Tom. How's it going? After I've come all this way. You and your dream."

The candle was sinking. The stars were pouring down on him. And the wine wasn't enough, he needed absinthe-but his dream. And where to begin? *Where* to begin?

"D'you remember the Drake Equation?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I remember," Terr said. "I remember the Drake Equation. You told me all about the Drake Equation that first day on our walk from that pub . . ." She tilted her head to one side, studying the glimmer of Aries in the west as if she was trying to remember the words of some song they'd once shared. "Now, how exactly did it go?"

Until that moment, none of it had yet seemed quite real to Tom. This night, and Terr being here. And, as the candle flickered, she still seemed to twist and change from Terr as he remembered to the Terr she was now in each quickening pulse of the flame. But with the Drake Equation, with that Tom Kelly was anchored. And how *did* it go, in any case?

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That long and misty afternoon. Walking beside the canal towpaths from that pub and beneath the dripping tunnels and bridges all the way past the old factories and the smart houses to the city's other university out in Edgbaston as the streetlights came on. He'd told Terr about a radio astronomer named Frank Drake who-after all the usual false alarms and funding problems which, even in its embryonic stage back in the middle of the last century, had beset SETI-had tried to narrow the whole question down to a logical series of parameters, which could then be brought together in an equation which, if calculated accurately, would neatly reveal a figure N which would represent a good estimate for the number of intelligent and communicating species currently in our galaxy. If the figure was found to be high, then space would be aswarm with the signals of sentient species anxious to talk to each other. If the figure was found to be 1, then we were, to all intents and purposes, alone in the universe. Drake's equation involved the number of stars in our galaxy, and chances of those stars having habitable planets, and then those planets actually bearing life, and of that life evolving into intelligence, and of that intelligence wanting to communicate with other intelligences, and of that communication happening in an era in human history when we humans were capable of listening-which amounted to a microscopic *now*.

And they *had* listened, at least those who believed, those who wanted that number N at the end of the Drake Equation to be up in the tens or hundreds or thousands. They skived spare radiotelescopy and mainframe processing time and nagged their college principals and senators and fellow dreamers for SETI funding. Some, like a project at Arecibo, had even beamed out messages, although the message was going out in any case, the whole babble of radio communications had been spreading out into space from Earth at the speed of light since Marconi's first transmission . . . *We are here. Earth is alive.* And they listened. They listened for a reply. Back then, when he had met Terr, Tom had still believed in the Drake Equation with a near-religious vehemence, even if many others were beginning to doubt it and funding was getting harder to maintain. As he walked with her beneath the clocktower through the foggy lights of Birmingham's other campus, his PC at his college digs in Erdington was chewing through the data he'd downloaded from a SETI website while his landlord's cat slept on it. Tom was sure that, what with the processing technology that was becoming available, and then the wide-array radio satellites, it was only a matter of time and persistence before that first wonderful spike of First Contact came through. And it had stood him in good stead, now he came to think of it, had the Drake Equation, as he walked

with Terr on that misty English autumn afternoon. One of the most convoluted chat-up lines in history. But, at least that once, it had worked.

They took the train back to the city and emerged onto New Street as the lights and the traffic fogged the evening and at some point on their return back past the big shops and the law courts to the campus Terr had leaned against him and he had put his arm around her. First contact, and the tension between them grew sweet and electric and a wonderful ache had swelled in his throat and belly until they stopped and kissed in the dank quietude of one of the old subways while the traffic swept overhead like a distant sea. Terr. The taste of her mouth, and at last he got to touch that space between her jaw and throat that he had been longing to touch all afternoon. Terr, who was dark and alive in his arms and womanly and English and alien. Terr, who closed her stormy eyes as he kissed her and then opened them again and looked at him with a thrilling candor. After that, everything was different.

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Terr had a zest for life, an enthusiasm for everything. And she had an old car, a nondescript Japanese thing with leaky sills, a corrupted GPS and a badly botched hydrogen conversion. Tom often fiddled under the bonnet to get the thing started before they set out on one of their ambitious weekend trips across the cool and misty country of love and life called England he suddenly found himself in. South to the biscuit-colored villages of the Cotswolds, north to the grey hills of the Peak District, and then further, further up the map as autumn-he could no longer think of it as fall-rattled her leaves and curled up her smoky clouds and faded and winter set in, juddering for hours along the old public lanes of the motorways as the sleek new transports swept past outside them with their occupants tele-conferencing or asleep. But Tom liked the sense of effort, the sense of getting there, the rumble of the tires and the off-center pull of the steering, swapping over with Terr every hour or two, and the way the hills rose and fell but always got bigger as they headed north. And finally stepping out, and seeing the snow and the sunlight on the high flanks, and feeling the clean bite of the wind. They climbed fells where the tracks had long-vanished and the sheep looked surprised at these humans who had invaded their territory. Hot and panting, they stopped in the lee of cols, and looked down at all the tiny details of the vast world they had made. By then, Terr had had changed options from SF to the early Romantics, poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, and she would chant from the *Prelude* in her lovely voice as they clambered up Scarfell and the snow and the lakes gleamed around them and Tom struggled, breathless, to keep up until they finally rested, sweating and freezing, and Terr sat down and smiled at him and pulled off her top layers of fleece and Gore-Tex and began to unlace her boots. It was ridiculous, the feel of her snow and her body intermingled, and the chant of her breath in his ear, urging him on as the wind and her fingers and the shadows of the clouds swept over his naked back. Dangerous, too, in the mid of winter-you'd probably die from exposure here if you lapsed into a post-coital sleep. But it was worth it. Everything. He'd never felt more alive.

Terr huddled against him in a coll. Her skin was taut, freezing, as the sweat evaporated from between them. Another hour, and the sun would start to set. Already, it was sinking down through the clouds over Helvellyn with a beauty that Tom reckoned even old Wordsworth would have been hard put to describe. His fingers played over the hardness of Terr's right nipple, another lovely peak Wordsworth might have struggled to get over in words. It was totally, absolutely, cold, but, to his pleasant surprise, Tom found that he, too, was getting hard. He pressed his mouth against Terr's shoulder, ran his tongue around that lovely hollow beneath her ear. She was shivering already, but he felt her give a shiver within the shiver, and traced his fingers down her belly, and thought of the stars which would soon be coming, and perhaps

of finding one of those abandoned farmhouses where they could spend the night, and of Terr's sweet moisture, and of licking her there. She tensed and shivered again, which he took as encouragement, even though he was sure, as the coat slid a few inches from his shoulder, that he felt a snowflake settle on his bare back. Then, almost abruptly, she drew away.

"Look over there, Tom. Can you see them-those specks, those colors?"

Tom looked, and sure enough, across in the last blazing patch of sunlight, a few people were turning like birds. They could have been using microlites, but on a day like this, the sound of their engines would have cut through the frozen air. But Tom had a dim recollection of reading of a new craze, still regarded as incredibly dangerous, both physically and mentally, whereby you took a gene-twist in a vial, and grew wings, just like in a fairy tale, or an SF story.

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Tom had dreamed, experienced, all the possibilities. He'd loved those creatures in *Fantasia*, half-human, half-faun; those beautiful winged horses. And not much later, he'd willed the green-eyed monsters and robots whom the cartoon superheroes battled with to put their evil plans into practice at least once. Then there were the old episodes of *Star Trek*-the older, the better-and all those other series where the crews of warp-driven starships calmly conversed around long florescent-lit tables with computer-generated aliens and men in rubber masks. By the age of eight, he'd seen galaxy-wide empires rise and fall, and tunneled through ice planets, he'd battled with the vast and still-sentient relics of ancient conflicts ... And he found the pictures he could make in his head from the dusty books he discovered for sale in an old apple box when they were closing down the local library were better than anything billion dollar Hollywood could generate. And it seemed to him that the real technology which he had started to study at school and to read up on in his spare time was always just a breakthrough or two away from achieving one or other of the technological feats which would get future, the real future for which he felt an almost physical craving, up and spinning. The starships would soon be ready to launch, even if NASA was running out of funding. The photon sails were spreading, although most of the satellites spinning around the earth seemed to be broadcasting virtual shopping and porn. The wormholes through time and dimension were just a quantum leap away. And the marvelous worlds, teeming with emerald clouds and sentient crimson oceans, the vast diamond cities and the slow beasts of the gasclouds with their gaping mouths spanning fractions of a lightyear, were out there waiting to be found. So, bright kid that he was, walking the salt harbors of Baltimore with his mother and gazing at the strange star-creatures in their luminous tanks at the National Aquarium long before he met Terr, he'd gone to sleep at nights with the radio on, but tuned between the station to the billowing hiss of those radio waves, spreading out. *We are here. Earth is alive.* Tom was listening, and waiting for a reply.

Doing well enough at exams and aptitudes at school to get to the next level without really bothering, he toyed with the cool physics of cosmology and the logic of the stars, and followed the tangled paths of life through chemistry and biology, and listened to the radio waves, and tinkered with things mechanical and electrical and gained a competence at computing and engineering, and took his degree in Applied Physics at New Colombia, where he had an on-off thing with a psychology undergrad, during which he'd finally got around to losing his virginity before-as she herself put it the morning after; as if, despite all the endearments and promises, she was really just doing him a favor-*it* lost him.

Postgrad time, and the cosmology weirdoes went one way, and the maths bods another, and the

computer nerds went thataway, and physics freaks like Tom got jobs in the nano-technology companies which were then creating such a buzz on the World Stock Exchange. But Tom found the same problem at the interviews he went to that he still often found with girls, at least when he was sober-which was that people thought him vague and disinterested. But it was true in any case. His heart really wasn't in it-whatever *it* was. So he did what most shiftless young academics with a good degree do when they can't think of anything else. He took a postgrad course in another country, which, pin-in-a-map-time, really, happened to be at Aston in Birmingham, England. And there he got involved for the first time in the local SETI project, which of course was shoestring and voluntary, but had hooked on to some spare radio time that a fellow-sympathizer had made available down the wire from Jodrell Bank. Of course, he'd known all about SETI for ages; his memory of the Drake Equation went so far back into his childhood past that, like *Snow White* or the songs of the Beatles, he couldn't recall when he had first stumbled across it. But to be involved at last, to be one of the ones who was listening. And then persuading his tutor that he could twist around his work on phase-shift data filtering to incorporate SETI work into his dissertation. He was with fellow dreamers at last. It all fitted. What Tom Kelly could do on this particular planet orbiting this common-or-garden sun, and what was actually possible. Even though people had already been listening for a message from the stars for more than fifty years and the politicians and the bureaucrats and the funding bodies-even Tom's ever-patient tutor-were shaking their heads and frowning, he was sure it was just a matter of time. One final push to get there.

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There was a shop in Kendal, at the edge of the Lake District. It was on a corner where the cobbled road sloped back and down, and it had, not so many years before, specialized in selling rock-climbing and fell-walking gear, along with the mint cake for which the town was justly famous and which tasted, as Terr had memorably said to Tom when she'd first got him to try it, like frozen toothpaste. You still just about see the old name of the shop-*Peak and Fell*, with a picture of a couple of hikers-beneath the garish orange paintwork of the new name which had replaced it. **EXTREME LAKES.**

There were people going in and out, and stylish couples outside posing beneath the bubble hoods of their pristine limegreen balloon-tired off-roaders. Even on this day of freezing rain, there was no doubt that the new bodily-enhanced sports for which this shop was now catering were good for business. Stood to reason, really. Nobody simply looked up at one of those rounded snowy peaks and consulted an old edition of Wainwright and then put one booted foot in front of another and walked up them any longer. Nobody except Tom and Terr, scattering those surprised black-legged sheep across the frozen landscape, finding abandoned farmhouses, making sweet freezing love which was ice cream and agony on the crackling ice of those frozen cols. Until that moment, Tom had been entirely grateful for it.

The people themselves had an odd look about them. Tom, who had rarely done more than take the autotram to and from the campus and his digs in England until he met Terr, and since had noticed little other than her, was seeing things here he'd only read about; and barely that, seeing as he had little time for newspapers. Facial enhancements, not just the subtle kind which made you look handsomer or prettier, but things which turned your eyebrows into blue ridges, or widened your lips into pillowy creations which would had surprised Salvador Dali, let alone Mick Jagger. Breasts on the women like airbags, or nothing but roseate nipple, which of course they displayed teasingly beneath outfits which changed transparency according to the pheromones the smart fabrics detected. One creature, Tom was almost sure, had a threesome, a double-cleavage, although it was hard to tell just by glancing, and he really didn't want to give her the full-bloodied stare she so obviously craved. But most of them were so

thin. That was the thing that struck him the most strongly. They were thin as birds, and had stumpy quill-like appendages sticking from their backs. They were angels or devils, these people, creatures of myth whose wings God had clipped after they had committed some terrible theological crime, although the wings themselves could be purchased once you went inside the shop. Nike and Reebok and Shark and Microsoft and Honda at quite incredible prices. Stacked in steel racks like skipoles.

The assistant swooped on them from behind her glass counter. She had green hair, which even to Tom seemed reasonable enough, nothing more than a playful use of hair dye, but close-up it didn't actually appear to be hair at all, but some sort of sleek curtain which reminded him of cellophane. It crackled when she touched it, which she did often, as if she couldn't quite believe it was there, the way men do when they have just grown a moustache or beard. She and Terr were soon gabbling about brands and tensile strength and power-to-weight ratios and cold-down and thrillbiting and brute thermals and cloud virgins-which Tom guessed was them. But Terr was soaking it all up in the way that she soaked up anything that was new and fresh and exciting. He watched her in the mirror behind the counter, and caught the amazing flash of those storm green eyes. She looked so beautiful when she was like this; intent and surprised. And he longed to touch that meeting of her throat and jaw just beneath her ear, which was still damp from the rain and desperately needed kissing, although this was hardly the appropriate time. And those eyes. He loved the way Terr gazed right back at him when she was about to come; that look itself was enough to send him tumbling, falling into those gorgeous green nebulae, down into the spreading dark core of her pupils which were like forming stars.

"Of course, it'll take several weeks, just to make the basic bodily adjustments ..."

Was the assistant talking to him? Tom didn't know or care. He edged slightly closer to the counter to hide the awkward bulge of his erection, and studied the Kendal Mint Cake, which they still had for sale. The brown and the chocolate-coated, and the standard white blocks, which did indeed taste like frozen toothpaste, but much, much sweeter. A man with jade skin and dreadfully thin arms excused-me past Tom to select a big bar, and then another. Tom found it encouraging, to think that Kendal Mint Cake was still thriving in this new age. There were medals and awards on the old-fashioned wrapping, which commemorated expeditions and treks from back in the times when people surmounted physical challenges with their unaided bodies because, as Mallory had said before he disappeared into the mists of the last ridge of Everest, they were there. But it stood to reason that you needed a lot of carbohydrate if your body was to fuel the changes which were necessary which would allow you to, as the adverts claimed, fly like a bird. Or at least flap around like a kite. Pretty much, anyway.

This was the new world of extreme sports, where, if you wanted to do something that your body wasn't up to, you simply had your body changed. Buzzing between channels a while back in search of a site which offered Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, which to Tom, when he was feeling a bit down, was the equivalent of a warm malt whisky, he'd stumbled across a basketball match, and had paused the search engine, imagining for a moment he'd stumbled across a new version of *Fantasia*, then wondering at the extraordinary sight of these ten and twelve foot giants swaying between each other on their spindly legs, clumsy and graceful as new-born fawns. But this, after all, was the future. It was the world he was in. And Terr was right when she urged him to accept it, and with it this whole idea of flying, and then offered to help with the money, which Tom declined, ridiculously excessive though the cost of it was. He lived cheaply enough most of the time, and the bank was always happy to add more to his student loan so that he could spend the rest of his life repaying it. And he and Terr were not going the whole way, in any case. They were on the nursery slopes, they were ugly chicks still trembling in their nest, they were Dumbo teetering atop that huge ladder in the circus tent. They were cloud virgins. So the heart and circulatory enhancements, and the bone-thinning and the flesh-wasting and the new growth crystals which sent spiderwebs of carbon fiber teasing their way up through your bone marrow, the Kevlar skin that the rapids surfers used, all the stuff which came stacked with health warnings and disclaimers that would have

made the Surgeon General's warning on a packet of full-strength Camels look like a nursery tale: all of that they passed on. They simply went for the basic Honda starter kits of vials and Classic ("Classic" meant boring and ordinary; even Tom had seen enough adverts to know that) wings. That would do-at least for a beginning, Terr said ominously, between humming to herself and swinging the elegant little bag which contained the first installment of their vials as they headed out from the shop into the driving winter rain.

It was January already, and the weather remained consistently foul for weeks in its own unsettled English way, which was cold and damp, and billows and squalls, and chortling gutters and rainswept parks, and old leaves and dog mess on the slippery Birmingham pavements. The Nissan broke down again too, but in a way which was beyond Tom's skill to repair. The part he needed might as well have been borne from China on a none-too fast sea-clipper, the time it took to come. Days and weekends, they were grounded, and sort-of living together in Tom's digs, or the pounding smoky Rastafarian fug of Terr's shared house in Handsworth. But Tom liked the Rastas; they took old-fashioned chemicals, they worshipped an old-fashioned God, and talked in their blurred and rambling way of a mythic Africa which would never exist beyond the haze their dreams. Tom did a little ganja himself, and he did a fair amount of wine, and he lay in bed with Terr back in his digs in Erdington one night when the first men landed on Mars, and they watched the big screen on the wall from the rucked and damp sheets while the landlord's cat slept on the purring computer.

"Hey, look ..." Terr squirmed closer to him. "Roll over. I want to see. I was *sure* I could feel something just then ..."

"I should hope so."

Terr chuckled, and Tom rolled over. He stared at the face in the woodgrain of the old mahogany headboard. She drew back the sheets from him. The cold air. The rain at the window. The murmuring of the astronauts as they undocked and began the last slow glide. Her fingers on his bare shoulders, then on his spine. It hurt there. It felt as if her nails were digging.

"Hey!!!"

"No no no no no ..." She pressed him there, her fingers tracing the source of the pain. A definite lump was rising. An outgrowth which, in another age, would have sent you haring to the doctor thinking, *cancer* ...

"I'm jealous Tom. I thought I was going to be the first. It's like when I was a kid, and I concentrated hard on growing breasts."

"And it happened?"

"Obviously ... Cheeky sod ... A bit, anyway ..." Slim and warm and womanly, she pressed a little closer. He felt her breath, her lips, down on his back where the quills were growing. She kissed him there. "I check in the mirror every morning. I try to feel there ..." he felt her murmur. "It's like a magic spell, isn't it? Waiting for the vials to work. You haven't noticed anything on me yet, have you, Tom?"

"No." He turned his head and looked at Terr. She was lying on her front too, and the red light of rising Mars on the screen was shining on the perfect skin of her thighs, her buttocks, her spine, her shoulders.

"You must have been waiting for this to happen for a long time," she said.

"What?"

Her blonde hair swayed as she tipped her head towards the screen. "Men landing on Mars."

He nodded.

"Will it take much longer before they actually touch down?"

"I suppose a few minutes."

"Well, that's good news ..." Terr's hand traveled down his spine. Her knuckles brushed his buttocks, raising the goosebumps. Her fingers explored him there. "Isn't it ...?"

So they missed the actual instant when the lander kicked up the rusty dust of the surface, but were sharing a celebratory bottle of Asti Spumante an hour or so later when, after an interminable string of adverts, the first ever human being stepped onto the surface of another planet and claimed all its ores and energies and secrets for the benefit of the mission's various sponsors. Another figure climbed out. Amid the many logos on this one's suit there was a Honda one, which sent Tom's mind skittering back towards the growing lump on his back which he could feel like a bad spot no matter how he laid the pillows now that Terr had mentioned it. How would he *sleep* from now on? How would they make *love*? Terr on top, fluttering her Honda wings like predator as she bowed down to eat him? It was almost a nice idea, but not quite. And the Mars astronauts, even in their suits, didn't look quite right to Tom either. The suits themselves were okay—they were grey-white, and even had the sort of longer-at-top faceplates he associated with 2001 and Hal and Dave Poole and Kubrick's incredible journey towards the alien monolith—but they were the wrong shape in the body; too long and thin. It was more like those bad old films; you half expected something horrible and inhuman to slither out of them once they got back into the lander, where it turned out to have crossed light years driven by nothing more than a simple desire to eat people's brains ...

Tom poured out the rest of the Asti into his glass.

"Hey!" Terr gave him a playful push. He sipped some of it. "What about me? You've had almost all of that ..."

He ambled off into the cupboard which passed for his kitchen to get another bottle of something, and stroked the landlord's cat and gave the keyboard of his PC a tweak on the way. It was processing a search in the region of Cygnus, and not on the usual waterhole wavelength. Somebody's hunch. Not that the PC had found anything; even in those days, he had the bells and whistles rigged for *that* event. But what *was* the problem with him, he wondered, as he raked back the door of the fridge and studied its sparse contents? He was watching the first Mars landing, in bed with a naked, beautiful and sexually adventurous woman, while his PC diligently searched the stars for the crucial first sign of intelligent life. If this wasn't his dream of the future, what on earth was? And even this flying gimmick which Terr was insisting they try together—that fitted in as well, didn't it? In many ways, the technology that was causing his back to grow spines was a whole lot more impressive than the brute force and money and Newtonian physics which had driven that Martian lander from one planet to another across local space.

The problem with this manned Mars landing, as Tom had recently overheard someone remark in the university refectory, was that it had come at least four decades too late. Probably more, really. NASA could have gone pretty much straight from Apollo to a Mars project, back at the end of the delirious 1960s. Even then, the problems had been more of money than of science. Compared to politics, compared to getting the right spin and grip on the public's attention and then seeing the whole thing through Congress before something else took the headlines or the next recession or election came bounding along, the science and the engineering had been almost easy. But a first landing by 1995 at the latest, that had once seemed reasonable—just a few years after establishing the first permanent moonbase.

And there really had been Mariner and Viking back in those days of hope and big-budget NASA: technically successful robot probes which had nevertheless demystified Mars and finished off H. G. Wells' Martians and Edgar Rice Burrows' princesses and Lowell's canals in the popular mind, and which, despite Sagan's brave talk about Martian giraffes wandering by when the camera wasn't looking, had scuppered any realistic sense that there might be large and complex Martian lifeforms waiting to be fought against, interviewed, studied, dissected, argued over by theologians, or fallen in love with. Still, there were hints that life might exist on Mars at a microscopic level; those tantalizingly contradictory results from the early Viking landers, and the micro-bacteria supposedly found on Martian meteorites back on Earth. But, as the probes had got more advanced and the organic tests more accurate, even those possibilities had faded. Tom, he'd watched Mars become a dead planet both in the real world, and in the books he loved reading. The bulge-foreheaded Martians faded to primitive cave-dwellers, then to shy kangaroo-like creatures of the arid plains, until finally they became bugs dwelling around vents deep in the hostile Martian soil, then anaerobic algae, until they died out entirely.

Mars was a dead planet.

Tom unscrewed the bottle of slivovitz which was the only thing he could find, and went back to bed with Terr, and they watched the figures moving about on the Martian landscape between messages from their sponsors. They were half Martians already. Not that they could breathe the emaciated atmosphere, or survive without their suits on, but nevertheless they had been radically transformed before the launch. Up in space, in null gravity, their bones and their flesh and their nutritional requirements had been thinned down to reduce the payload, then boosted up just a little as they approached Mars a year and a half later so they could cope with the planet's lesser pull. They were near-sexless creatures with the narrow heads and bulging eyes of a thyroid condition, fingers as long and bony as ET's. The way they looked, far worse than any flyers, Tom figured that you really didn't need to search further than these telecasts to find aliens to Mars. Or Belsen victims.

The slivovitz and the whole thing got to him. He had a dim recollection of turning off the screen at some point, and of making love to Terr, and touching the hollow of her back and feeling a tiny sharp edge there sliding beneath her skin; although he wasn't quite sure about that, or whether he'd said anything to her afterwards about growing bigger breasts, which had been a joke in any case. In the morning, when she had gone, he also discovered that he had broken up the Honda vials and flushed them down the communal toilet. Bits of the spun glass stuff were still floating there. He nearly forgot his slivovitz headache as he pissed them down. This was one thing he'd done when he was drunk he was sure he'd never regret.

.....

The winter faded. Terr went flying. Tom didn't. The spines on her back really weren't so bad; the wings themselves were still inorganic in those days, carbon fiber and smart fabric, almost like the old microlites, except you bonded them to the quills with organic superglue just before you took the leap, and unbonded them again and stacked them on the roofrack of your car at the end of the day. Terr's were sensitive enough when Tom touched them, licked them, risked brushing their sharp edges against his penis to briefly add a new and surprising spice to their love-making, although if he grew too rough, too energetic, both he and they were prone to bleed.

Terr was unbothered about his decision to stop taking the vials in any case. After all, it was his life. And

why do something you don't want to do just to please me? she'd said with her characteristic logic. But Terr was moving with a different set now, with the flyers, and their relationship, as spring began and the clean thermals started to rise on the flanks of Skiddaw and Helvellyn and Ben Nevis, began to have that ease and forgetfulness which Tom, little versed though he was in the ways of love, still recognized as signaling the beginning of the end. Terr had always been one for changing enthusiasms in any case. At university, she was now talking of studying creative writing, or perhaps dropping the literature thing entirely and swapping over to cultural studies, whatever the hell that was. It would be another one of Terr's enthusiasms, just, as Tom was coming to realize, had been Tom Kelly.

He still saw plenty of Terr for a while, although it was more often in groups. He enjoyed the jazz with her at Ronnie Scott's and sat around florescent tables in the smart bars along Broad Street with people whose faces often reminded him of those rubber-masked creatures you used to get in *Star Trek*. The world was changing-just like Terr, it didn't feel like it was quite *his* any longer, even though he could reach out and touch it, taste it, smell it. He drove up with her once or twice to the Lakes, and watched her make that first incredible leap from above the pines on Skiddaw and across the wind-rippled grey expanse of Bassenthwaite Lake. He felt nothing but joy and pride at that moment, and almost wished that he, too, could take to the air, but soon, Terr was just another colored dot, swooping and circling in the lemony spring sunlight on her Honda-logoed wings, and no longer a cloud virgin. He could block her out with the finger of one hand.

So they drifted apart, Tom and Terr, and part of Tom accepted this fact-it seemed like a natural and organic process; you meet, you exchange signals of mutual interest, you fall in love and fuck each other brainless for a while and live in each other's skin and hair, then you get to know your partner's friends and foibles and settle into a warmer and easier affection as you explore new hobbies and positions and fetishes until the whole thing becomes just a little stale-and part of Tom screamed and hollered against the loss, and felt as if he was drowning as the sounds, the desperate, pleading signals he wanted to make, never quite seemed to reach the surface. He had, after all, always been shy and diffident with women. Especially the pretty ones. Especially, now, Terr.

At the end of the summer term, Tom got his postgrad diploma based around his SETI work and Terr didn't get anything. Just as she'd done with Tom, she'd worn Aston University out as she explored its highways and byways and possibilities with that determination that was so uniquely Terr. Next year, if any would take her and she could gather up the money, she'd have to try another enthusiasm at another university. They hadn't been lovers for months, which seemed to Tom like years, and had lost regular contact at the time, by pure chance, he last saw her. Tom needed to get on with his life, and had already booked a flight to spend some time at home with his parents in the States while he decided what *getting on with life* might actually involve for him.

It was after the official last day of term, and the wine bars around the top of the city were busy with departing students and the restaurants contained the oddly somber family groups who had come up to bear a sibling and their possessions back home. The exams had been and gone, the fuss over the assessments and dissertations and oral hearings had faded. There was both a sense of excitement and anti-climax, and beneath that an edge of sorrow and bone-aching tiredness which came from too many-or not enough-nights spent revising, screwing, drinking ... Many, many people had already left, and hallways in the North Wing rang hollow and the offices were mostly empty as Tom called in to pick up his provisional certificate, seeing as he wouldn't be here for the award ceremonies in the autumn, and he didn't attend such pompous occasions in any case.

There was no obvious reason for Terr to be around. Her friends by now were mostly flyers, non-students, and she hadn't sat anything remotely resembling an exam. The season wasn't a Terr season in Tom's mind, either. A late afternoon, warm and humid as a dishrag, uncomfortable and un-English,

when the tee-shirt clung to his back and a bluish smog which even the switch from petrol to hydrogen hadn't been able to dissolve hung over the city. Put this many people together, he supposed, holding his brown envelope by the tips of his fingers so that he didn't get sweat onto it, this much brick and industry, and you'd always get city air. Even now. In this future world. He caught a whiff of curry-house cooking, and of beer-infused carpets from the open doorways of the stifling Yate's Wine Lodge, and of hot pavements, and of warm tar and of dogmess and rank canals, and thought of the packing he'd left half-finished in his room, and of the midnight flight he was taking back to the States, and of the last SETI download his PC would by now have probably finished processing, and decided he would probably miss this place.

Characteristically, Terr was walking one way up New Street and Tom was heading the other. Characteristically, Terr was with a group of gaudy fashion victims; frail waifs and wasp-waisted freaks. Many of them looked Japanese, although Tom knew not to read too much into that, when a racial look was as easy to change as last season's shoes if you had the inclination and the money. In fact, Terr rather stood out, in that she really hadn't done anything that freakish to herself, although the clothes she wore-and sensibly enough, really, in this weather-were bare-backed and scanty, to display the quills of those wings. And her hair was red; not the red of a natural redhead, or even the red of someone who had dyed it that color in the old-fashioned way. But crimson; for a moment, she almost looked to Tom as if her head was bleeding. But he recognized her instantly. And Terr, Tom being Tom and thus unchanged, probably even down to his tee-shirt, instantly recognized him.

She peeled off from the arm-in-arm group she was swaying along with, and he stopped and faced her as they stood in the shadow of the law courts while the pigeons cluttered up around them and the bypass traffic swept by beyond the tall buildings like the roar of the sea. He'd given a moment such as this much thought and preparation. He could have been sitting an exam. A thousand different scenarios, but none of them now quite seemed to fit. Terr had always been hard to keep up with, the things she talked about, the way she dressed. And those stormgreen eyes, which were the one thing about her which he hoped she would never change, they were a shock to him now as well.

They always had been.

"I thought you weren't going to notice, Tom. You looked in such a hurry ..."

"Just this ..." He waved the limp brown envelope as if it was the reason for everything. "And I've got a plane to catch."

She nodded, gazing at him. Tom gazed back-those green nebulae-and instantly he was falling. "I'd heard that you were leaving."

"What about you, Terr?"

She shrugged. The people behind her were chattering in a language Tom didn't recognize. His eyes traveled quickly over them, wondering which of them was now screwing Terr, and which were male-as if that would matter, Terr being Terr ...

"Well, actually, its a bit of a secret, and quite illegal probably, but we're going to try to get onto the roof of one of the big halls of residence and-

"-fly?"

She grinned. Her irises were wide. Those dark stars. She was high on something. Perhaps it was life. "Obviously. Can you imagine what the drift will be like, up there, with all these cliff-face buildings, on an afternoon like this?"

"Drift?"

"The thermals."

He smiled. "Sounds great."

One of those pauses, a slow roaring beat of city silence, as one human being gazes at another and wonders what to say to them next. How to make contact-or how to regain it. That was always the secret, the thing for which Tom was searching. And he had a vision, ridiculous in these circumstances, of clear winter daylight on a high fell. He and Terr ...

"That dress you used to wear," he heard himself saying, "the blue one-"

"-Have you had any luck yet, Tom?" It was a relief, really, that she cut across his rambling. "With that SETI work you were doing? All that stuff about ..." She paused. Her hands touched her hair, which didn't seem like hair at all, not curtains of blood, but of cellophane. It whispered and rustled in her fingers, and then parted, and he glimpsed in the crimson shade beneath that space at the join of her jaw and neck, just beneath her ear, before she lowered her hand and it was gone again. He wondered if he would ever see it again; that place which-of all the glories in the universe, the dark light years and the sentient oceans and the ice planets and the great beasts of the stellar void-was the one he now most longed to visit. Then she remembered the phrase for which she'd been searching, which was one Tom had explained, when they'd walked that first day by the canals in fall, in English autumn. "... the Drake Equation."

"I'm still looking."

"That's good." She nodded and smiled at him in a different way, as if taking in the full implications of this particular that's-good-ness, and what it might mean one great day to all of mankind. "You're not going to give up on it, are you?"

"No."

"You're going to keep looking?"

"Of course I will. It's my life."

As he said it, he wondered if it was. But the creatures, the flyers, behind Tom and Terr, were twitching and twittering; getting restless. And one or two of the things they were saying Tom now recognized as having the cadence of English. There was just so much jargon thrown in there.

"And you'll let me know, won't you? You'll let me know as soon as you get that first message." Terr's tongue moistened her lower lip. "And I don't mean ages later, Tom. I want you to call me the moment it happens, wherever you are, up in whatever observatory. Will you do that for me? I want to be the first to hear ..."

Tom hesitated, then nodded. Hesitated not because of the promise itself, which seemed sweet and wonderful, but because of the way that she'd somehow made this chance meeting, this short conversation, into an almost final parting. Or entirely final. It all now really depended on the outcome of the Drake Equation. Life out there, or endless barren emptiness. Terr, or no Terr.

"And I'll let you know, too, Tom," she said, and gave him a kiss that was half on his cheek, half on the side of his mouth, "I'll let you know if I hear anything as well ..." But it was too quick for him to really pay attention to this strange thing she was saying. He was just left with a fading impression of her lips, her scent, the coolly different feel of her hair.

"You'd better be going," he said.

"Yes! While we've still got the air. Or before the Provost finds us. And you've got that plane to catch ..."

Terr gave him a last smile, and touched the side of his face with her knuckles almost where she'd kissed it, and traced the line of his jaw with fingernails which were now crimson. Then she turned and rejoined the people she was with. Tom thought she looked thinner as he watched the departing sway of her hips, and the way a satyr-like oaf put his arm around her in what might or might not have been a normally friendly manner. And narrower around the shoulders, too. Almost a waif. Not quite the fully rounded Terr he'd loved through the autumn and winter, although her breasts seemed to be bigger. Another few months, and he'd probably barely recognize her, which was a comfort of sorts. Things changed. You moved on. Like it or not, the tide of the future was always rushing over you.

Determined not to look back, Tom headed briskly on down New Street. Then, when he did stop and swallow the thick choking in his throat which was like gritty phlegm and acid and turn around for a last anguished glimpse of Terr, she and her friends had already gone from sight beyond the law courts. *I'll let you know if I hear anything, Tom* ... What a strange, ridiculous idea! But at least the incident had helped him refine his own feelings, and put aside that hopeful longing which he realized had been dogging him like a cloud in a cartoon. As he strode down New Street to catch the autotram back to Erdington and finish his packing, Tom had a clear, almost Biblical certainty about his life, and the direction in which it would lead him. It was-how could he ever have doubted it?-the Drake Equation.

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"So how does it work out?" Terr said to him now, up on his mountain. "That Drake fellow must have been around more than a century ago. So much has changed-even in the time since we were ... Since England, since Birmingham. We've progressed as a race, haven't we, us humans? The world hasn't quite disintegrated. The sun hasn't gone out. So surely you must have a better idea by now, surely you must know?"

"Nobody knows for sure, Terr. I wouldn't be here if I did. The Drake Equation is still just a series of guesses."

"But *we're* here on Earth, aren't we, Tom? Us humans and apes and bugs and cockroaches and dolphins. *We* must have somehow got started."

He nodded. Even now. Terr was so right. "Exactly."

"And we're still listening, and we want to hear ..." She chuckled. "Or at least *you're* still listening, Tom. So all you have to hope for is another Tom Kelly out in space, up there amid all those stars. It's that simple, isn't it?"

"Can you imagine that?"

Terr thought for a moment. She thought for a long time. The wine bottle was empty. The candle was guttering. "Does he have to have the same color skin, this alien Tom Kelly? Does he have to have four purple eyes and wings like a flyer?"

"That's up to you, Terr."

Then she stood up, and the waft of her passage towards him blew out the candle and brightened the stars and brought her scent which was sweet and dusty and as utterly unchanged as the taste of her mouth as she leaned down out of the swarming night and kissed him.

"I think you'll do as you are," she said, and traced her finger around his chin, just as she'd used to do, and down his nose and across his lips, as if he was clay, earth, and she was sculpting him. "One Tom Kelly ..."

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In the years after he left Aston and split with Terr, Tom had found that he was able to put aside his inherent shyness, and go out in the big bad world of academic science, and smile and press the flesh with administrators and business suits and dinosaur heads-of-department, and develop a specialization of sorts which combined data analysis with radio astronomy. He knew he was able enough—somehow, his ability was the only thing about himself that he rarely doubted—and he found to his surprise that he was able to move from commercial development contracts to theoretical work to pure research without many of the problems of job security and unemployment which seemed to plague his colleagues. Or perhaps he just didn't care. He was prepared to go anywhere, do anything. He lived entirely in his head, as a brief woman friend had said to him. Which was probably true, for Tom knew that he was never that sociable. Like the essential insecurity of research work, he simply didn't let it worry him. It helped, often, that there was a ready supply of drinks at many of the conferences and seminars he attended—not perhaps in the actual lecture halls and conference suites, but afterwards, in the bars and rooms where the serious science of self-promotion went on. It helped, too, that at the back of it all, behind all the blind alleys and government cuts and flurries of spending, he had one goal.

It had surprised Tom that that first Martian landing should have had such a depressing effect on SETI research, when any sensible interpretation of the Drake Equation had always allowed for the fact that Earth was the only planet likely to harbor life in this particular solar system. Even he was disappointed, though, when the Girouard probe finally put the kibosh on any idea of life existing in what had once seemed like the potentially warm and habitable waters of Jupiter's satellite Europa. Still, the Principal of Mediocrity, which is that this sun, this solar system, this planet, and even the creatures which dwell upon it, are all common-or-garden variety phenomena, and thus likely to be repeated in similar form all over the galaxy, remained entirely undamaged by such discoveries, at least in Tom's mind. But in the mind of the general public (in that the general public has a mind to care about such things) and in the minds of the politicians and administrators who controlled scientific funding (ditto), it was a turning point, and began to confirm the idea that there really wasn't much out there in space apart from an endless vacuum punctuated by a few aggregations of rocks, searing temperatures, hostile chemicals.

Funnily enough, this recession of the tides in SETI funding worked in Tom's favor. Like a collector of a type of object d'art which was suddenly no longer fashionable, he was able to mop up the data, airtime and hardware of several abandoned projects at bargain prices, sometimes using his own money, sometimes by tapping the enthusiasm of the few remaining SETI-freaks, sometimes by esoteric tricks of funding. Now that the big satellite telescopes could view and analyze stars and their orbital perturbation with a previously unheard-of accuracy, a few other solar systems had come out of the woodwork, but they were astonishingly rare, and mostly seemed to consist either of swarms of asteroids and dust clouds or huge near-stellar aggregations of matter which would fuse and crush anything resembling organic life. So f_p in the Drake Equation—the fraction of stars to likely have a planetary system—went down to

something like 0.0001, and n_e —the number of those planets which could bear life—fell to the even lower 0.0000-somethings unless you happened to think that life was capable of developing using a different chemical basis to carbon, as Tom, reared as he was on a diet of incredible starbeasts, of course did. f_i —the probability that life would then develop on a suitable planet—also took a downturn, thanks to lifeless Mars and dead Europa, and then as every other potential niche in solar system that some hopeful scientist had posited was probed and explored and spectrum analyzed out of existence. The stock of SETI was as low as it had ever been, and Tom really didn't care. In fact, he relished it.

He wrote a paper entitled "New Light On The Drake Equation," and submitted it to *Nature*, and then, as the last SETI journal had recently folded, to the *Radio Astronomy Bulletin* and, without any more success, and with several gratuitously sneering remarks from referees, to all the other obvious and then the less obvious journals. In the paper, he analyzed each element of the equation in turn, and explained why what had become accepted as the average interpretation of it was in fact deeply pessimistic. Taking what he viewed as the true middle course of balance and reason, and pausing only to take a few telling swipes at the ridiculous idea that computer simulations could provide serious data on the likelihood of life spontaneously developing, and thus on f_b , he concluded that the final N figure in the Drake Equation was, by any balanced interpretation, still in the region 1,000-10,000, and that it was thus really only a matter of time before contact was made. That was, as long as people were still listening . . .

He didn't add it to the versions of the paper he submitted, but he also planned to ask whoever finally published the thing to place a dedication when it was printed: *For Terr*. That, at least, was the simplest variant of a text he spent many wall-staring hours expanding, cutting, revising. But the paper never did get published, although a much shortened work, stripped of its maths by Tom and then of a lot of its sense by the copy editor, finally did come out in a popular science comic, beside an article about a man who was growing a skein of his own nerve tissue to a length of several hundred feet so that he could bungee-jump with it from the Victoria Falls. Still, the response was good, even if many of the people who contacted Tom were of a kind he felt reluctant to give out his e-mail, let alone his home, address to.

The years passed. Through a slow process of hard work, networking and less-than-self-aggrandizement, Tom became Mr. SETI. There always was, he tended to find, at least one member of the astronomy or the physics or even the biology faculty of most institutes of learning who harbored a soft spot for his topic. Just as Sally Normanton had done when he returned to Aston on that autumn when the air had smelled cleaner and different and yet was in so many ways the same, they found ways of getting him small amounts of funding. Slowly, Tom was able to bow out of his other commitments, although he couldn't help noticing how few attempts were made to dissuade him. Perhaps he'd lost his youthful zest, perhaps it was the smell on his breath of whatever he'd drunk the night before, and which now seemed to carry over to the morning. He was getting suprisingly near to retirement age, in any case. And the thought, the ridiculous idea that he'd suddenly been on the planet for *this long*, scared him, and he needed something which would carry him though the years ahead. What scared him even more, though, like a lottery addict who's terrified that their number will come up on exactly the week that they stop buying the tickets, was what would happen to SETI if he stopped listening. Sometimes, looking up at the night sky as the computers at whatever faculty he was now at pounded their way through the small hours with his latest batch of star data, gazing at those taunting pinpricks with all their mystery and promise, he felt as if he was bearing the whole universe up by the effort of his mind, and that the stars themselves would go out, just as they did in that famous Clarke story, the moment he turned his back on them. It was about then that he generally thought about having another drink, just to see him through the night, just to keep up his spirits. It was no big deal. A drink was a drink. Everyone he knew did it.

So Tom finally got sufficient funds and bluff together to set up his own specialized SETI project, and then settled on France for reasons he couldn't now quite remember, except that it was a place he hadn't been to where they still spoke a language which wasn't English, and then chose the karst area of the Massif

Central because it gave the sort of wide flat planes which fitted with the technology of his tripwire receivers, and was high up and well away from the radio babble of the cities. The choice was semi-symbolic—as well as the tripwires, he planned to borrow and buy-in as much useful data as he could from all possible sources, and process it there with whatever equipment he could borrow or cannibalize. Then he saw the waterhole, a tiny blue dot on the map of this otherwise desolate mountain-plateau above a small place called St. Hilaire, and that settled it. He hadn't even known that the place was a flying resort, until he'd signed all the necessary legal papers and hitched his life to it. And even that, in its way—those rainbow butterflies and beetles, those prismatic famine victims clustering around their smart bars and expensive shops, queuing with their wings whispering to take the cable lifts to the high peaks in the sunstruck south each morning—seemed appropriate. It made him think of Terr, and how her life had been, and it reminded him—as if he'd ever forgotten—of his, of *their* promise.

But it had never happened. There'd never been a reason to let her know.

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Tom wrestled with the memories, the feelings, as Terr touched him, and closed her hands around his with fingers which seemed to have lost all their flesh. She was tunneling down the years to him, kissing him from the wide sweep of some incredible distance. He tried closing his eyes, and felt the jagged rim of teeth and bone beneath her lips. He tried opening them, and he saw her flesh streaked and lined against the stars, as if the Terr of old was wearing a mask made of paper. And her eyes had gone out. All the storms had faded. She touched him, briefly, intimately, but he knew that it was useless.

She stood back from him and sighed, scarecrow figure in her scarecrow dress, long hair in cobwebs around her thin and witchy face.

"I'm sorry, Tom—"

"—No, it isn't—"

"—I was making presumptions."

But Tom knew who and what was to blame. Too many years of searching, too many years of drink. He sat outside his hut, frozen in his chair with his tripwires glimmering, and watched as Terr wandered off. He heard the clink of bottles as she inspected his dumpster. He heard the shuffle of rubbish as she picked her way around indoors. He should have felt ashamed, but he didn't. He was past that, just as he was past, he realized, any approximation of the act of love.

When Terr came out again into the starlight, she was carrying a bottle. It was the absinthe.

"Is this what you want?" she said, and unstoppered it. She poured a slug of the stuff out into her own empty wineglass, and raised it to her thin lips, and sipped. Even under this starlight, her face grew wrinkled, ugly. "God, it's so *bitter* ..."

"Perhaps that's why I like it."

"You know, you could get rid of this habit, Tom. It's like you said to me—if there's something about yourself you don't like, all you need do is take a vial."

Tom shrugged, wondering whether she was going to pour some absinthe out into his glass or just stand there, waving the bottle at him. Was he being deliberately taunted? But Terr was right, of course. You took a vial, and you were clean. The addiction was gone. Everything about you was renewed, apart from the fact that you were who you were, and still driven by the same needs and contradictions which had given you the craving in the first place. So you went back to the odd drink, because you knew you were clean now, you were safe. And the odd drink became a regular habit again, and you were back where you started again, only poorer and older, and filled with an even deeper self-contempt. And worse headaches. Yes, Tom had been there.

"It's like you say, Terr. We are as we are. A few clever chemicals won't change that."

"You're going to be telling me next that you're an addictive personality."

"I wouldn't be here otherwise would I, doing this?"

She nodded and sat down again. She tipped some absinthe into his glass, and Tom stared at it, and at the faintly glowing message cards which he still hadn't read which lay beside it on the table, allowing a slight pause to elapse before he drank the absinthe, just to show her that he could wait. Then the taste of anise and wormwood, which was the name of the star, as he recalled, which had fallen from the heavens and seared the rivers and fountains in the Book of Revelation. It had all just been a matter of belief, back then.

"You still haven't told me how things have been for you, Terr."

"They've been okay. On and off ... " Terr considered, her head in shade and edged with starlight. Tom told himself that the skull he could now see had always been there, down beneath Terr's skin that he had once so loved to touch and taste. Nothing was really that different. "With a few regrets."

"Did you really get into flying? That was how I always pictured you, up in the skies. Like the kids you see now down in this valley."

"Yes! I was a flyer, Tom. Not quite the way they are now—I'm sure they'd think the stuff we used then was uselessly heavy and clumsy. But it was great while it lasted. I made a lot of friends."

"Did you ever go back to your studies?"

She gave that dry chuckle again; the rustle of wind through old telephone wires. "I don't think I ever had *studies*, Tom. No, I got a job. Worked in public relations. Built up this company I was involved in very well for a while, sold other people's projects and ideas, covered up other people's mistakes—"

"—We could have used you for SETI."

"I thought of that, Tom—or of you, at least. But you had your own life. I didn't want to seem patronizing. And then I got sick of being slick and enthusiastic about other people's stuff, and I got involved in this project of my own. Basically, it was a gallery, a sort of art gallery, except the exhibits were people. I was ..."

"You were one of them?"

"Of course I was, Tom! What do you expect? But it plays havoc with your immune system after a while. You hurt and ache and bleed. It's something for the very fit, the very young, or the very dedicated. And then I tried being normal and got married and unmarried, and then married again."

"Not to the same person?"

"Oh no. Although they made friends, funnily enough, did my two ex's. Last time I heard from one of them, they were both still keeping in touch. Probably still are. Then I got interested in religion. *Religions*, being me ..."

"Any kids?"

"Now never quite seemed the time. I wish there had been a *now*, though, but on the other hand perhaps I was always too selfish."

"You were never selfish, Terr."

"Too unfocussed then."

"You weren't that either." Tom took another slug of absinthe, and topped up the glass. He could feel the bitter ease of it seeping into him. It was pleasant to sit talking like this. Sad, but pleasant. He realized he hadn't just missed Terr. These last few years up on his mountain, he'd missed most kinds of human company. "But I know what you mean. Even when I used to dream about us staying together, I could never quite manage the idea of kids ..."

"How can two people be so different, and so right for each other?"

"Is that what you really think?"

"I loved you more than I loved anyone, Tom. All the time since, I often got this feeling you were watching, listening. Like that afternoon when I jumped with my wings from that tower in Aston and then got arrested. And the body art. You were like a missing guest at the weddings. I was either going for or against you in whatever I did—and sort of wondering how you'd react. And then I went to the Moon, and your ghost seemed to follow me there, too. Have you ever been off-planet?"

He shook his head. He hadn't—or at least not in the obvious physical sense, although he'd traveled with Kubrick over the Moon's craters a thousand times to the thrilling music of Ligeti.

"Thought not. It was the most expensive thing I ever did."

"What's it like?"

"That's just about it with the Moon, Tom—it's expensive. The place you stay in is like one of those cheap old Japanese hotels. Your room's a pod you can't even sit up in. Who'd ever have thought space could be so claustrophobic!"

"All these things you've done, Terr. They sound so fascinating."

"Do, don't they—saying them like I'm saying them now? But it was always like someone else's life that I seemed to be stuck in. Like wearing the wrong clothes. I was always looking for my own. And then you get older—God, you know what it's like! And there are so many *choices* nowadays. So many different ways of stretching things out, extending the years, but the more you stretch them, the thinner they get. I always knew that I never wanted to live to some great age. These one-and-a-half centenarians you see, they seem to be there just to prove a point. Tortoises in an endless race. Or animals in a grotty zoo. Minds in twisted rusty cages ..."

"I'd never really thought—"

"—You'll just go on until the bang, won't you Tom? Until the booze finally wrecks some crucial organ or busts a capillary in your head. Or until the Venusians land over there on those funny wires in a flying

saucer and take you away with them. Although you'd probably say no because they aren't quite the aliens you expected."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Tom. It's just the way you are. And you've been lucky, really, to have managed to keep your dream intact, despite all the evidence. I read that article you did, years ago in that funny little paper with all the flashing adverts for body-changing. "New Light on the Drake Equation." I had to smile. You still sounded so positive. But don't you think we'd have heard from them by now, if they really were out there? Think of all the millions of stars, all these millions of years, and all those galactic civilisations you used to read about. It wouldn't be a whisper, would it, Tom, something you needed all this fiddly technology to pick up on? It would be all around us, and unavoidable. If the aliens wanted us to hear from them, it would be an almighty roar ..."

The stars were just starting to fade now at the edge of the east; winking out one by one in the way that Tom had always feared. Taurus, Orion ... The first hint of light as this part of the planet edged its face towards the sun was always grey up here on the karst, oddly wan and depressing. It was the color, he often felt as the night diluted and the optimism that the booze inspired drained out of him in torrents of piss and the occasional worrying hawk of bloody vomit, that his whole world would become—if he lost SETI. And the argument which Terr had so cannily absorbed, was, he knew, the most damning of all the arguments against his dream. The odd thing was, it lay outside the Drake Equation entirely, which was probably why that dumb article of his had avoided mentioning it. What Terr was saying was a version of a question that the founding father of the nuclear chain reaction Enrico Fermi had once asked in the course of a debate about the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligence nearly a century and half—and how time flew!—ago. The question was simply this: "Where are they?"

There were these things called von Neumann machines; perhaps Terr knew that as well. They'd once been a theory, and stalwarts of the old tales of the future Tom had loved reading, but now they were out working in the asteroid belt and on Jupiter's lesser moons, and down in deep mines on earth and the sea trenches and on Terr's moon and any other place where mankind wanted something but didn't want to risk its own skin by getting it. They were robots, really, but they were able to manufacture new versions of themselves—reproduce, if you wanted to make the obvious biological comparison—using the available local materials. They were smart, too. They could travel and adapt to new environments. They could do pretty much anything you wanted of them. So surely, went the argument which sometimes crept along with the depression and the morning hangover into Tom's head, any other intelligent lifeform would have come up with a similar invention? Even with the staggering distance involved in travel between the stars, all you had to do was launch some into space, wait a few million years—a mere twitch of God's eye, by any cosmological timescale—and the things would be colonizing this entire galaxy. So where were they?

The answer was as simple as Fermi's question: *They aren't here*. And mankind was a freak; he and his planet were a fascinating outrage against all the laws of probability. The rest of the universe was either empty, or any other dim glimmerings of life were so distant and faint as to be unreachable in all the time remaining until the whole shebang collapsed again. Better luck next time, perhaps. Or the time after that. By one calculation of the Drake Equation Tom had read, life of some kind was likely to appear somewhere in the entire universe once in every 10^{10} big bangs, and even that was assuming the physical laws remained unchanged. The guy hadn't bothered to put the extra spin on the figure which would involve two communicating intelligences arising at the same time and in the same corner of the same galaxy. Probably hadn't wanted to wreck his computer.

Half the sky was greying out now. Star by star by star. At least he'd soon get a proper look at Terr, and

she'd get a proper look at him, although he wasn't sure that that was what either of them wanted. Perhaps there was something to be said for the grey mists of uncertainty, after all.

"I always said—didn't I, Tom?—that I'd bring you a message."

"And *this* is it? You saying I should give up on the one thing that means something to me?"

"Don't look at it like that, Tom. Think of it as ..." A faint breeze had sprung up, the start of the wind that would soon lift the flyers as the temperature gradients hit the valley. Tom thought for a moment that they must still have a candle burning on the table between them, the way Terr seemed to flicker and sway beyond it. She was like smoke. Her hair, her face. He poured himself some more absinthe, which he decided against drinking. "The thing is, Tom, that you've got yourself into this state when you imagine that whether or not you listen in itself proves something. It doesn't, Tom. They're out there—they're not out there. Either way, it's a fact already isn't it? It's just one we don't happen to know the answer to ... And wouldn't it be a pity, if we knew the answer to everything? Where would your dreams be then?"

"Science is all about finding out the truth—"

"—And this life of yours, Tom! I mean, why on earth do you have to go down to the village to pick up those messages? Can't you communicate with people from up here? It looks like you've got enough equipment in that hut to speak to the entire world if you wanted to. But I suppose that doesn't interest you."

"I find personal messages ..." He gazed at the hills in the east as a questing spear of light rose over them, then down at the cards she'd brought up to him. "I find them distracting."

"I'm sorry, Tom. I don't want to distract you."

"I didn't mean ..." There he went again. Terr in tears, just the way she'd been, in a memory he'd suppressed for so long, in his bed in Erdington on that night of the Mars landing when the booze first started to get the better of him. But this was different. Terr was different. She was twisting, writhing. And the wind, the dawn, was rising.

"And I always felt responsible for you in a way, Tom. It was probably just a sort of vanity, but I felt as if I'd given you some final push along a path down which you might not otherwise have taken. You were charming, Tom. You were handsome and intelligent. You could have made a fortune and had a happy life doing anything other than SETI. Is that true Tom? Does that make any sense to you?"

He didn't reply, which he knew in itself was a positive answer. The truth was always out there in any case, with or without him. What was the point in denying anything?

"And that promise I made you make, that last day when we were standing outside the law courts with all those stupid flyer friends of mine. It seemed clever, somehow. I knew how much you still loved me and I wanted to leave my mark on you, just to prove it. I'm sorry, Tom. It was another one of my stupid, stupid projects ..."

"You can't hold yourself responsible for someone else's life, Terr."

"I know, Tom. It didn't even feel like I was responsible for my own."

Tom looked away from Terr, and back at his ragged hut. But for the fine-spun silver of his field of tripwires, but for the faint glow of his computers, but for the bottle-filled dumpster and the old Citroën beside it, it could have been the dwelling of a medieval hermit. He sighed and looked down the slope of his mountain. In this gathering light, the whole world looked frail as a spiderweb. And down there—he

could just see it—lay his waterhole, and the flickering movement of the shy mountain ibex who gathered dawn and dusk to drink there.

"The sun's coming up, Tom. I'll have to be going soon . . ."

"But you haven't . . ." The words froze in his mouth as he looked back at Terr. Even as the light strengthened, the substance was draining from her. " . . . can't you stay...?"

"I'm sorry, Tom. I've said all there is to be said . . ."

She stood up and moved, floated, towards him. Changed and not changed. Terr and not Terr. What few stars remained in the west were now shining right through her. But Tom felt no fear as she approached him. All he felt, welling up in his heart, was that childhood ache, that dark sweetness which was cola and ice cream and his mother's embrace. All he felt was a glorious, exquisite, sense of wonder.

The rim of the sun gilded the edge of those ranged peaks. Terr broke and shimmered. She was like her eyes now; a beautiful swarming nebula. But the sun was brightening, the wind was still rising. She was fading, fading. Tom stretched out a hand to touch whatever it was she had become, and found only morning coolness, the air on his flesh.

Remember, Tom.

Terr had no voice now, no substance. She was just a feeling, little more than the sad and happy memory he had carried with him through all these years into this dim and distant age. But he felt also that she was moving, turning away from him, and he smiled as he watched her in that dark blue dress, as beautiful as she had always been, walking away down the silvered turf of his mountain towards the waterhole. Terr with her blonde hair. Terr with her beautiful eyes. Terr with the mist on her flesh in that place where her jaw met her throat beneath her earlobe. She turned and gave him a smile and a wave as the sun sent a clear spine of light up from the cleft between two mountains. Terr in her dark blue dress, heading down towards that waterhole where all the shy creatures of the universe might gather at the beginning or end of the longest of days. Then she was gone.

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Tom sat there for a long while. It was, after all, his time of day for doing nothing. And the sun rose up, brightening the world, corkscrewing the spirals beside the limestone crags. He thought he caught the flash of wings, but the light, his whole world and mountain, was smeared and rainbowed. He thought that he had probably been crying.

The cards on the table before him had lost most of their glow. And they were cold and slickly damp when he turned them over. He selected the one card he didn't recognize, the one which was blue and almost plain, with a pattern on its surface like rippled water. He was sure now that it was more than just spam, junk mail. He ran his finger across the message strip to activate it, and closed his eyes, and saw a man standing before him in a fountained garden which was warm and afternoon-bright and almost Moorish; it could have been Morocco, Los Angeles, Spain. The man was good-looking, but no longer young. He had allowed the wrinkles to spread over his face, his hair to grey and recede. There was something, Tom found himself thinking, about himself about his face, or at least the self he thought he remembered once seeing in a mirror. But the man was standing with the fixedness of someone preparing for a difficult moment. His face was beyond ordinary sadness. His eyes were grave.

Tom waited patiently through the you-don't-know-me-and-I-don't-know-you part of the message, and the birds sang and the bees fumbled for pollen amid deep red and purple tropic flowers as the man gave Tom his name, and explained the one thing about their backgrounds which they had in common, which was that they had both loved Terr. They'd loved Terr, and then of course they'd lost her, because Terr was impossible to keep—it was in her nature; it was why they'd made the glorious leap of loving her in the first place. But this man was aware of Tom Kelly in a way that Tom wasn't aware of him. Not that Terr had ever said much about her past because she lived so much in the present, but he'd known that Tom was there, and in a way he'd envied him, because love for Terr was a first and only thing, glorious in its moment, then impossible to ever quite recapture in the same way. So he and Terr had eventually parted, and their marriage—which was her second, in any case—had ended as, although he'd hoped against hope, he'd always known it would. And Terr had gone on with her life, and he'd got on with his, and he'd followed her sometimes through the ether, her new friends, her new discoveries and fresh obsessions, until he heard this recent news, which was terrible, and yet for him, not quite unexpected, Terr being Terr.

There was a ridge on a peak in the Andes known as Catayatauri. It sounded like a newly discovered star to Tom, and was almost as distant and as hostile. The ridge leading up to it was incredible; in the east, it dropped nearly ten thousand sheer feet, and it took a week of hard walking and another week of hard climbing to reach it, that was, if the winds and the treacherous séracs let you get there at all. But it had acquired a near-mythic reputation amongst a certain kind of flyer, a reputation which went back to the time of the Incas, when human sacrifices were thrown from that ridge to placate Viracocha, the old man of the sky.

So picture Terr making that climb alone in the brutal cold, no longer as young or as fit as she might once have been, but still as determined. She left messages in the village which lay in Catayatauri's permanent shadow. If she didn't come back, she didn't want anyone risking their lives trying to find her. The Incas had felt Catayatauri with a deep, religious, intensity, and so had the climbers who came after, and so must Terr, alone up in those godly mountains. She climbed unaided; no wings, no muscle or lung enhancements, no crampon claws on her feet or hands, no ropes, and no oxygen. The fact that she made it there at all was incredible, clinging to that ridge at the roof of the world. From Catayatauri, from that drop, nothing else was comparable. And Terr had stood there alone, a nearly-old woman at the edge of everything. She'd bought vials at a shop in Lima. She'd emptied what little she had left in her accounts to get hold of them. These weren't like the vials they sold along the Rue de Commerce in St. Hilaire. Scarcely legal, they were the quickest acting, the most radical, the most expensive. They tore through your blood and veins by the nanosecond, they burned you up and twisted your body inside out like a storm-wrecked umbrella. And Terr had purchased three times the usual dosage.

And she probably did get there, and make the leap from the ridge on Catayatauri. It seemed like the most likely explanation, even though her body hadn't been found. Terr had thrown herself from the precipice with the vials singing in her body, her bones twisting, the wings breaking out from her like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, although they would have been too damp and frail to do more than be torn to shreds in the brutal torrents of air. And then, finally, finally, she would have been buffeted onto the rocks. Terr, it seemed, had chosen the most extreme of all possible ways of dying ...

Was it like her, to do this, Tom wondered? Terr plummeting, twisting and writhing? Had she meant to kill herself, or just wanted to take the risk, and lived the moment, and not really cared about the next? The man in the Moorish garden was as lost and puzzled by all these questions as Tom was himself. But the thing about Terr, as they both realized, was that she had always changed moment by moment, hour by hour, year by year. The thing about Terr was that you could never really know her. Tom, he had always been steady and purposeful; long ago, he had laid down the tracks of his life. Terr was different. Terr was always different. She'd never been troubled as Tom had been most of his life by that sense of missed

appointments, unfinished business, time slipping by; of vital a message which he had never quite heard. Terr had always leapt without looking back.

The man gave a smile and signed off. The Moorish garden, the dense scent of the flowers, faded. Tom Kelly was back in the morning as the shadows raced the clouds over his mountain; and he was wondering, like a character in a fairy story, just where he had been the previous night, and exactly what it was that he had witnessed. And if he could have been granted one wish—which was something that Terr, whatever she had been, hadn't even offered to him—it would still be the thing for which he had always been hoping. He was nearly seventy, after all. He was Tom Kelly; Mr. SETI. No matter what happened to you, no matter what wonders you witnessed, people his age didn't change. He was still sure of that, at least.

.....

Tom Kelly, speeding down his mountain. The sun is blazing and the chairlifts are still and the flyers are resting as shadow lies down next to shadow for the long, slumberous afternoon. He parks in the near-empty Place de la Révolution, and climbs out from his Citroën, and waves to Jean-Benoît wiping his tables, and then bangs on the door of the *bureau de poste*. The sign says *fermé*, but Madame Brissac slides back the bolts. She seems almost pleased to see him. She nearly gives him a smile. Then they spend their hour together, seated beside the counter as bluebottles buzz and circle by her pigeonholes in the warm, intensely odorous air. Tom's got as far as transitive verbs, and here he's struggling. But after all, French is a foreign language, and you don't learn such things in a day—at least, not the way Tom's learning. It will be some months, he reckons late autumn at least—*l'automne*, and perhaps even winter, whatever that's called—before he's got enough of a grip to ask her about how she sorts the mail in those pigeonholes. And he suspects she'll think it's a stupid question in any case. Madame Brissac is, after all, Madame Brissac. But who'd have thought that she was once a teacher, back in the days when people still actually needed to be taught things? For every person, it seems to Tom, who gains something in this future age, there's someone else who makes a loss from it.

Things are just starting to reawaken when he emerges into the blazing Place de la Révolution, and he has to move his Citroën and park it round the corner to make room for the evening's festivities. It's the *Foire aux Sorcières* tonight, which a few months ago would have meant nothing to him, and still means little enough. But the French like a good festival, he knows that much now at least. They have them here in St. Hilaire regularly—in fact, almost every week, seeing as there's such a regular throughput of new flyers needing to have their francs taken from them. But this festival is special. Tom knows that, too.

Drinking sweet hot coffee at his usual table, he passes the necessary hour while the market stalls and the stage for the evening pageant assemble themselves to the attentions of robot crabs and the clang of poles and the shouts of a few largely unnecessary artisans. The town, meanwhile, stretches itself and scratches its belly and emerges from its long meals and lovers' slumbers. The girl with that Audrey Hepburn look, whom he now knows is called Jeannette, gives him a smile and goes over to say hi, *bonjour*. She thinks it's sweet, that a mad old mountain goat like Tom should take the long way around to learning her language. And so does Michel, her boyfriend, who is as urbane and charming as anyone can be who's got the muscles of a cartoon god and the green scaly skin of a reptile. They even help Tom carry his few boxes of stuff from the boot of his Citroën to the stall he's booked, and wish him luck, and promise to come back and buy something later on in the evening, although Tom suspects they'll be having too much fun by then to remember him.

But it turns out that business at his stall is surprisingly brisk in any case. It's been this way for a couple of weeks now, and if it continues, Tom reckons he'll have to order some new SETI tee-shirts and teatowels to replace his lost stock, although the teatowels in particular will be hard to replace after all these years, seeing as people don't seem to have any proper use for them any longer. They ask him what they're for, these big SETI handkerchiefs, and then tie them around their necks like flags. Who'd have thought it—that teatowels would be a casualty of this future he finds himself in? But bargaining, setting a price for something and then dropping it to make the sale; that's no problem for Tom. The numbers of another language come almost easily to him; he supposes his brain dimly remembers it once had an aptitude for maths.

The *Foire aux Sorcières* seems an odd festival for summer, but, even before the darkness has settled, the children are out, dressed as witches, ghosts, goblins, and waving lanterns which cast, through some technical trick Tom can't even guess at, a night-murk across their faces. Still, the whole occasion, with those sweet and ghastly faces, the trailing sheets with cut eye-holes, the shrieking, cackling devices, has a pleasantly old-fashioned feel about it to Tom. Even the flyers, when they emerge, have done nothing more to change themselves than put on weird costumes and make-ups, although, to Tom's mind at least, many of them had looked the part already. The scene, as the sun finally sinks behind the tenements and a semblance of cool settles over the hot and frenzied square, is incredible. Some of the people wandering the stalls have even dressed themselves up as old-fashioned aliens. He spots a bulge-headed Martian, then a cluster of those slim things with slanted eyes that were always abducting people in the Midwest, and even someone dressed as that slippery grey thing that used to explode out of people's stomachs in the films, although the guy's taken the head off and is mopping his face with one of Tom's SETI teatowels because he's so hot inside it. If you half-closed your eyes, Tom thinks, it really could be market day on the planet Zarg, or anywhere else of a million places in this universe which he suspects that humanity will eventually get around to colonizing, when it stops having so much fun here on earth. Look at Columbus, look at Cook, look at Einstein, look at NASA. Look at Terr. We are, in the depths of our hearts, a questing, dreaming race.

Small demons, imps and several ghosts cluster around him now, and ask him *qu'est-ce que SETI?* which Tom attempts to explain in French. They nod and listen and gaze up at him with grave faces. He's almost thinking he's starting to get somewhere, when they all dissolve into gales of laughter and scatter off through the crowds. He watches them go, smiling, those ghosts, those flapping sheets. When he refocuses his gaze, Madame Brissac has materialized before him. She is dressed as an old-fashioned witch. But she seems awkward beneath her stick-on warts and green make-up, shorn of the usual wooden counter which, even now that they're attempting to talk to each other in the same language, still separates Tom and her. Still, she politely asks the price of his SETI paperweights, and rummages in her witchy bag and purchases one from him, and then comments on the warmth and the beauty of this evening, and how pretty and amusing the children are. And Tom agrees with her in French, and offers Madame Brissac a SETI tea towel at no extra cost, which she declines. Wishing him a good evening, she turns and walks away. But Tom still feels proud of himself, and he knows that's she's proud of him too. It's an achievement for them both, that they can talk to each other now in the same language, although, being Madame Brissac, she'll never quite let it show.

The music rides over him. The crowds whoop and sing. The lanterns sway. Down the slope towards the river, the lace-draped stalls look almost cool in the soft breeze which plays down from the hills and over the tenements as Tom sweats in his SETI tee-shirt. Jean-Benoît's down there, dressed red as fallen Lucifer and surrounded by lesser demons, and looking most strange and splendid for his evening off. There's no sign, though, of the woman in the dark blue dress whom Tom glimpsed standing in the sunlight all those weeks ago. He knows that Terr's dead now, although the thought still comes as a cold blunt shock to him. So how could there ever be any sign of Terr?

Tom's got his days better sorted now. He's never again gotten so drunk as to lose one whole day and imagine Thursday is Wednesday. In fact, nowadays, Tom never has a drink at all. It would be nice to say that he's managed it through pure willpower. But he's old, and a creature of habit, even when the habits are the wrong ones. And this *is* the future, after all. So Tom's taken a vial, just as he had done several times before, and the need, the desire, the welling emptiness, faded so completely that he found himself wondering for the first few days what all the trouble and fuss had been about. But that was two months ago, and he still rarely entertains the previous stupid thoughts about how a social drink, a sip and a glass here and there, would be quite safe for someone like him. Even on a night such as this, when the air smells of wine and sweat and Pernod and coffee and Gitanes, and he can hear bottles popping and glasses clinking and liquid choruses of laughter all around the square, he doesn't feel the usual emptiness. Or barely. Or at least he's stopped kidding himself that it's something the alcohol will ever fill, and decided to get on with the rest of his life unaided.

He sometimes wonders during the long hot afternoons of his lessons with Madame Brissac whether a woman in a blue dress and grey or blonde hair really did enter the *bureau de poste* to inquire about an elderly American called Tom Kelly on that magical Thursday. Sometimes, he's almost on the brink of interrupting her as she forces him through the endless twists and turns of French grammar, although he knows she'd probably regard it as an unnecessary distraction. He's thought of asking Jean-Benoît, too—at least, when he's not dressed up as Lucifer—if he remembers a woman who could have been old or might have been young coming to his café, and who undertook to pass on the message cards he'd forgotten to take with him. Would they remember Terr? Would they deny that they'd ever seen her at all? More likely, Tom has decided, they'll have long forgotten such a trivial incident amid the stream of faces and incidents which populate their lives.

Tom glances up from the bright Place de la Révolution at the few faint stars which have managed to gather over the rooftops and spires of St. Hilaire. Like Terr—or the ghost of her—he suspects they'll remain a mystery that he'll have carry to his grave. But there's nothing so terrible about mysteries. It was mystery, after all, which drew him to the stars in the first place. Wonder and mystery. He smiles to himself, and waves to Jeannette and Michel as they pass through the crowds. Then Jean-Benoît, amid great cheers, flaps his crimson wings and rises over the stalls and hovers floodlit above the church spire to announce the real beginning of the night's festivities, which will involve fireworks, amazing pageants, dancing ...

This *Foire aux Sorcières* will probably still be going on at sunrise, but Tom Kelly knows it will be too much for him. He's getting too old for this world he finds himself in. He can barely keep pace. But he permits himself another smile as he starts to pack up his stall of SETI memorabilia, the tee-shirts and paperweights, the lapel pins embossed with a tiny representation of the Drake Equation which not a single person who's bought one of the things has ever asked him to explain. He's looking forward to the midnight drive back up his mountain in his old Citroën, and the way the stars will blossom when he finally turns off the headlights and steps into the cool darkness outside his hut, with the glitter of his tripwires, the hum and glow of his machines. Who knows what messages might be up there?

He's Tom Kelly, after all.

And this might be the night.

He's still listening, waiting.

The End