

The Tourist - a short story by Paul Park

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Everybody wants to see the future, but of course they can't. They get turned back at the border. "Go away," the customs people tell them.

"You

can't come in. Go home." Often you'll get people on TV who say they snuck

across. Some claim it's wonderful and some claim it's a nightmare, so in

that way it's like before there was time travel at all.

But the past is different. I would have liked to have gone early, when it

was first opened up. Nowadays whenever you go, you're liable to be caught

in the same pan-cultural snarl: We just can't keep our hands off, and as a

result, Cuba has invaded prehistoric Texas, the Empire of Ashok has become

a Chinese client state, and Napoleon is in some kind of indirect vast communication with Genghis Khan. They plan to attack Russia in some

temporal pincer movement. In the meantime, Burger Chef has opened restaurants in Edo, Samarkand and Thebes, and a friend of mine who ventured by mistake into the Thirty Years War, where you'd think no one

in

their right mind would ever want to go, said that even Dessau in 1626

was

full of fat Australians drinking boilermakers and complaining that the 17th century just wasn't the same since Carnage Travel ("Explore the bloodsoaked fields of Europe!") organized its packaged tours. They weren't

even going to show up at the bridgehead the next day; my friend went,

and

reported that the Danish forces were practically outnumbered by

Japanese

tourists, who stampeded the horses with their fleets of buses, and

would

have changed the course of history had there been anything left to change.

Wallenstein, the Imperial commander, didn't even bother to show up till four o'clock; he was dead drunk in the back of a Range Rover, and it

was

only due to contractual obligations that he appeared at all, the

Hapsburg

government (in collaboration with a New York public relations firm)

having

organized the whole event as a kind of theme park. Casualties (my

friend

wrote) after seven hours of fighting were still zero, except for an Italian who had cut his finger changing lenses--an improvement, I

suppose,

over the original battle, when the waters had flowed red with Danish

blood.

And that period is less travelled than most. The whole classical era barely exists anymore. First-century Palestine is like a cultural

ground

zero: nothing but taxi cabs and soft-drink stands, and confused and frightened people. Thousands attend the Crucifixion every day, and the garden at Gethsemane is a madhouse at all hours. My ex-inlaws were there and they sent me a photograph, taken with a flash. It shows a panicked, harried, sad young man. (Yes, he's blond and blue-eyed, as it turns out, raising questions as to whether the past can actually be altered in retrospect by the force of popular misconception.) But at least he's out in the open. Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, and the entire family of Herod the Great are in hiding, yet still hardly a week goes by that Interpol doesn't manage to deport some new revisionist. It's amazing how difficult people find it to accept the scientific fact--that nothing they do will ever make a difference, that cause and effect, as explicative principles, are as dead as Malcolm X. Naturally they are confused by their ability to cause short-term mayhem, and just as naturally they are seeking an outlet for their own frustrations: Adolf Hitler, for example, has survived attempts on his life every 15 minutes between 1933 and 1945, and people are still lining up to take potshots even since the Nazis closed the border to everyone but a small group of Libyan consultants--now stormtroopers are racing back in time, hoping to provide 24-hour security to all the Fuehrer's distant ancestors. Who wants to explain to that crowd how history works? Joseph Stalin--it's the same. Recently some Lithuanian fanatic managed to break through UN security to confront him at his desk. "Please," he says, "don't kill me." (They all speak a little English now.) "I am a democrat," he says--"I change my mind." These days it requires diplomatic pressure just to get people to do what they're supposed to. It is only by promising the Confederate government \$10,000,000 in new loans that the World Bank can persuade Lee to attack at Gettysburg at all--"I have a real bad feeling about this," he says over and over. "I love my boys," he says. "Please don't make me do it." Who can blame him? He has a book of Matthew Brady's photographs on his desk. And in fact, why should he be persuaded? What difference does it make? People hold onto these arbitrary rules, these arbitrary patterns, out of fear. Not even all historians are able to concede the latest proofs--confirmations of everything they feared and half-suspected when they were in graduate school--that events in the past have no discernible effect upon the present. That time is not after all a continuum. That the past is like a booster rocket, constantly dropping away. Afterward, it's disposable. Except for the most recent meeting of the AHA (Vienna, 1815--Prince Metternich the keynote speaker, and a drunken lecher, by all

reports), American historians now rarely go abroad except as tourists. They are both depressed and liberated to find that their work has no practical application.

That's not completely true. It certainly changed things, for example, when

people found out that the entire known opus of Rembrandt van Rijn consisted of forgeries. But that's a matter of money; it's business contacts that people want anyway, not understanding. So everywhere you

go

back then are phalanxes of oilmen, diplomats, arms dealers, art collectors, and teachers of English as a second language. Citibank recently pre-empted slave gangs working on the pyramid of Cheops, to

help

complete their Giza offices. The World Wildlife Fund has projects (Save the Trilobites, etc.) into the Precambrian era-- projects doomed to failure by their very nature.

Of course the news is not all bad: world profiles for literacy and

public

health have been transformed. In 1349 the International Red Cross has seven hundred volunteers in Northern Italy alone. And the Peace Corps,

my

God, they're everywhere. But nevertheless I thought I could discern a trend, that all the world and all of history would one day share the

same

dismal denominator. Alone in my house on Washon Island, which I'd kept after Suzanne and I broke up, I saw every reason to stay put. I am a cautious person by nature.

But that summer I was too much by myself. And so I took advantage of a special offer; there had been some terrorist attacks on Americans in Tenochtitlan, and fares were down as a result. I bought a ticket for Paleolithic Spain. Far enough away for me to think that things might be different there. I thought there might be out-of-the-way places still. Places pure and untouched and malleable, where I could make things different. Where my imagination might still correspond in some sense to reality--I might have known. My ex-inlaws had sent me postcards. They

had

recently been on a mastodon safari not far from Jaca, where they had visited Suzanne. "The food is great," they wrote me--never a good sign. I might have known I was making a mistake. There is something about the past which makes what we've done to it even more poignant. All the brochures and the guidebooks say it and it's true. It really is more beautiful back then. The senses come alive. Colours are brighter.

Chairs

are more comfortable. Things smell better, taste better. People are friendlier, or at least they were. Safe in the future, you can still

feel

so much potential. Yet the town I landed in-- my God, it was such a sad place. San Juan de la Cruz. We came in over the Pyrenees, turned low

over

a lush forest, and then settled down in an enormous empty field of tarmac.

The hangar space was as big as Heathrow's, but there was only one other commercial jetliner-- a KLM. Everything else was US military aircraft

and

not even much of that, just five beige transports in a line, and a

single

helicopter gunship.

We taxied in toward His Excellency the Honorable Dr Wynstan Mog (Ph.D.) International Airport, still only half built and already crumbling,

from  
the look of it. For no perceptible reason the pilot offloaded us about  
200  
yards from the terminal, and then we had to stand around on the melting  
asphalt while the stewardesses argued with some men in uniform. I  
didn't  
mind. The sky was cobalt blue. It was hot, but there were astonishing  
smells blown out of the forest toward us, smells which I couldn't  
identify, and which mixed with the tar and the gasoline and my own  
sweat  
and the noise of the engines into a sensation that seemed to nudge at  
the  
edges of my memory, as if it almost meant something, just in itself.  
But  
what? I had been born in Bellingham; this was nothing I recognized. It  
was  
nothing from my past. I put my head back and closed my eyes,  
dangerously  
patient, while all around me my 19 fellow passengers buzzed and  
twittered.  
And I thought, this is nothing. This feeling is nothing. Everybody  
feels  
this way.  
The men in uniform collected our passports and then they marched us  
toward  
the terminal. They were not native to the time and place; they were  
big,  
fat men. I knew Dr Mog had hired mercenaries from all over--these ones  
looked Lebanese or Israeli. They wore sunglasses and carried machine  
pistols. They hustled us through the doors and into the VIP lounge, an  
enormous air-conditioned room with plastic furniture and a single  
plate-glass window that took up one whole wall. It appeared to lead  
directly onto the street in front of the terminal. Certainly there was  
a  
crowd out there, perhaps a hundred and fifty people of all races and  
nationalities, and they were staring in at us, their faces pressed  
against  
the glass.  
One of the uniformed men moved to a corner of the window. A cord hung  
from  
the ceiling; he pulled down on it, and a dirty brown curtain inched  
from  
left to right across the glass wall. It made no difference to the  
people  
outside, and even when the curtain was closed I was still aware of  
their  
presence, their sad stares. If anything I was more aware. I sat down in  
one of the moulded chairs with my back to the curtain, and watched some  
customs officials explain two separate hoaxes, both fairly  
straightforward.  
There was a desk at the back of the room and they had spread our  
passports  
onto it. They were waiting for our luggage, and in the meantime they  
checked our visas and especially our certificates of health. I was  
prepared for this. The region is suffering from a high rate of AIDS  
infection--almost 25% of the population in San Juan de la Cruz has  
tested  
HIV positive. The government seems unconcerned, but they have required  
that all tourists be inoculated with the so-called AIDS vaccine, a  
figment

in the imagination of some medical comen in Zaire, and unavailable in the US. Nevertheless it is now mandatory for travel in large parts of the third world, as a way of extorting hard currency. I work in a hospital research lab and I had the stamp; so, apparently, had someone else in our group, a thin man my own age, deeply tanned. His name was Paul.

Together we watched the others gather around the desk, and watched them as they came to understand their choice--to pay a fine of \$150 per person, or to be inoculated right there on the premises with the filthiest syringe I'd ever seen. It was a good piece of theatre; one of the officials left to "wash his hands," and came back in a white smock with blood on it--you had to smile. At the same time one of the others was handing out bank booklets and explaining how to change money: all tourists were required to exchange \$50 a week at the State Bank, for which they received a supposedly equivalent amount of the national currency--three eoliths, a bone needle, six arrowheads and two chunks of rock salt. An intrinsic value of about 40 cents, total -this in a country where in any case dollars and Deutschmarks are the only money that anyone accepts.

Paul and I lined up to buy our currency packs, which came in a convenient leather pouch. "It's ridiculous," he said. "Before time travel they didn't even have domesticated animals. They lived in caves. What were they going to buy?" He had been working in the country for about five years, and was knowledgeable about it. At first I liked him because he still seemed fresh in some ways, his moral outrage tempered with humour and a grudging admiration for Dr Mog. "He's not a fool," he said. "His PhD is a real one: political economy from the University of Colombo--the correspondence branch, of course, but his dissertation was published. An amazing accomplishment when you consider his background. And he's just about the only one of these dictators who's not a foreign puppet or an adventurer--he's a genuine Cro-Magnon, native to the area, and he's managed to stay in power despite some horrendous CIA intrigues, and get very rich in the process." Someone wheeled in a trolley with our luggage on it. The customs men spread out the suitcases on a long table. Paul and I were done early; we both had packed light, and were carrying no modern gadgets. The others, most of whom were with a tour group going to Altamira, stood around in abject silence while the officials went through everything, arbitrarily confiscating cameras, hairdryers, CD players on a variety of pretexts. "This is a waste of our electrical resources," admonished one, holding up a Norelco.

But by that time Paul and I had been given permission to leave. We had to wait in line outside the lounge to get our visas stamped, and then we made our way through the chaotic lobby. I allowed Paul to guide me, ignoring as he did the many people who accosted us and tugged upon our arms. He seemed familiar with the place, happy or at least amused to be there. Outside in the heat, he stopped to give a quarter to a beggar he appeared to recognize, and conversed with him while I looked around. I was going to get a taxi and find a hotel and stay there for a night or so before going on into the interior. I haven't travelled very much, and I was worried about choosing a taxi man from the horde that surrounded us, worried for being overcharged, taken advantage of. I put on my sunglasses, waiting for Paul, and I was relieved to find when he was finished that he expected me to follow him. "I'll take you to the Aladeph," he said. "We'll get some breakfast there."

He was scanning the crowd for someone specific, and soon a little man broke through, Chinese or Korean or Japanese--"Mr Paul," he said, "This way, Mr Paul." Then he was tugging at our bags and I, untrusting, wasn't letting go until I saw Paul surrender his own daypack. We walked over to a battered green Toyota. Rock and roll was blaring from the crummy speakers. The sun was powerful. "We've got to get you a hat," said Paul. A long straight road led into town, flanked on both sides by lines of identical one-storey concrete buildings: commercial establishments selling hubcaps and used tyres, as well as piles of more anonymous metal junk. Men sat in the sandy forecourts, smoking cigarettes and talking; there were a lot of people, a lot of people in the streets as we passed an enormous statue of Dr Mog, the Father of the Nation with his arms outstretched--a gift from the Chinese government. We drove through Martyr's Gate into a neighbourhood of concrete hovels, separated from the narrow streets by drainage ditches full of sewage. People everywhere, but not one of them looked native to the time--the men wore ragged polyester shirts and pants, the women faded housedresses. Most were barefoot, some wore plastic shoes. We passed the Catholic Cathedral, as well as numerous smaller churches of various denominations: Mormon, Seventh Day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness. We passed the headquarters of several international relief organizations, and then I must have dozed off momentarily, for when I opened my eyes we were in a different kind of neighbourhood entirely, a neighbourhood of sleek highrises and villas covered with flowering vines. The cab pulled up in front of a Belgian restaurant called Pepe le Moko, and we got out. Paul paid the driver before I could get my money, and then

waved away the bills I offered him; he had said nothing during the ride, but had sat staring out the window with an expression half rueful and half amused. Now he smiled more broadly and motioned me inside the restaurant-- it was an expensive place, full of white people in short-sleeved shirts and ties. "I thought we'd get some breakfast," he said. We ordered French toast and coffee, which came almost immediately. I spooned some artificial creamer into mine and offered the jar to him, but he wrinkled his nose. "I'm sure it's all right," he said. "What do you mean?" He shrugged. "You know the United States government pays for its projects here by shipping them some of our agricultural surplus. It's a terrible idea, because it makes the population dependent on staples that can't be grown locally; at any rate, Dr Mog sells it, and then uses the money, supposedly, to finance USAID, and famine relief, whatever. Well, my first year there was a shipment of a thousand tons of wheat, which they packed in the same container as a load of PCV's, which was being sent to some plastics factory. When it got here, the customs people claimed the wheat was contaminated and couldn't be sold. They sequestered it in warehouses while the US sent a scientist who said it was okay. But as they argued back and forth, the wheat was sold anyway. And then the raw PCV's began to show up also here in San Juan, in some of the poorer restaurants. It's a white powder, it's soluble in water, and it's got a kind of chalky, milky taste, apparently." "Thanks for telling me," I said. "That's okay. It was a shambles. The Minister of Health was fired, before he came back last year as the Minister for Armaments. Somebody got rich. So what's a blip in the leukemia statistics?" He smiled. "That's horrible," I said. "Yeah, well, it's not all bad. And what do you expect? It's got to be like that. People don't understand--they think it's every country's right to be modern and industrialized. Mog's been to college; he knows what's what. You and I might say, well, they're better off living in caves, chipping flint and hitting each other with bones, but who the fuck are we? Mog, he wants an army. He wants telephones. He wants roads, cars, electricity. Who can blame him? But if you can't make that stuff yourself, you've got to get it from the white man. And the thing about the white man, he doesn't offer you that shit for free." Paul was looking pretty white himself. "What do you do?" I asked. "I work for Continental Grain. We've got a project in the bush. Near

Jaca."

I looked down into my coffee cup. "Do you know Suzanne Denier?" I asked. "Yeah, sure. She works for an astronomy project in my area. Near the reservation there."

I closed my eyes and opened them. I asked myself: Had she been to this restaurant? Where did she sit? Did she know the story about the

powdered

milk?

"She's with the Cro-Magnon," I said. "Is that the only place they live?

On

reservations? I haven't seen a single one since we've been here."

"You'll see one. In San Juan they're all registered. It's one of Mog's

new

laws. You can't kick them out of business establishments, and all the restaurants have to give them food and liquor. So they're around here begging all the time. You'll see."

In fact, shortly after that, one did come in. She stood in the doorway

and

watched us as we ate our toast. She was almost six feet tall, with delicate bones, a beautiful face, and long, graceful hands. She had no hair on her head. She had green eyes and black skin. At ten o'clock in

the

morning she was very drunk.

After breakfast I spent most of the day with Paul. We had lunch at the Intercontinental and then went swimming at the Portuguese Club. Soon I began to find him patronizing.

In those days I was sensitive and easily annoyed. Nevertheless I stayed with him, my resentment rising all the time. I allowed him to get me a room, as he had mentioned, at the Aladeph--a guesthouse reserved for people on official business. I think it amused him to demonstrate that

he

could place me there, that he could manipulate the bureaucracy, which

was

formidable. I was grateful, in a way. Jetlagged, I went to bed early,

but

I couldn't sleep until a few hours before dawn.

"Suzanne," I said when I woke up. I said it out loud. I lay in bed with

my

throat dry, my skin wet. At six o'clock in the morning it was already

hot.

White gauze curtains moved in the hot breeze.

I lay in bed thinking about Suzanne. I thought of how when she was

leaving

I had not even asked her to stay.

It's not as if our marriage wasn't difficult, wasn't unsatisfying, and

I

remember my cold anger as I listened to her reasons why she should take

a

job so far from home. Later she had written and told me that even then,

if

I had just said something, anything, she would have stayed with me.

Lying

in bed at the Aladeph, I remembered her walking back and forth next to

the

dark long living-room window of the island house while I sat in the

chair,

half watching her, half reading. I remembered how her face changed as

she

made up her mind. I saw it happen, and I did nothing.



Lying in bed, remembering, I made myself get up and take her by the shoulders. I made myself apologize and made her listen. "Don't go," I said. "I love you," I said, and with just those three words I saw myself

creating a new future for us both.

But of course we know nothing about the future, though we must push into

it every day. We are frightened to look at it, and so we spend our lives

looking backward, remoulding over and over again what we should leave alone, breaking it, changing it, dragging it forward through time.

Lying in bed, I thought: these things are past. They don't have anything

to do with you now. I knew it, but I didn't believe it. Why else was I there? Because I imagined we could go back together to some pure and unadulterated time. I thought maybe if I could just get back about

30,000

years before I made all those mistakes...

That day I went down to the Mercado de Ladrones, and I took a ride on a truck out toward Pamplona.

Every year the United States donates large sums for road development in that part of the world, and every year the money is stolen by Dr Mog and

his associates, though the streets around the US embassy in San Juan are

obsessively repaved every few months. But in the interior the roads are horrible even in the dry season, which this mercifully was--rutted

tracks of red mud through the jungle, and it took ten hours to go 200 miles.

But

before we even got out of the city we passed 16 army checkpoints where soldiers extorted money from passing motorists; I found out later that none of them had been paid for over a year. They took pleasure in intimidating me--fat, dark, sweating men with automatic rifles, and

they

made insulting comments in Spanish and Arabic as they searched the back

of

the truck where I was sitting on some lumpy burlap sacks. A green Mercedes-Benz had overturned into a garbage ditch, and the traffic was backed up for half a mile along a street of corrugated iron shacks. A stack of tyres burned in a vacant lot, and the smoke from it hurt my

eyes

and mixed with the exhaust fumes and the polluted air into a hot blend

of

gases that was scarcely breathable.

A little boy ran in and out between the trucks, and he sold me two pineapples and a piece of sugar cane. He was smiling and chattering in

a

language I didn't recognize; he charged me a dime, and he flicked the

coin

into the air and caught it behind his back. It was a hopeful gesture,

and

soon the truck started to move again, and soon we passed beyond the

ring

road into a clear-cut waste of shantytowns and landfills, and then into the jungle. I gnawed on my sugar cane and licked the pineapple juice

off

my fingers, and I was rehearsing all the things that I was going to

tell

Suzanne, rehearsing her replies--it was like trying to memorize the chess openings in a book. And because my opponent was a strong one, my only advantage, I thought, lay in preparation and surprise. I went over conversations in my mind until the words started to lose their significance, and then the sun came out. When I looked up, the air was fresh and clean. Yellow birds hung in the trees beside the road, making nests of plaited straw. Occasionally an animal would blunder out the bushes as the truck went past. I sat looking backward, and saw a couple of wild pigs and a big rodent. We stopped at some villages, and three people joined me in the bed of the truck: two men with jerrycans and a gap-toothed woman, who smiled and held up her own length of sugar cane. Her yellow hair was tied back with a piece of string. We were coming up out of the plain into the mountains, and toward sunset we passed the gates to the Krieger-Richardson Observatory. I got out, and the truck barrelled away. The air was cooler, drier here, and the vegetation had changed. The trees were lower, and they no longer presented an impermeable wall. I walked through them over the dry grass. A one-lane asphalt road came down out of the hills, and I walked up it with my bag, meeting no one, seeing no one. Suzanne had described the place in one of her letters, and it was interesting to see it now myself for the first and last time-- the road climbed sharply for a mile or so until the trees gave out, and I came up over the crest and stood overlooking a wide volcanic bowl. Antennae rose out of it: this was the radio telescope, and beyond it on the summit of Madre de la Nacion rose the dome of the observatory. Then the road sank down a bit until the telescope was out of sight. There were pine trees here, and a parking lot full of identical white cars, and beyond that a low dormitory among the rhododendron bushes. Light came from the windows, a comforting glow, for I was tired and hungry. I came up the concrete steps and knocked on the door. It was locked, but after a minute or so somebody opened it, a teenage girl in a Chicago Bulls sweatshirt. "Excuse me," I said. "I'm looking for Dr Suzanne Denier. Does she live here?" She stared at me for a while, and then shrugged, and then peered past me at the sky. "She's at work tonight. It's supposed to be clear after nine o'clock." "But she lives here?"

"She came back from Soria on Wednesday. We've had terrible weather for the past two weeks."

She opened the door and stood aside, and I came into a corridor with brown carpeting. "Who are you?" she said.

"Her husband."

She stood staring at me, measuring me up, and I tried to decipher her expression. Lukewarm. Interested, so perhaps she had heard something.

"Do

you have a name?" A wise-ass--she was half my age.

"Christopher," I said.

"I'm Joan. Does she know you're coming? We don't get too many personal visitors, so I thought..."

"It's a surprise."

She stared at me for a little bit with her head cocked to one side.

Finally: "Well, come in. We're just finishing dinner. Have you eaten?"

"Please," I said, "could I see Suzanne? Where is she?"

I waited in the corridor while Joan went back to check. I looked at the travel posters on the wall: the Taj Mahal. Malibu beach.

Krieger-Richardson with a flock of birds passing over the dome. Some health statistics and some graphs. Then another, older, woman came back whom I recognized from a group photograph Suzanne had sent me. "You're Christopher," she said.

Her name was Anise Wilcox. She drove me out to the observatory, a 20-minute ride up along the ridge of the mountain. We spoke little.

"The

phones are down," she said, and I didn't know whether she was giving me the chance to say that I had tried to call and failed, or whether she

was

telling me that she had not been able to inform Suzanne that I was here.

"Wait," she said. We stopped in the parking lot in front of the observatory, and she slipped out of the driver's seat and ran up to the door. I sat alone in the twilight listening to the engine cool; I

rolled

down my window and looked out at the unlit bulk of the dome against the sky. An insect settled on my arm, a tiny delicate moth unlike any I had ever seen.

Then Dr Wilcox was there again, standing by the car. "Come in," she

said,

and I got out and followed her. She opened the metal door for me. There was a dim light inside next to an elevator, and I turned back and saw

her

face. She seemed nervous; she wouldn't look me in the eyes. She closed

the

door and locked it, and then she moved past me to the elevator. It was

not

until we stood next to each other inside the elevator car that she

glanced

up and gave me a worried smile.

"Good luck," she said when we reached the third floor.

Inside the observatory all the rooms were cramped and small until I

pushed

through those final doors and stood under the dome. The air was cold.

And

it was dark underneath the enormous y-shaped column of the telescope; I stood looking up at it, until I heard a movement behind me, off to my right. Suzanne was there at the top of a wide shallow flight of stairs, maybe five steps high. She looked professional in a black turtleneck sweater and black denim overalls, with two pens in her breast pocket.

She

was carrying a mechanical notebook under one arm.

"Chris," she said, and she came forward to the edge of the top step.

Light

came from the windows of the observation room. Computer screens glowed there.

I could feel her anger just in that one word. It radiated out from her small body. But I was prepared for it. I have my own way of protecting myself. I had not seen her in ten months, and as I looked at her I

thought

first of all how plain she was with her pinched face, her scowl, her stubborn jaw. Her skin was sallow in that light, her black hair was unbrushed. A small-boned woman with bad posture, that's what I told myself, and I thought, what am I doing here? Oh, I deserve more than

this.

Because she started in immediately: "I can't believe you're here," she said. "I asked you not to come. No, I told you not to. I can't believe

you

could be so insensitive to my wishes after everything you've done."

"Please," I said, and she stopped, and I found I didn't have anything

to

say. Much as I had rehearsed this scene, I had not anticipated that she would speak first, that I, not she, would have to react.

"Please," I said. "Just listen to me for a few minutes. I came a long way..."

She interrupted me. "Do you think I'm supposed to be impressed by that? What am I supposed to do, fall into your arms now that you're here?"

"No, I certainly didn't expect..."

"Then what? Christopher, is it too much to ask that you leave me alone?"

I

have a lot of things to sort out, and I want to do it by myself. I

can't

believe you're not sensitive to that. I can't believe you think you

have

the right to barge in here and disrupt my life and my work whenever you feel like it. Don't you have any respect for me at all?"

"Please," I said. "I knew you'd be like this, and I still risked it

just

to come. Is there any way that you could take a smaller risk and talk

to

me, instead of just yelling at me and closing me out?"

"Yelling? I'm not yelling. I'm telling you how I feel." But then she

was

quiet, and I realized she was giving me a chance to speak.

"Suzanne," I said, and I really tried to sound sincere, even though

half

of me was whispering to the other half that I couldn't win, that I had never won and never could, and that my best tactic was to run away.

"You

sounded so distant in your letters and I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand to feel you pull away from me and not do something. I love you.

I'm

more sorry than I can tell you about what happened, about what I did. I want to make it up to you. I want..."

I

It sounded weak even to me. She jumped on it: "But what about what I

want,

Chris? Did you think about that at all? Did you think about that for

one

minute? Things are different now. How can I trust you when you can't

even

respect my wishes enough to leave me alone here to think about what I want? What's best for me. I needed time. I told you that."

"It's been ten months. Ten months and thirty thousand years," I said--a line that I'd prepared. She didn't think much of it. I saw her eyebrows come together, her eyes roll upward in an expression of irritation that I'd always hated. "Suzanne," I said, "I know you. I know you could just seal yourself up here for the rest of your life. We had something precious, and it made us both happy for a long time. I can't just give

it

up."

"But you did give it up. Sometimes I think you forget how this all started. You're right--we were very happy. So how could you do it,

Chris?

She was my friend."

"No, she wasn't."

"Oh, so it's her fault. I can't believe you. I still can't believe you. How could you hurt me like that? How could you humiliate me so

publicly?"

"It wouldn't have been so public if you hadn't told everybody."

"Oh, and I was supposed to just smile and take it? You hurt me, Chris.

You

have no idea."

"Yes," I said, "I do. I'm sorry."

She turned away for a moment, and stared into the glass of the

observation

window. I could see the reflection of her face there, and beyond it the flash of the computer screens. "And that's supposed to make it all

right?

You don't understand. I've got some thinking to do. Chris, I don't want

to

be the kind of woman who just takes something like this. Who tolerates

it.

Who just hangs on year after year, hoping her man will change."

You could never be that kind of woman, I thought. But I said nothing.

"You

don't understand," she said. "I trusted you. I really trusted you.

Chris,

I'd given you my soul to keep, and you dropped it, and things changed.

I

changed. I know I'll never trust anyone like that again. What I don't

know

is, whether we can go on from here."

You never trusted me, I thought. I stared at her, my mind a blank.

"Well," she said finally. "I've got to get to work. I'll tell Anise you can spend the night in my room. I'll be back a little after sunrise,

and

I'd appreciate it if you were gone. I'll tell Carlos to give you a ride back to San Juan."

to

I looked up at the big telescope and shook my head. "Aren't you going

to

give me a tour? You said in your letter you were close to something

new."

"Yes." She came down the steps. And then things changed for a little while. Because we knew each other so well, even then we could slip down effortlessly and immediately into another way of being, a connection

that

seemed so intimate and strong that I had to keep reminding myself

during

the next hour that it was all gone, all ruined. She showed me her work,

and I took such pleasure in seeing her face light up as she explained it.

She took me all over the observatory, up into the dome, into the camera room. Then back down again into her office, where we sat drinking coffee in the dim light, and she smoked cigarettes and showed me photographs of stars. "We knew the galaxies were moving, because of the red shift. And we assumed that they were spreading apart, because it fit the theory. But of course we didn't know, because we could observe from one point only. But now of course we have two points thirty thousand years apart, and we thought that we could see it."

She sucked the cigarette down to the filter and then ground it out. I sat looking at her face, reminded of how she used to come over to my apartment in the early morning, when she was working on her dissertation. She would wake me up to talk to me, and she would grind her cigarettes out in a teacup that I had, and I would force myself awake, just for the pleasure of looking at the concentration in her face, as she described some theory or some project. "So?"

"What do you think? Our results have been extraordinary. The opposite of what everyone predicted."

"So?"

She smiled. "I don't know if I should tell you. I don't know if you deserve to know."

"It sounds like it's important."

"Sure. But I don't know. Anise would kill me if I told you."

I looked up at the ceiling. Someone had pasted up a cluster of phosphorescent stars. "Okay," she said, "so here it is. We think some galaxies are farther apart now than they are in the 20th century." For me at least, time had gone backward in that little room. Not because of what she said--I didn't care about it. I sat watching her face. But I was afraid that she'd stop talking and I'd have to go. She'd bring us back up to the surface again. I said: "And what's your explanation for that?"

She gave a shrug. "It's complicated. Either our observations are mistaken, and we're about to make fools of ourselves. Or else maybe the universe is contracting. Or part of it is. Or else it fluctuates. I have my own theory."

I said nothing, but sat watching her, and the moment stretched on until I smiled and she laughed. "I'll tell you anyway. I think time goes the other direction from the way we imagine. I think that's why the past doesn't affect the present like we thought." Not like we thought. But it does have some effect. I looked at Suzanne, her beautiful and well-loved face. "So why not forgive me?" I said.

She glanced up at me, a quick, sly look.

"We can make the past into the future," I said.

She smiled, and then frowned, and then: "Sure, that's what I'm afraid of.

It's just away of talking. It's not like when we're born we actually die."

She ground out her cigarette butt. "Seriously," she said. "But maybe time

flows in two directions. One of them is the direction of our ordinary experience. Our personal sense of time. But maybe cosmological time flows

back the other way. Maybe the conception of the universe happens in the future from our point of view."

I thought about it. "Why do you think we don't meet anybody from beyond our own time?" she said. "From our own future? Certainly the technology would still exist."

It took me a little while to understand her. Then I said: "Perhaps they lost interest."

"Forever? I don't buy it. No - maybe we're talking about two big bangs, one at the end of one kind of time, one at the beginning of the other.

One manmade and one not."

I considered this. Falling in love is one. And then breaking apart. I said: "So you're telling me that there's no future and the past is all

we have."

Soon after, Dr Wilcox drove me back to the dormitory and gave me something

to eat. She heated up some spaghetti Bolognese in the microwave. She didn't say much, except for one thing which proved to be prophetic:

"You must know she won't forgive you. She can't."

She showed me back to Suzanne's room and left me there. It was a small bare cubicle with a window overlooking the parking lot. She had put

some curtains up and that was all. There was nothing on the walls. I didn't take off my clothes. I lay down on her narrow, white bed; I lay on my

back with my hands clasped under my neck, staring at the ceiling. From time

to time I got up and turned on the light. I opened her bureau, and the smell

from her shirts made me unhappy. She had a picture of me tucked into a corner of her mirror. I was smiling. Underneath, on the bureau top,

stood a framed photograph of her parents, taken at their 40th anniversary.

They were smiling too.

There was a package of my letters in a corner of the drawer, maybe seventy-five or a hundred of them, wrapped in a rubber band.

I had spoken to Carlos and had plotted an itinerary for the rest of my vacation. He told me there were some beautiful beaches on the

Mediterranean, which I could reach on a rail link from San Juan. I set the

alarm clock for five-thirty and lay down on the bed and listened to it ticking on the bedside table. I imagined time passing over me, forward into an uncertain future, backward into a contented past. Perhaps the

ebb and flow of it lulled me, because toward three o'clock I slid beneath

the

surface of a dream.

I dreamt that I woke up to find Suzanne sitting beside me. "I wanted to show you something before you left," she said. "You know we're close to one of the big reservations here?"

"You told me in your letter."

"Yes. Well, there's a big family of Cro-Magnon that's moved in close by.

I

wanted to show you."

I dreamt she took me out into the fresh dawn air, and we walked down a path through the woods behind the dormitory. Soon we were in a

deciduous

forest of aspen trees and mountain laurel, and the breeze pressed

through

the leaves and made them flicker back and forth. Once out of sight of

the

buildings, all traces of modernity were lost. We climbed downhill.

"Wait

till you see them," said Suzanne. "They're so great. They never fight. They're so sweet to each other. It's because they can't feel love. They don't know what it feels like."

seen

A bird flickered through the underbrush, one of the yellow birds I'd

the

that morning in the real world. "So you're saying maybe evolution runs

other way."

She frowned. "Maybe we're the ones who are like animals. You know what

I

mean."

We were standing in an open glade, and the light filtered through the leaves, and the little path ran backward, forward through the brush.

Then

I bent down and I kissed her, and even in the dream she smelled like cigarettes.

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