

SIGNAL TO NOISE

Alastair Reynolds

Alastair Reynolds is a frequent contributor to *Interzone*, and has also sold *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Spectrum SF*, and elsewhere. His first novel, *Revelation Space*, was widely hailed as one of the major SF books of the year; it was quickly followed by *Chasm City*, *Redemption Ark*, *Absolution Gap*, and *Century Rain*, all big sprawling space operas that were big sellers as well, establishing Reynolds as one of the best and most popular new SF writers to enter the field in many years. His other books include a novella collection, *Diamond Dogs*, *Turquoise Days*. His most recent books are a novel, *Pushing Ice*, and two new collections, *Galactic North* and *Zima Blue and Other Stories*. Coming up is a new novel, *The Prefect*. A professional scientist with a Ph.D. in astronomy, Reynolds comes from Wales, but lives in the Netherlands, where he works for the European Space Agency.

Reynolds's work is known for its grand scope, sweep, and scale (in one story, "Galactic North," a spaceship sets out on in pursuit of another in a stern chase that takes thousands of years of time and hundreds of thousands of light-years to complete; in a "Thousandth Night," ultrarich immortals embark on a plan that will call for the physical rearrangement of all the stars in the galaxy. In the intimate and compassionate story that follows, he sticks a lot closer to home, in one sense—while in another sense taking us to another universe altogether, one further away than the most distant galaxies, but close to the touch of a hand.

* * * *

FRIDAY

MICK Leighton was in the basement with the machines when the police came for him. He'd been trying to reach Joe Liversedge all morning to cancel a prearranged squash match. It was the busiest week before exams, and Mick had gloomily concluded that he had too much tutorial work to grade to justify sparing even an hour for the game. The trouble was that he had either turned off his phone or left it in his office, where it wouldn't interfere with the machines. Mick had sent an email, but when that had gone unanswered he decided there was nothing for it but to stroll over to Joe's half of the building and inform him in person. Now Mick was a sufficiently well-known face in Joe's department that he was able to c

and go more or less as he pleased.

“Hello, matey,” Joe said, glancing over his shoulder with a half-eaten sandwich in hand. There was a bandage on the back of his neck, just below the hairline. He was hunched over a desk covered in laptops, cables, and reams of hardcopy. “Ready for a thrashing, are you?”

“That’s why I’m here,” Mick said. “Got to cancel, sorry. Too much on my plate to

“Naughty.”

“Ted Evans can fill in for me. He’s got his kit. You know Ted, don’t you?”

“Vaguely.” Joe set down his sandwich to put the lid back on a felt-tipped pen. He was an amiable Yorkshireman who’d come down to Cardiff for his postgraduate work and decided to stay. He was married to an archaeologist named Rachel who spent a lot of time poking around in the Roman ruins under the walls of Cardiff Castle. “Sure I can’t tuck your arm? It’ll do you good, you know, bit of a workout.”

“I know. But there just isn’t time.”

“Your call. How are things, anyway?”

Mick shrugged philosophically. “Been better.”

“Did you phone Andrea like you said you were going to?”

“No.”

“You should, you know.”

“I’m not very good on the phone. Anyway, I thought she probably needed a bit of space.”

“It’s been three weeks, mate.”

“I know.”

“Do you want the wife to call her? It might help.”

“No, but thanks for suggesting it anyway.”

“Call her. Let her know you’re missing her.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, sure. You should stick around, you know. It’s all go here this morning. We lock just after seven this morning.” Joe tapped one of the laptop screens, which was scrolling rows of black-on-white numbers. “It’s a good one, too.”

“Really?”

“Come and have a look at the machine.”

“I can’t. I need to get back to my office.”

“You’ll regret it later. Just like you’ll regret canceling our match, or not calling Andy to know you, Mick. You’re one of life’s born regretters.”

“Five minutes, then.”

In truth, Mick always enjoyed having a nose around Joe’s basement. As solid as Mick’s own early-universe work was, Joe had really struck gold. There were hundreds of researchers around the world who would have killed for a guided tour of the Liversedge laboratory.

In the basement were ten hulking machines, each as large as a steam turbine. You couldn’t go near them if you were wearing a pacemaker or any other kind of implant, but Mick knew that, and he’d been careful to remove all metallic items before he came down the stairs and through the security doors. Each machine contained a ten-ton bar of ultra-high-purity iron, encased in vacuum and suspended in a magnetic cradle. Joe liked to wax lyrical about the hardness of the vacuum, about the dynamic stability of the magnetic field generators. Cardiff could be hit by a Richter six earthquake, and the bars wouldn’t budge from the slightest tremor.

Joe called it the call center.

The machines were called correlators. At any one time eight were online, while two were down for repairs and upgrades. What the eight functional machines were doing was cold-calling: dialing random numbers across the gap between quantum realities, waiting for someone to answer on the other end.

In each machine, a laser repeatedly pumped the iron into an excited quantum state. By monitoring vibrational harmonics in the excited iron—what Joe called the back-chirp—the same laser could determine if the bar had achieved a lock onto another strand of quantum reality—another worldline. In effect, the bar would be resonating with its counterpart in another version of the same basement, in another version of Cardiff.

Once that lock was established—once the cold-calling machine had achieved a hit—then those two previously indistinguishable worldlines were linked together by an information conduit. If the laser tapped the bar with low-energy pulses, enough to influence but not upset the lock, then the counterpart in the other lab would also register those taps. This meant that it was possible to send signals from one lab to the other, in both directions.

“This is the boy,” Joe said, patting one of the active machines.

“Looks like a solid lock, too. Should be good for a full ten or twelve days. I think this might be the one that does it for us.”

Mick glanced again at the bandage on the back of Joe’s neck. “You’ve had a nerverlink inserted, haven’t you.”

“Straight to the medical center as soon as I got the alert on the lock. I was nervous—first time, and all that. But it turned out to be dead easy. No pain at all. I was in and out within half an hour. They even gave me a Rich Tea Biscuit.”

“Ooh. A Rich Tea Biscuit. It doesn’t get any better than that, does it. You’ll be going through today, I take it?”

Joe reached up and tore off the bandage, revealing only a small spot of blood, like a shaving nick. “Tomorrow, probably. Maybe Sunday. The nerverlink isn’t active yet, and it’ll take some getting used to. We’ve got bags of time, though; even if we don’t switch on the nerverlink until Sunday, I’ll still have five or six days of bandwidth before we become noise-limited.”

“You must be excited.”

“Right now I just don’t want to cock up anything. The Helsinki boys are nipping at our heels as it is. I reckon they’re within a few months of beating us.”

Mick knew how important this latest project was for Joe. Sending information between different realities was one thing, and impressive enough in its own right. But now the technology had escaped from the labs out into the real world. There were hundreds of correlators in other labs and institutes around the world. In five years it had gone from a spooky, barely believable phenomenon, to an accepted part of the modern world.

But Joe—whose team had always been at the forefront of the technology—hadn’t stood still. They’d been the first to work out how to send voice and video comms across a gap with another reality, and within the last year they’d been able to operate a camera-equipped robot, the same battery-driven kind that all the tourists had been using before nerverlinking became the new thing. Joe had even let Mick have a go on it. With his hands operating the robot’s manipulators via force-feedback gloves, and his eyes seeing

the world via the stereoscopic projectors in a virtual-reality helmet, Mick had been able to feel himself almost physically present in the other lab. He'd been able to move around and pick things up just as if he were actually walking in that alternate reality. Oddest of all had been meeting the other version of Joe Liversedge, the one who worked in the counter-lab. Both Joes seemed cheerily indifferent to the weirdness of the setup, as if collaborating with a duplicate of yourself was the most normal thing in the world.

Mick had been impressed by the robot. But for Joe it was a stepping stone to something even better.

"Think about it," he'd said. "A few years ago, tourists started switching over to nerverlinks instead of robots. Who wants to drive a clunky machine around some smelly foreign city, when you can drive a warm human body instead? Robots can see stuff, they can move around and pick stuff up, but they can't give you the smells, the taste of food, the feel of the contact with other people."

"Mm," Mick had said noncommittally. He didn't really approve of nerverlinking, even though it essentially paid Andrea's wages.

"So we're going to do the same. We've got the kit. Getting it installed is a piece of piss. All we need now is a solid link."

And now Joe had what he'd been waiting for. Mick could practically see the cover article in his friend's eyes. Perhaps he was even thinking about taking that long train ride to Stockholm.

"I hope it works out for you," Mick said.

Joe patted the correlator again. "I've got a good feeling about this one."

That was when one of Joe's undergraduates came up to them. To Mick's surprise, it wasn't Joe she wanted to speak to.

"Doctor Leighton?"

"That's me."

"There's somebody to see you, sir. I think it's quite important."

"Someone to see me?"

"They said you left a note in your office."

"I did," Mick said absent-mindedly. "But I also said I wouldn't be gone long. Nothing's *that* important, is it?"

But the person who had come to find Mick was a policewoman. When Mick met her at the top of the stairs her expression told him it wasn't good news.

"Something's happened," he said.

She looked worried, and very, very young. "Is there somewhere we can talk, Mister Leighton?"

"Use my office," Joe said, showing the two of them to his room just down the corridor. Joe left the two of them alone, saying he was going down to the coffee machine in the hall.

"I've got some bad news," the policewoman said, when Joe had closed the door. "I think you should sit down, Mister Leighton."

Mick pulled out Joe's chair from under the desk, which was covered in papers: coursework Joe must have been in the process of grading. Mick sat down, then didn't know where to put his hands. "It's about Andrea, isn't it."

"I'm afraid your wife was in an accident this morning," the policewoman said.

"What kind of accident? What happened?"

"Your wife was hit by a car when she was crossing the road."

A mean, little thought flashed through Mick's mind. Bloody Andrea: she'd always been one for dashing across a road without looking. He'd been warning her for years she was going to regret it one day.

"How is she? Where did they take her?"

"I'm really sorry, sir." The policewoman hesitated. "Your wife died on the way to hospital. I understand that the paramedics did all they could, but..."

Mick was hearing it, and not hearing it. It couldn't be right. People still got knocked down by cars. But they didn't *die* from it, not anymore. Cars couldn't go fast enough in towns to kill anyone. Being knocked down and

killed by a car was something that happened to people in soap operas, not real life. Feeling numb, not really present in the room, Mick said, "Where is she now?" As if by visiting her, he might prove that they'd got it wrong, that she wasn't dead at all.

"They took her to the Heath, sir. That's where she is now. I can drive you there."

"Andrea isn't dead," Mick said. "She can't be. Not now."

"I'm really sorry," the policewoman said.

* * * *

SATURDAY

For the last three weeks, ever since they had separated, Mick had been sleeping in a spare room at his brother's house in Newport. The company had been good, but now Bill was away for the weekend on some ridiculous team-building exercise in Snowdonia. For tedious reasons, Mick's brother had had to take the house keys with him, leaving Mick with nowhere to sleep on Friday night. When Joe had asked him where he was going to stay, Mick said he'd go back to his own house, the one he'd left at the beginning of the month.

Joe was having none of it, and insisted that Mick sleep at his house instead. Mick spent the night going through the usual cycle of emotions that came with any sudden bad news. He'd had nothing to compare with losing his wife, but the texture of the shock was familiar enough, albeit magnified from anything in his previous experience. He resented the fact that the world seemed to be continuing, crassly oblivious to Andrea's death. The news wasn't dominated by his tragedy; it was all about some Polish miners trapped underground. When he finally managed to get to sleep, Mick was tormented by dreams that his wife was still alive, that it had all been a mistake.

But he knew it was all true. He'd been to the hospital; he'd seen her body. He even knew why she'd been hit by the car. Andrea had been crossing the road to her favorite hair salon; she'd had an appointment to get her hair done. Knowing Andrea, she had probably been so focused on the salon that she was oblivious to all that was going on around her. It hadn't even been the car that had killed her in the end. When the slow-moving vehicle knocked her down, Andrea had struck her head against the side of

the curb.

By midmorning on Saturday, Mick's brother had returned from Snowdonia. Bill came around to Joe's house and hugged Mick silently, saying nothing for many minutes. Then Bill went into the next room and spoke quietly to Joe and Rachel. Their low voices made Mick feel like a child in a house of adults.

"I think you and I need to get out of Cardiff," Bill told Mick, when he returned to the living room. "No ifs, no buts."

Mick started to protest. "There's too much that needs to be done. I still need to get back to the funeral home."

"It can wait until this afternoon. No one's going to hate you for not returning a few calls. C'mon; let's drive up to the Gower and get some fresh air. I've already reserved a car."

"Go with him," Rachel said. "It'll do you good."

Mick acquiesced, his guilt and relief in conflict at being able to put aside thoughts of the funeral plans. He was glad Bill had come down, but he couldn't quite judge how his brother—or his friends, for that matter—viewed his bereavement. He'd lost his wife. They all knew that. But they also knew that Mick and Andrea had been separated. They'd been having problems for most of the year. It would only be human for his friends to assume that Mick wasn't quite as affected by Andrea's death as he would have been had they still been living together.

"Listen," he told Bill, when they were safely under way. "There's something I've got to tell you."

"I'm listening."

"Andrea and I had problems. But it wasn't the end of our marriage. We were going to get through this. I was going to call her this weekend, see if we couldn't meet."

Bill looked at him sadly. Mick couldn't tell if that meant that Bill just didn't believe him, or that his brother pitied him for the opportunity he'd allowed to slip between his fingers.

When they got back to Cardiff in the early evening, after a warm and blustery day out on the Gower, Joe practically pounced on Mick as soon as

they came through the door.

“I need to talk to you,” Joe said. “Now.”

“I need to call some of Andrea’s friends,” Mick said. “Can it wait until later?”

“No. It can’t. It’s about you and Andrea.”

They went into the kitchen. Joe poured him a glass of whisky. Rachel and Bill watched from the end of the table, saying nothing.

“I’ve been to the lab,” Joe said. “I know it’s Saturday, but I wanted to make sure that lock was still holding. Well, it is. We could start the experiment tomorrow if we wanted to. But something’s come up, and you need to know about it.”

Mick sipped from his glass. “Go on.”

“I’ve been in contact with my counterpart in the other lab.”

“The other Joe.”

“The other Joe, yes. We were finessing the equipment, making sure everything was optimal. And we talked, of course. Needless to say I mentioned what had happened.”

“And?”

“The other me was surprised. Shocked, even. He said Andrea hadn’t died in his reality.” Joe held up a hand, signaling that Mick should let him finish before speaking. “You know how it works. The two histories are identical before the lock takes effect: so identical that there isn’t even any point in thinking of them as being distinct realities. The divergence only happens once the lock is in effect. The lock was active by the time you came down to tell me about the squash match. The other me also had a visit from you. The difference was that no policewoman ever came to his lab. You eventually drifted back to your office to carry on grading tutorials.”

“But Andrea was already dead by then.”

“Not in that reality. The other me phoned you. You were staying at the Holiday Inn. You knew nothing of Andrea having had any accident. So my other wife...” Joe allowed himself a quick smile. “The other version of

Rachel called Andrea. And they spoke. Turned out Andrea had been hit by a car, but she'd barely been bruised. They hadn't even called an ambulance."

Mick absorbed what his friend had to say, then said, "I can't deal with this, Joe. I don't need to know it. It isn't going to help."

"I think it is. We were set up to run the nerverlink experiment as soon as we had a solid lock, one that we could trust to hold for the full million seconds. This is it. The only difference is it doesn't have to be me who goes through."

"I don't understand."

"I can put you through, Mick. We can get you nerverlinked tomorrow morning. Allowing for a day of bedding in and practice once you arrive in the other reality... well, you could be walking in Andrea's world by Monday afternoon, Tuesday morning at the latest."

"But you're the one who is supposed to be going through," Mick said. "You've already had the nerverlink put in."

"We've got a spare," Joe said.

Mick's mind raced through the implications. "Then I'd be controlling the body of the other you, right?"

"No. That won't work, unfortunately. We've had to make some changes to these nerverlinks to get them to work properly through the correlator, with the limited signal throughput. We had to ditch some of the channels that handle proprioceptive mapping. They'll only work properly if the body on the other end of the link is virtually identical to the one on this side."

"Then it won't work. You're nothing like me."

"You're forgetting *your* counterpart on the other side," Joe said. He glanced past Mick at Bill and Rachel, raising his eyebrows as he did so. "The way it would work is, you come into the lab and we install the link in you, just the same way it happened for me yesterday morning. At the same time your counterpart in Andrea's world comes into *his* version of the lab and gets the other version of the nerverlink put into him."

Mick shivered. He'd become used to thinking about the other version

of Joe; he could even begin to accept that there was a version of Andrea walking around somewhere who was still alive. But as soon as Joe brought the other Mick into the argument, he felt his head begin to unravel.

“Wouldn’t he—the other me—need to agree to this?”

“He already has,” Joe said solemnly. “I’ve been in touch with him. The other Joe called him into the lab. We had a chat over the videolink. He didn’t go for it at first—you know how you both feel about nervelinking. And he hasn’t lost his version of Andrea. But I explained how big a deal this was. This is your only chance to see Andrea again. Once this window closes—we’re talking about no more than eleven or twelve days from the start of the lock, by the way—we’ll never make contact with another reality where she’s alive.”

Mick blinked and placed his hands on the table. He felt dizzy with the implications, as if the kitchen was swaying. “You’re certain of that? You’ll never open another window into Andrea’s world?”

“Statistically, we were incredibly lucky to get this one chance. By the time the window closes, Andrea’s reality will have diverged so far from ours that there’s essentially no chance of ever getting another lock.”

“Okay,” Mick said, ready to take Joe’s word for it. “But even if I agree to this—even if the other me agrees to it—what about Andrea? We weren’t seeing each other.”

“But you wanted to see her again,” Bill said quietly.

Mick rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands, and exhaled loudly. “Maybe.”

“I’ve spoken to Andrea,” Rachel said. “I mean, Joe spoke to himself, and the other version of him spoke to the other Rachel. She’s been in touch with Andrea.”

Mick hardly dared speak. “And?”

“She says it’s okay. She understands how horrible this must be for you. She says, if you want to come through, she’ll meet you. You can spend some time together. Give you a chance to come to some kind of...”

“Closure,” Mick whispered.

“It’ll help you,” Joe said. “It’s got to help you.”

* * * *

SUNDAY

The medical center was normally closed on weekends, but Joe had pulled strings to get some of the staff to come in on Sunday morning. Mick had to sit around a long time while they ran physiological tests and prepared the surgical equipment. It was much easier and quicker for tourists, for they didn’t have to use the modified nerverlink units Joe’s team had developed.

By the early afternoon they were satisfied that Mick was ready for the implantation. They made him lie down on a couch with his head encased in a padded plastic assembly with a hole under the back of the neck. He was given a mild, local anesthetic. Rubberized clamps whirred in to hold his head in position with micromillimeter accuracy. Then he felt a vague impression of pressure being applied to the skin on the back of his neck, and then an odd and not entirely pleasant sensation of sudden pins and needles in every part of his body. But the unpleasantness was over almost as soon as he’d registered it. The support clamps whirred away from his head. The couch tilted up, and he was able to get off and stand on his feet.

Mick touched the back of his neck, came away with a tiny smear of blood on his thumb.

“That’s it?”

“I told you there was nothing to it,” Joe said, putting down a motorcycling magazine. “I don’t know what you were so worried about.”

“It’s not the nerverlink operation itself I don’t approve of. I don’t have a problem with the technology. It’s the whole system, the way it encourages the exploitation of the poor.”

Joe tut-tutted. “Bloody *Guardian* readers. It was you lot who got the bloody moratorium against air travel enacted in the first place. Next you’ll be telling us we can’t even walk anywhere.”

The nurse swabbed Mick’s wound and applied a bandage. He was shunted into an adjoining room and asked to wait again. More tests followed. As the system interrogated the newly embedded nerverlink, he experienced mild electrical tingles and strange, fleeting feelings of

dislocation. Nothing he reported gave the staff any cause for alarm.

After Mick's discharge from the medical center, Joe took him straight down to the laboratory. An electromagnetically shielded annex contained the couch Joe intended to use for the experiment. It was a modified version of the kind tourists used for long-term nerverlinking, with facilities for administering nutrition and collecting bodily waste. No one liked to dwell too much on those details, but there was no way around it if you wanted to stay nerverlinked for more than a few hours. Gamers had been putting up with similar indignities for decades.

Once Mick was plumbed in, Joe settled a pair of specially designed immersion glasses over his eyes, after first applying a salve to Mick's skin to protect against pressure sores. The glasses fit very tightly, blocking out Mick's view of the lab. All he could see was a gray-green void, with a few meaningless red digits to the right side of his visual field.

"Comfortable?" Joe asked.

"I can't see anything yet."

"You will."

Joe went back into the main part of the basement to check on the correlation. It seemed that he was gone a long time. When he heard Joe return, Mick half-expected bad news—that the link had collapsed, or some necessary piece of technology had broken down. Privately, he would not have been too sorry were that the case. In his shocked state of mind in the hours after Andrea's death, he would have given anything to be able to see her again. But now that the possibility had arisen, he found himself prone to doubts. Given time, he knew he'd get over Andrea's death. That wasn't being cold, it was just being realistic. He knew more than a few people who'd lost their partners, and while they might have gone through some dark times afterward, almost all of them now seemed settled and relatively content. It didn't mean they'd stopped feeling anything for the loved one who had died, but it did mean they'd found some way to move on. There was no reason to assume he wouldn't make the same emotional recovery.

The question was, would visiting Andrea hasten or hamper that process? Perhaps they should just have talked over the videolink, or even the phone. But then he'd never been very good on either.

He knew it had to be face to face, all or nothing.

“Is there a problem?” he asked Joe, innocently enough.

“Nope, everything’s fine. I was just waiting to hear that the other version of you is ready.”

“He is?”

“Good to go. Someone from the medical center just put him under. We can make the switch any time you’re ready.”

“Where is he?”

“Here,” Joe said. “I mean, in the counterpart to this room. He’s lying on the same couch. It’s easier that way; there’s less of a jolt when you switch over.”

“He’s unconscious already?”

“Full coma. Just like any nerverlinked mule.”

Except, Mick thought, unlike the mules, his counterpart hadn’t signed up to go into a chemically induced coma while his body was taken over by a distant tourist. That was what Mick disapproved of more than anything. The mules did it for money, and the mules were always the poorest people in any given tourist hotspot, whether it was some affluent European city or some nauseatingly “authentic” Third World shithole. No one ever aspired to become a mule. It was what you did when all other options had dried up. In some cases it hadn’t just supplanted prostitution, it had become an entirely new form of prostitution in its own right.

But enough of that. They were all consenting adults here. No one—least of all the other version of himself—was being exploited. The other Mick was just being kind. No, kinder, Mick supposed, than *he* would have been had the tables been reversed, but he couldn’t help feeling a perverse sense of gratitude. And as for Andrea... well, she’d always been kind. No one ever had a bad word to say for Andrea on that score. Kind and considerate, to a fault.

So what was he waiting for?

“You can make the switch,” Mick said.

There was less to it than he’d been expecting. It was no worse than the involuntary muscular jolt he sometimes experienced in bed, just before

dozing off to sleep.

But suddenly he was in a different body.

“Hi,” Joe said. “How’re you feeling, matey?”

Except it was the other Joe speaking to him now: the Joe who belonged to the world where Andrea hadn’t died. The original Joe was on the other side of the reality gap.

“I feel...” But when Mick tried speaking, it came out hopelessly slurred.

“Give it time,” Joe said. “Everyone has trouble speaking to start with. That’ll come quickly.”

“Can’t see. Can’t see.”

“That’s because we haven’t switched on your glasses. Hold on a tick.”

The gray-green void vanished, to be replaced by a view of the interior of the lab. The quality of the image was excellent. The room looked superficially the same, but as Mick looked around—sending the muscle signals through the nerverlink to’ move the body of the other Mick—he noticed the small details that told him this wasn’t his world. Joe was wearing a different checked shirt, smudged white trainers instead of Converse sneakers. In this version of the lab, Joe had forgotten to turn the calendar over to the new month.

Mick tried speaking again. The words came easier this time.

“I’m really here, aren’t I.”

“How does it feel to be making history?”

“It feels... bloody weird, actually. And no, I’m not making history. When you write up your experiment, it won’t be me who went through first. It’ll be you, the way it was always meant to be. This is just a dry run. You can mention me in a footnote, if that.”

Joe looked unconvinced. “Have it your way, but—“

“I will.” Mick moved to get off the couch. This version of his body wasn’t plumbed in like the other one. But when he tried to move, nothing

happened. For a moment, he felt a crushing sense of paralysis. He must have let out a frightened sound.

“Easy,” Joe said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “One step at a time. The link still has to bed in. It’s going to be hours before you’ll have complete fluidity of movement, so don’t run before you can walk. And I’m afraid we’re going to have to keep you in the lab for rather longer than you might like. As routine as nerverlinking is, this *isn’t* simple nerverlinking. The shortcuts we’ve had to use to squeeze the data through the correlator link mean we’re exposing ourselves to more medical risks than you’d get with the standard tourist kit. Nothing that you need worry about, but I want to make sure we keep a close eye on all the parameters. I’ll be running tests in the morning and evening. Sorry to be a drag about it, but we do need numbers for our paper, as well. All I can promise is that you’ll still have a lot of time available to meet Andrea. If that’s what you still want to do, of course.”

“It is,” Mick said. “Now that I’m here... no going back, right?”

Joe glanced at his watch. “Let’s start running some coordination exercises. That’ll keep us busy for an hour or two. Then we’ll need to make sure you have full bladder control. Could get messy otherwise. After that—we’ll see if you can feed yourself.”

“I want to see Andrea.”

“Not today,” Joe said firmly. “Not until we’ve got you housetrained.”

“Tomorrow. Definitely tomorrow.”

* * * *

MONDAY

He paused in the shade of the old, green boating shed at the edge of the lake. It was a hot day, approaching noon, and the park was already busier than it had been at any time since the last gasp of the previous summer. Office workers were sitting around the lake making the most of their lunch break: the men with their ties loosened and sleeves and trousers rolled up, the women with their shoes off and blouses loosened. Children splashed in the ornamental fountains, while their older siblings bounced meters into the air on servo-assisted pogo sticks, the season’s latest, lethal-looking craze. Students lolled around on the gently sloping grass, sunbathing or catching

up on neglected coursework in the last week before exams. Mick recognized some of them from his own department. Most wore cheap, immersion glasses, with their arms covered almost to the shoulder in tight-fitting, pink, haptic feedback gloves. The more animated students lay on their backs, pointing and clutching at invisible objects suspended above them. It looked like they were trying to snatch down the last few wisps of cloud from the scratchless blue sky above Cardiff.

Mick had already seen Andrea standing a little further around the curve of the lake. It was where they had agreed to meet, and true to form Andrea was exactly on time. She stared pensively out across the water, seemingly oblivious to the commotion going on around her. She wore a white blouse, a knee-length burgundy skirt, sensible office shoes. Her hair was shorter than he remembered, styled differently and barely reaching her collar. For a moment—until she'd turned slightly—he hadn't recognized her at all. Andrea held a Starbucks coffee holder in one hand, and every now and then she'd take a sip or glance at her wrist-watch. Mick was five minutes late now, and he knew there was a risk Andrea would give up waiting. But in the shade of the boating shed, all his certainties had evaporated.

Andrea turned minutely. She glanced at her watch again. She sipped from the coffee holder, tilting it back in a way that told Mick she'd finished the last drop. He saw her looking around for a waste bin.

Mick stepped from the shade. He walked across the grass, onto concrete, acutely conscious of the slow awkwardness of his gait. His walking had improved since his first efforts, but it still felt as if he were trying to walk upright in a swimming pool filled with treacle. Joe had assured him that all his movements would become more normal as the nerverlink bedded in, but that process was obviously taking longer than anticipated.

"Andrea," he said, sounding slurred and drunk and too loud, even to his own ears.

She turned and met his eyes. There was a slight pause before she smiled, and when she did, the smile wasn't quite right, as if she'd been asked to hold it too long for a photograph.

"Hello, Mick. I was beginning to think..."

"It's okay." He forced out each word with care, making sure it came out right before moving to the next. "I just had some second thoughts."

“I don’t blame you. How does it feel?”

“A bit odd. It’ll get easier.”

“Yes, that’s what they told me.” She took another sip from the coffee, even though it must have been empty. They were standing about two meters apart, close enough to talk, close enough to look like two friends or colleagues who’d bumped into each other around the lake.

“It’s really good of you...” Mick began.

Andrea shook her head urgently. “Please. It’s okay. We talked it over. We both agreed it was the right thing to do. If the tables were turned, you wouldn’t have hesitated.”

“Maybe not.”

“I know you, Mick. Maybe better than you know yourself. You’d have done all that you could, and more.”

“I just want you to know... I’m not taking any of this lightly. Not you having to see me, like this... not what *he* has to go through while I’m around.”

“He said to tell you there are worse ways to spend a week.”

Mick tried to smile. He felt the muscles of his face move, but without a mirror there was no way to judge the outcome. The moment stretched. A football splashed into the lake and began to drift away from the edge. He heard a little boy start crying.

“Your hair looks different,” Mick said.

“You don’t like it.”

“No, I do. It really suits you. Did you have that done after... oh, wait. I see. You were on your way to the salon.”

He could see the scratch on her face where she’d grazed it on the curb, when the car knocked her down. She hadn’t even needed stitches. In a week it would hardly show at all.

“I can’t begin to imagine what it’s been like for you,” Andrea said. “I can’t imagine what *this* is like for you.”

“It helps.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I want it to help. I think it’s going to. It’s just that right now it feels like I’ve made the worst mistake of my life.”

Andrea held up the coffee holder. “Do you fancy one? It’s my treat.”

Andrea was a solicitor. She worked for a small legal firm located in modern offices near the park. There was a Starbucks near her office building. “They don’t know me there, do they.”

“Not unless you’ve been moonlighting. Come on. I hate to say it, but you could use some practice walking.”

“As long as you won’t laugh.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Hold my hand, Mick. It’ll make it easier.”

Before he could step back, Andrea closed the distance between them and took his hand in hers. It was good of her to do that, Mick thought. He’d been wondering how he would initiate that first touch, and Andrea had spared him the fumbling awkwardness that would almost certainly have ensued. That was Andrea to a tee, always thinking of others and trying to make life a little easier for them, no matter how small the difference. It was why people liked her so much; why her friends were so fiercely loyal.

“It’s going to be okay, Mick,” Andrea said gently. “Everything that’s happened between us... it doesn’t matter now. I’ve said bad things to you and you’ve said bad things to me. But let’s forget about all that. Let’s just make the most of what time we have.”

“I’m scared of losing you.”

“You’re a good man. You’ve more friends than you realize.”

He was sweating in the heat, so much so that the glasses began to slip down his nose. The view tilted toward his shoes. He raised his free hand in a stiff, salutelike gesture and pushed the glasses back into place.

Andrea’s hand tightened on his.

“I can’t go through with this,” Mick said. “I should go back.”

“You started it,” Andrea said sternly, but without rancor. “Now you finish it. All the way, Mick Leighton.”

* * * *

TUESDAY

Things were much better by the morning of the second day. When he woke in Joe Liversedge’s lab there was a fluency in his movements that simply hadn’t been there the evening before, when he’d said goodbye to Andrea. He now felt as if he was inhabiting the host body, rather than simply shuffling it around like a puppet. He still needed the glasses to be able to see anything, but the nervelink was conveying sensation much more effectively now, so that when he touched something it came through without any of the fuzziness or lag he’d been experiencing the day before. Most tourists were able to achieve reasonable accuracy of touch differentiation within twenty-four hours. Within two days, their degree of proprioceptive immersion was generally good enough to allow complex motor tasks such as cycling, swimming, or skiing. Repeat-visit tourists, especially those that went back into the same body, got over the transition period even faster. To them it was like moving back into a house after a short absence.

Joe’s team gave Mick a thorough checkup in the annex. It was all routine stuff. Amy Flint, Joe’s senior graduate student, insisted on adding some more numbers to the tactile test database that she was building for the study. That meant Mick sitting at a table, without the glasses, being asked to hold various objects and decide what shape they were and what they were made of. He scored excellently, only failing to distinguish between wood and plastic balls of similar weight and texture. Flint was cheerfully casual around him, without any of the affectedness or oversensitivity Mick had quickly detected in his friends or colleagues. Clearly she didn’t know what had happened; she just thought Joe had opted to go for a different test subject than himself.

Joe was upbeat about Mick’s progress. Everything, from the host body to the hardware, was holding up well. The bandwidth was stable at nearly two megabytes per second, more than enough spare capacity to permit Mick the use of a second video feed to peer back into the version of the lab on the other side. The other version of Joe held the cam up so that Mick could see his own body, reclining on the heavy-duty immersion couch. Mick had expected to be disturbed by that, but the whole experience turned

out to be oddly banal, like replaying a home movie.

When they were done with the tests, Joe walked Mick over to the university canteen, where he ate a liquid breakfast, slurping down three containers of fruit yoghurt. While he ate—which was tricky, but another of the things that was supposed to get easier with practice—he gazed distractedly at the television in the canteen. The wall-sized screen was running through the morning news, with the sound turned down. At the moment the screen was showing grainy footage of the Polish miners, caught on surveillance camera as they trudged into the low, concrete pithead building on their way to work. The cave-in had happened three days ago. The miners were still trapped underground, in all the world-lines that were in contact with this one, including Mick's own.

“Poor fuckers,” Joe said, looking up from a draft paper he was penciling remarks over.

“Maybe they'll get them out.”

“Aye. Maybe. Wouldn't fancy my chances down there, though.”

The picture changed to a summary of football scores. Again, most of the games had ended in identical results across the contacted worldlines, but two or three—highlighted in sidebars, with analysis text ticking below them—had ended differently, with one team even being dropped from the rankings.

Afterward Mick walked on his own to the tram stop and caught the next service into the city center. Already he could feel that he was attracting less attention than the day before. He still moved a little stiffly, he could tell that just by looking at his reflection in the glass as he boarded the tram, but there was no longer anything comical or robotic about it. He just looked like someone with a touch of arthritis, or someone who'd been overdoing it in the gym and was now paying with a dose of sore muscles.

As the tram whisked its way through traffic, he thought back to the evening before. The meeting with Andrea, and the subsequent day, had gone as well as he could have expected. Things had been strained at first, but by the time they'd been to Starbucks, he had detected an easing in her manner, and that had made him feel more at ease as well. They'd made small talk, skirting around the main thing neither of them wanted to discuss. Andrea had taken most of the day off; she didn't have to be at the law offices until late afternoon, just to check that no problems had arisen in her absence.

They'd talked about what to do with the rest of their day together.

"Maybe we could drive up into the Beacons," Mick had said. "It'll be nice up in the hills with a bit of a breeze. We always used to enjoy those days out."

"Been a while though," Andrea had said. "I'm not sure my legs are up to it anymore."

"You always used to hustle up those hills."

"Emphasis on the 'used to,' unfortunately. Now I get out of breath just walking up St. Mary's Street with a bag full of shopping."

Mick looked at her skeptically, but he couldn't deny that Andrea had a point. Neither of them was the keen, outdoors type they had been when they met fifteen years earlier through the university's hill-walking club. Back then they'd spent long weekends exploring the hills of the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains, or driving to Snowdonia or the Lake District. They'd had some hair-raising moments together, when the weather turned against them or when they suddenly realized they were on completely the wrong ridge. But what Mick remembered, more than anything, was not being cold and wet, but the feeling of relief when they arrived at some cozy warm pub at the end of the day, both of them ravenous and thirsty and high on what they'd achieved. Good memories, all of them. Why hadn't they kept it up, instead of letting their jobs rule their weekends?

"Look, maybe we might drive up to the Beacons in a day or two," Andrea said. "But I think it's a bit ambitious for today, don't you?"

"You're probably right," Mick said.

After some debate, they'd agreed to visit the castle and then take a boat ride around the bay to see the huge and impressive sea defenses up close. Both were things they'd always meant to do together but had kept putting off for another weekend. The castle was heaving with tourists, even on this midweek day. Because a lot of them were nervelinked, though, they afforded Mick a welcome measure of inconspicuousness. No one gave him a second glance as he bumbled along with the other shade-wearing bodysnatchers, even though he must have looked considerably more affluent and well-fed than the average mule. Afterward, they went to look at the Roman ruins, where Rachel Liversedge was busy talking to a group of bored primary school children from the valleys.

Mick enjoyed the boat ride more than the trip to the castle. There were still enough nervelinked tourists on the boat for him not to feel completely out of place, and being out in the bay offered some respite from the cloying heat of the city center. Mick had even felt the breeze on the back of his hand, evidence that the nervelink was really bedding in.

It was Andrea who nudged the conversation toward the reason for Mick's presence. She'd just returned from the counter with two paper cups brimming with murky coffee, nearly spilling them as the boat swayed unexpectedly. She sat down on the boat's hard wooden bench.

"I forgot to ask how it went in the lab this morning?" she asked brightly. "Everything working out okay?"

"Very well," Mick said. "Joe says we were getting two megs this morning. That's as good as he was hoping for."

"You'll have to explain that to me. I know it's to do with the amount of data you're able to send through the link, but I don't know how it compares with what we'd be using for a typical tourist setup."

Mick remembered what Joe had told him. "It's not as good. Tourists can use as much bandwidth as they can afford. But Joe's correlators never get above five megabytes per second. That's at the start of the twelve-day window, too. It only gets worse by day five or six."

"Is two enough?"

"It's what Joe's got to work with." Mick reached up and tapped the glasses. "It shouldn't be enough for full color vision at normal resolution, according to Joe. But there's an awful lot of clever software in the lab to take care of that. It's constantly guessing, filling in gaps."

"How does it look?"

"Like I'm looking at the world through a pair of sunglasses." He pulled them off his nose and tilted them toward Andrea. "Except it's the glasses that are actually doing the seeing, not my—*his*—eyes. Most of the time, it's good enough that I don't notice anything weird. If I wiggle my head around fast—or if something streaks past too quickly—then the glasses have trouble keeping up with the changing view." He jammed the glasses back on, just in time for a seagull to flash past only a few meters from the boat. He had a momentary sense of the seagull breaking up into blocky areas of

confused pixels, as if it had been painted by a cubist, before the glasses smoothed things over and normality ensued.

“What about all the rest of it? Hearing, touch...”

“They don’t take up anything like as much bandwidth as vision. The way Joe puts it, postural information only needs a few basic parameters: the angles of my limb joints, that kind of thing. Hearing’s pretty straightforward. And touch is the easiest of all, as it happens.”

“Really?”

“So Joe says. Hold my hand.”

Andrea hesitated an instant then took Mick’s hand.

“Now squeeze it,” Mick said.

She tightened her hold. “Are you getting that?”

“Perfectly. It’s much easier than sending sound. If you were to say something to me, the acoustic signal would have to be sampled, digitized, compressed, and pushed across the link: hundreds of bytes per second. But all touch needs is a single parameter. The system will still be able to keep sending touch even when everything else gets too difficult.”

“Then it’s the last thing to go.”

“It’s the most fundamental sense we have. That’s the way it ought to be.”

After a few moments, Andrea said, “How long?”

“Four days,” Mick said slowly. “Maybe five, if we’re lucky. Joe says we’ll have a better handle on the decay curve by tomorrow.”

“I’m worried, Mick. I don’t know how I’m going to deal with losing you.”

He closed his other hand on hers and squeezed in return. “You’ll get me back.”

“I know. It’s just... it won’t be you. It’ll be the other you.”

“They’re both me.”

“That’s not how it feels right now. It feels like I’m having an affair while my husband’s away.”

“It shouldn’t. I am your husband. We’re both your husband.”

They said nothing after that, sitting in silence as the boat bobbed its way back to shore. It was not that they had said anything upsetting, just that words were no longer adequate. Andrea kept holding his hand. Mick wanted this morning to continue forever: the boat, the breeze, the perfect sky over the bay. Even then he chided himself for dwelling on the passage of time, rather than making the most of the experience as it happened to him. That had always been his problem, ever since he was a kid. School holidays had always been steeped in a melancholic sense of how few days were left.

But this wasn’t a holiday.

After a while, he noticed that some people had gathered at the bow of the boat, pressing against the railings. They were pointing up, into the sky. Some of them had pulled out phones.

“There’s something going on,” Mick said.

“I can see it,” Andrea answered. She touched the side of his face, steering his view until he was craning up as far as his neck would allow. “It’s an airplane.”

Mick waited until the glasses picked out the tiny, moving speck of the plane etching a pale contrail in its wake. He felt a twinge of resentment toward anyone still having the freedom to fly, when the rest of humanity was denied that right. It had been a nice dream when it lasted, flying. He had no idea what political or military purpose the plane was serving, but it would be an easy matter to find out, were he that interested. The news would be in all the papers by the afternoon. The plane wouldn’t just be overflying this version of Cardiff, but his as well. That had been one of the hardest things to take since Andrea’s death. The world at large steamrolled on, its course undeflected by that single human tragedy. Andrea had died in the accident in his world, she’d survived unscathed in this one, and that plane’s course wouldn’t have changed in any measurable way (in either reality).

“I love seeing airplanes,” Andrea said. “It reminds me of what things were like before the moratorium. Don’t you?”

“Actually,” Mick said, “they make me a bit sad.”

* * * *

WEDNESDAY

Mick knew how busy Andrea had been lately, and he tried to persuade her against taking any time off from her work. Andrea had protested, saying her colleagues could handle her workload for a few days. Mick knew better than that—Andrea practically ran the firm single-handedly—but in the end they'd come to a compromise. Andrea would take time off from the office, but she'd pop in first thing in the morning to put out any really serious fires.

Mick agreed to meet her at the offices at ten, after his round of tests. Everything still felt the way it had the day before; if anything he was even more fluent in his body movements. But when Joe had finished, the news was all that Mick had been quietly dreading, while knowing it could be no other way. The quality of the link had continued to degrade. According to Joe they were down to one point eight megs now. They'd seen enough decay curves to be able to extrapolate forward into the beginning of the following week. The link would become noise-swamped around teatime on Sunday, give or take three hours either way.

If only they'd started sooner, Mick thought. But Joe had done all that he could.

Today—despite the foreboding message from the lab—his sense of immersion in the counterpart world had become total. As the sunlit city swept by outside the tram's windows, Mick found it nearly impossible to believe that he was not physically present in this body, rather than lying on the couch in the other version of the lab. Overnight his tactile immersion had improved markedly. When he braced himself against the tram's upright handrail, as it swept around a curve, he felt cold aluminum, the faint greasiness where it had been touched by other hands.

At the offices, Andrea's colleagues greeted him with an unforced casualness that left him dismayed. He'd been expecting awkward expressions of sympathy, sly glances when they thought he wasn't looking. Instead he was plonked down in the waiting area and left to flick through glossy brochures while he waited for Andrea to emerge from her office. No one even offered him a drink.

He leafed through the brochures dispiritedly. Andrea's job had always been a sore point in their relationship. If Mick didn't approve of nerverlinking,

he had even less time for the legal vultures that made so much money out of personal injury claims related to the technology. But now he found it difficult to summon his usual sense of moral superiority. Unpleasant things *had* happened to decent people because of negligence and corner-cutting. If *nervelinking* was to be a part of the world, then someone had to make sure the victims got their due. He wondered why this had never been clear to him before.

“Hiya,” Andrea said, leaning over him. She gave him a businesslike kiss, not quite meeting his mouth. “Took a bit longer than I thought, sorry.”

“Can we go now?” Mick asked, putting down the brochure.

“Yep, I’m done here.”

Outside, when they were walking along the pavement in the shade of the tall, commercial buildings, Mick said: “They didn’t have a clue, did they? No one in that office knows what’s happened to us.”

“I thought it was best,” Andrea said.

“I don’t know how you can keep up that act, that nothing’s wrong.”

“Mick, nothing *is* wrong. You have to see it from my point of view. I haven’t lost my husband. Nothing’s changed for me. When you’re gone—when all this ends, and I get the other *you* back—my life carries on as normal. I know what’s happened to you is a tragedy, and believe me I’m as upset about it as anyone.”

“Upset,” Mick said quietly.

“Yes, upset. But I’d be lying if I said I was paralyzed with grief. I’m human, Mick. I’m not capable of feeling great emotional turmoil at the thought that some distant counterpart of myself got herself run over, all because she was rushing to have her hair done. Silly cow, that’s what it makes me feel. At most it makes me feel a bit odd, a bit shivery. But I don’t think it’s something I’m going to have trouble getting over.”

“I lost my wife,” Mick said.

“I know, and I’m sorry. More than you’ll ever know. But if you expect my life to come crashing to a halt...”

He cut her off. “I’m already fading. One point eight this morning.”

“You always knew it would happen. It’s not like it’s any surprise.”

“You’ll notice a difference in me by the end of the day.”

“This isn’t the end of the day, so stop dwelling on it. All right? Please, Mick. You’re in serious danger of ruining this for yourself.”

“I know, and I’m trying not to,” he said. “But what I was saying, about how things aren’t going to get any better... I think today’s going to be my last chance, Andrea. My last chance to be with you, to be with you properly.”

“You mean us sleeping together,” Andrea said, keeping her voice low.

“We haven’t talked about it yet. That’s okay; I wasn’t expecting it to happen without at least some discussion. But there’s no reason why...”

“Mick, I...” Andrea began.

“You’re still my wife. I’m still in love with you. I know we’ve had our problems, but I realize now how stupid all that was. I should have called you sooner. I was being an idiot. And then this happened... and it made me realize what a wonderful, lovely person you are, and I should have seen that for myself, but I didn’t... I needed the accident to shake me up, to make me see how lucky I was just to know you. And now I’m going to lose you again, and I’m not sure how I’m going to cope with that. But at least if we can be together again... properly, I mean.”

“Mick...”

“You’ve already said you might get back together with the other Mick. Maybe it took all this to get us talking again. Point is, if you’re going to get back together with him, there’s nothing to stop us getting back together *now*. We were a couple before the accident; we can still be a couple now.”

“Mick, it isn’t the same. You’ve lost your wife. I’m not *her*. I’m some weird thing there isn’t a word for. And you aren’t really my husband. My husband is in a medically induced coma.”

“You know none of that really matters.”

“To you.”

“It shouldn’t matter to you either. And your husband—me, incidentally—agreed to this. He knew exactly what was supposed to happen. And so did you.”

“I just thought things would be better—more civilized—if we kept a kind of distance.”

“You’re talking as if we’re divorced.”

“Mick, we were already separated. We weren’t talking. I can’t just forget what happened before the accident as if none of that mattered.”

“I know it isn’t easy for you.”

They walked on in an uneasy silence, through the city center streets they’d walked a thousand times before. Mick asked Andrea if she wanted a coffee, but she said she’d had one in her office not long before he arrived. Maybe later. They paused to cross the road near one of Andrea’s favorite boutiques and Mick asked if there was something he could buy for her.

Andrea sounded taken aback at the suggestion. “You don’t need to buy me anything, Mick. It isn’t my birthday or anything.”

“It would be nice to give you a gift. Something to remember me by.”

“I don’t need anything to remember you, Mick. You’re always going to be there.”

“It doesn’t have to be much. Just something you’ll use now and then, and will make you think of me. *This* me, not the one who’s going to be walking around in this body in a few days.”

“Well, if you really insist...” He could tell Andrea was trying to sound keen on the idea, but her heart still wasn’t quite in it. “There was a handbag I saw last week...”

“You should have bought it when you saw it.”

“I was saving up for the hairdresser.”

So Mick bought her the handbag. He made a mental note of the style and color, intending to buy an identical copy next week. Since he hadn’t bought the gift for his wife in his own worldline, it was even possible that he might walk out of the shop with the exact counterpart of the handbag he’d

just given Andrea.

They went to the park again, then to look at the art in the National Museum of Wales, then back into town for lunch. There were a few more clouds in the sky compared to the last two days, but their chrome whiteness only served to make the blue appear more deeply enameled and permanent. There were no planes anywhere at all; no contrail scratches. It turned out the aircraft—which had indeed been military -that they had seen yesterday had been on its way to Poland, carrying a team of mine rescue specialists. Mick remembered his resentment at seeing the plane, and felt bad about it now. There had been brave men and women aboard it, and they were probably going to be putting their own lives at risk to help save other brave men and women stuck miles underground.

“Well,” Andrea said, when they’d paid the bill. “Moment of truth, I suppose. I’ve been thinking about what you were saying earlier, and maybe...” She trailed off, looking down at the remains of her salad, before continuing, “We can go home, if you’d like. If that’s what you really want.”

“Yes,” Mick said. “It’s what I want.”

They took the tram back to their house. Andrea used her key to let them inside. It was still only the early afternoon, and the house was pleasantly cool, with the curtains and blinds still drawn. Mick knelt down and picked up the letters that were on the mat. Bills, mostly. He set them on the hall-side table, feeling a transitory sense of liberation. More than likely he’d be confronted with the same bills when he got home, but for now *these* were someone else’s problem.

He slipped off his shoes and walked into the living room. For a moment he was thrown, feeling as if he really was in a different house. The wallscreen was on another wall; the dining table had been shifted sideways into the other half of the room; the sofa and easy chairs had all been altered and moved.

“What’s happened?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Andrea said. “I felt like a change. You came around and helped me move them.”

“That’s new furniture.”

“No, just different seat covers. They’re not new, it’s just that we haven’t had them out for a while. You remember them now, don’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“C’mon, Mick. It wasn’t that long ago. We got them off Aunty Janice, remember?” She looked at him despairingly. “I’ll move things back. It was a bit inconsiderate of me, I suppose. I never thought how strange it would be for you to see the place like this.”

“No, it’s okay. Honestly, it’s fine.” Mick looked around, trying to fix the arrangement of furniture and decor in his mind’s eye. As if he were going to duplicate everything when he got back into his own body, into his own version of this house.

Maybe he would, too.

“I’ve got something for you,” Andrea said suddenly, reaching onto the top of the bookcase. “Found it this morning. Took ages searching for it.”

“What?” Mick asked.

She held the thing out to him. Mick saw a rectangle of laminated pink card, stained and dog-eared. It was only when he tried to hold it, and the thing fell open and disgorged its folded paper innards, that he realized it was a map.

“Bloody hell. I wouldn’t have had a clue where to look.” Mick folded the map back into itself and studied the cover. It was one of their old hill-walking maps, covering that part of the Brecon Beacons where they’d done a lot of their walks.

“I was just thinking... seeing as you were so keen... maybe it wouldn’t kill us to get out of town. Nothing too adventurous, mind.”

“Tomorrow?”

She looked at him concernedly. “That’s what I was thinking. You’ll still be okay, won’t you?”

“No probs.”

“I’ll get us a picnic, then. Tesco’s does a nice luncheon basket. I think we’ve still got two thermos flasks around here somewhere, too.”

“Never mind the thermos flasks, what about the walking boots?”

“In the garage,” Andrea said. “Along with the rucksacks. I’ll dig them out this evening.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Mick said. “Really. It’s kind of you to agree.”

“Just as long you don’t expect me to get up Pen y Fan without getting out of breath.”

“I bet you’ll surprise yourself.”

A little later they went upstairs, to their bedroom. The blinds were open enough to throw pale stripes across the walls and bedsheets. Andrea undressed, and then helped Mick out his own clothes. As good as his control over the body had now become, fine motor tasks—like undoing buttons and zips—would require a lot more practice than he was going to have time for.

“You’ll have to help me get all this on afterward,” he said.

“There you go, worrying about the future again.”

They lay together on the bed. Mick had already felt himself growing hard long before there was any corresponding change in the body he was now inhabiting. He had an erection in the laboratory, halfway across the city in another worldline. He could even feel the sharp plastic of the urinary catheter. Would the other Mick, sunk deep into coma, retain some vague impression of what was happening now? There were occasional stories of people coming out of their coma with a memory of what their bodies had been up to while they were under, but the agencies had said these were urban myths.

They made slow, cautious love. Mick had become more aware of his own awkwardness, and the self-consciousness only served to exaggerate the stiffness of his movements. Andrea did what she could to help, to bridge the gap between them, but she could not work miracles. She was patient and forgiving, even when he came close to hurting her. When he climaxed, Mick felt it happen to the body in the laboratory first. Then the body he was inhabiting responded, too, seconds later. Something of it reached him through the nerverlink—not pleasure, exactly, but confirmation that pleasure had occurred.

Afterward, they lay still on the bed, limbs entwined. A breeze made the blinds move back and forth against the window. The slow movement of

light and shade, the soft tick of vinyl on glass, was as lulling as a becalmed boat. Mick found himself falling into a contented sleep. He dreamed of standing on a summit in the Brecon Beacons, looking down on the sunlit valleys of South Wales, with Andrea next to him, the two of them poised like a tableau in a travel brochure.

When he woke, hours later, he heard her moving around downstairs. He reached for the glasses—he'd removed them earlier—and made to leave the bed. He felt it then. Somewhere in those languid hours he'd lost a degree of control over the body. He stood and moved to the door. He could still walk, but the easy facility he'd gained on Tuesday was now absent. When he moved to the landing and looked down the stairs, the glasses struggled to cope with the sudden change of scene. The view fractured, reassembled. He moved to steady himself on the banister, and his hand blurred into a long smear of flesh. He began to descend the stairs, like a man coming down a mountain.

* * * *

THURSDAY

In the morning he was worse. He stayed overnight at the house, then caught the tram to the laboratory. Already he could feel a measurable lag between the sending of his intentions to move, and the corresponding action in the body. Walking was still just about manageable, but all other tasks had become more difficult. He'd made a mess trying to eat breakfast in Andrea's kitchen. It was no surprise when Joe told him that the link was now down to one point two megs, and falling.

"By the end of the day?" Mick asked, even though he could see the printout for himself.

"Point nine, maybe point eight."

He'd dared to think it might still be possible to do what they had planned. But the day soon became a catalogue of declining functions. At noon he met Andrea at her office and they went to a car rental office, where they'd booked a vehicle for the day. Andrea drove them out of Cardiff, up the valleys, along the A470 from Merthyr to Brecon. They had planned to walk all the way to the summit of Pen y Fan, an ascent they'd done together dozens of times during their hill-walking days. Andrea had already collected the picnic basket from Tesco's and packed and prepared the two rucksacks. She'd helped Mick get into his walking boots.

They left the car at the Storey Arms then followed the well-trodden trail that wound its way toward the mountain. Mick felt a little ashamed at first. Back in their hill-walking days, they'd tended to look down with disdain on the hordes of people making the trudge up Pen y Fan, especially those that took the route up from the pub. The view from the top was worth the climb, but they'd usually made a point of completing at least one or two other ascents on the same day, and they'd always eschewed the easy paths. Now Mick was paying for that earlier superiority. What started out as pleasantly challenging soon became impossibly taxing. Although he didn't think Andrea had begun to notice, he was finding it much harder than he'd expected to walk on the rough, craggy surface of the path. The effort was draining him, preventing him from enjoying any of the scenery, or the sheer bliss of being with Andrea. When he lost his footing the first time, Andrea didn't make much of it—she'd nearly tripped once already, on the dried and cracked path. But soon he was finding it hard to walk more than a hundred meters without losing his balance. He knew, with a heavy heart, that it would be difficult enough just to get back to the car. The mountain was still two miles away, and he wouldn't have a hope as soon as they hit a real slope.

“Are you okay, Mick?”

“I'm fine. Don't worry about me. It's these bloody shoes. I can't believe they ever fit me.”

He soldiered on for as long as he could, refusing to give in, but the going got harder and his pace slower. When he tripped again and this time grazed his shin through his trousers, he knew he'd pushed himself as far as he could go. Time was getting on. The mountain might as well have been in the Himalayas, for all his chances of climbing it.

“I'm sorry. I'm useless. Go on without me. It's too nice a day not to finish it.”

“Hey.” Andrea took his hand. “Don't be like that. It was always going to be hard. Look how far we've come anyway.”

Mick turned and looked dispiritedly down the valley. “About three kilometers. I can still see the pub.”

“Well, it felt longer. And besides, this is actually a very nice spot to have the picnic.” Andrea made a show of rubbing her thigh. “I'm about ready to stop anyway. Pulled a muscle going over that sty.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“Shut up, Mick. I’m happy, okay? If you want to turn this into some miserable, pain-filled trek, go ahead. Me, I’m staying here.”

She spread the blanket next to a dry brook and unpacked the food. The contents of the picnic basket looked very good indeed. The taste came through the nerverlink as a kind of thin, diluted impression, more like the memory of taste rather than the thing itself. But he managed to eat without making too much of a mess, and some of it actually bordered on the enjoyable. They ate, listening to the birds, saying little. Now and then other walkers trudged past, barely giving Mick and Andrea a glance, as they continued toward the hills.

“I guess I shouldn’t have kidded myself I was ever going to get up that mountain,” Mick said.

“It was a bit ambitious,” Andrea agreed. “It would have been hard enough without the nerverlink, given how flabby the two of us have become.”

“I think I’d have made a better job of it yesterday. Even this morning... I honestly felt I could do this when we got into the car.”

Andrea touched his thigh. “How does it feel?”

“Like I’m moving away. Yesterday I felt like I was in this body, fully a part of it. Like a face filling a mask. Today it’s different. I can still see through the mask, but it’s getting further away.”

Andrea seemed distant for several moments. He wondered if what he’d said had upset her. But when she spoke again there was something in her voice—a kind of steely resolution—that he hadn’t been expecting, but which was entirely Andrea.

“Listen to me, Mick.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’m going to tell you something. It’s the first of May today; just past two in the afternoon. We left Cardiff at eleven. This time next year, this exact day, I’m coming back here. I’m going to pack a picnic basket and go all the way up to the top of Pen y Fan. I’ll set off from Cardiff at the same time. And I’m going to do it the year after, as well. Every first of May. No matter what day of the week it is. No matter how bloody horrible the weather

is. I'm going up this mountain and nothing on Earth is going to stop me."

It took him a few seconds to realize what she was getting at. "With the other Mick?"

"No. I'm not saying we won't ever climb that hill together. But when I go up it on the first of May, I'll be on my own." She looked levelly at Mick. "And you'll do it alone as well. You'll find someone new, I'm sure of it. But whoever she is will have to give you that one day to yourself. So that you and I can have it to ourselves."

"We won't be able to communicate. We won't even know the other one's stuck to the plan."

"Yes," Andrea said firmly. "We will. Because it's going to be a promise, all right? The most important one either of us has ever made in our whole lives. That way we'll know. Each of us will be in our own universe, or worldline, or whatever you call it. But we'll both be standing on the same Welsh mountain. We'll both be looking at the same view. And I'll be thinking of you, and you'll be thinking of me."

Mick ran a stiff hand through Andrea's hair. He couldn't get his fingers to work very well now.

"You really mean that, don't you?"

"Of course I mean it. But I'm not promising anything unless you agree to your half of it. Would you promise, Mick?"

"Yes," he said. "I will."

"I wish I could think of something better. I could say we'd always meet in the park. But there'll be people around; it won't feel private. I want the silence, the isolation, so I can feel your presence. And one day they might tear down the park and put a shopping center there instead. But the mountain will always be there. At least as long as we're around."

"And when we get old? Shouldn't we agree to stop climbing the mountain, when we get to a certain age?"

"There you go again," Andrea said. "Decide for yourself. I'm going to keep climbing this thing until they put me in a box. I expect nothing less from you, Mick Leighton."

He made the best smile he was capable of. “Then... I’ll just have to do my best, won’t I?”

* * * *

FRIDAY

In the morning Mick was paraplegic. The nerverlink still worked perfectly, but the rate of data transmission from one worldline to the other had become too low to permit anything as complex and feedback-dependent as walking. His control over the body’s fingers had become so clumsy that his hands might as well have been wearing boxing gloves. He could hold something if it was presented to him, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to manipulate simple objects, even those that had presented no difficulty twenty-four hours earlier. When he tried to grasp the breakfast yoghurt, he succeeded only in tipping it over the table. His hand had seemed to lurch toward the yoghurt, crossing the distance too quickly. According to Joe he had lost depth perception overnight. The glasses, sensing the dwindling data rate, were no longer sending stereoscopic images back to the lab.

He could still move around. The team had anticipated this stage and made sure an electric wheelchair was ready for him. Its chunky controls were designed to be used by someone with only limited upper body coordination. The chair was equipped with a panic button, so that Mick could summon help if he felt his control slipping faster than the predicted rate. Were he to fall into sudden and total paralysis, the chair would call out to passersby to provide assistance. In the event of an extreme medical emergency, it would steer itself to the nearest designated care point.

Andrea came out to the laboratory to meet him. Mick wanted one last trip into the city with her, but although she’d been enthusiastic when they’d talked about the plan on the phone, Andrea was now reluctant.

“Are you sure about this? We had such a nice time on Thursday. It would be a shame to spoil the memory of that now.”

“I’m okay,” Mick said.

“I’m just saying, we could always just stroll around the gardens here.”

“Please,” Mick said. “This is what... I want.”

His voice was slow, his phrasing imprecise. He sounded drunk and

depressed. If Andrea noticed—and he was sure she must have—she made no observation.

They went into town. It was difficult getting the wheelchair on the tram, even with Andrea's assistance. No one seemed to know how to lower the boarding ramp. One of the benefits of nerverlink technology was that you didn't see that many people in wheelchairs anymore. The technology that enabled one person to control another person's body also enabled spinal injuries to be bypassed. Mick was aware that he was attracting more attention than on any previous day. For most people wheelchairs were a medical horror from the past, like iron lungs or leg braces.

On the tram's video monitor he watched a news item about the Polish miners. It wasn't good. The rescue team had had a number of options available to them, involving at least three possible routes to the trapped men. After carefully evaluating all the data—aware of how little time remained for the victims—they'd chosen what had promised to be the quickest and safest approach.

It had turned out to be a mistake, one that would prove fatal for the miners. The rescuers had hit a flooded section and had been forced to retreat, with damage to their equipment, and one of their team injured. Yet the miners *had* been saved in one of the other contacted worldlines. In that reality, one of the members of the rescue team had slipped on ice and fractured his hip while boarding the plane. The loss of that one man—who'd been a vocal proponent for taking the quickest route—had resulted in the team following the second course. It had turned out to be the right decision. They'd met their share of obstacles and difficulties, but in the end they'd broken through to the trapped miners.

By the time this happened, contact with that worldline had almost been lost. Even the best compression methods couldn't cope with moving images. The pictures that came back, of the men being liberated from the ground, were grainy and monochrome, like a blowup of newsprint from a hundred years earlier. They'd been squeezed across the gap in the last minutes before noise drowned the signal.

But the information was useless. Even armed with the knowledge that there was a safe route through to the miners, the team in this worldline didn't have time to act.

The news didn't help Mick's mood. Going into the city turned out to be exactly the bad move Andrea had predicted. By midday his motor control had deteriorated even further, to the point where he was having difficulty

steering the wheelchair. His speech became increasingly slurred, so that Andrea had to keep asking him to repeat himself. In defense, he shut down into monosyllables. Even his hearing was beginning to fail, as the auditory data was compressed to an even more savage degree. He couldn't distinguish birds from traffic, or traffic from the swish of the trees in the park. When Andrea spoke to him she sounded like her words had been fed through a synthesizer, then chopped up and spliced back together in some tinny approximation to her normal voice.

At three, his glasses could no longer support full color vision. The software switched to a limited color palette. The city looked like a hand-tinted photograph, washed out and faded. Andrea's face oscillated between white and sickly gray.

By four, Mick was fully quadriplegic. By five, the glasses had reverted back to black and white. The frame rate was down to ten images per second, and falling.

By early evening, Andrea was no longer able to understand what Mick was saying. Mick realized that he could no longer reach the panic button. He became agitated, thrashing his head around. He'd had enough. He wanted to be pulled out of the nerverlink, slammed back into his own waiting body. He no longer felt as if he was in Mick's body, but he didn't feel as if he was in his own one either. He was strung out somewhere between them, helpless and almost blind. When the panic hit, it was like a foaming, irresistible tide.

Alarmed, Andrea wheeled him back to the laboratory. By the time she was ready to say goodbye to him, the glasses had reduced his vision to five images per second, each of which was composed of only six thousand pixels. He was calmer then, resigned to the inevitability of what tomorrow would bring: he would not even recognize Andrea in the morning.

* * * *

SATURDAY

Mick's last day with Andrea began in a world of sound and vision—senses that were already impoverished to a large degree—and ended in a realm of silence and darkness.

He was now completely paralyzed, unable even to move his head. The brain that belonged to the other, comatose Mick now had more control

over this body than its wakeful counterpart. The nerverlink was still sending signals back to the lab, but the requirements of sight and sound now consumed almost all available bandwidth. In the morning, vision was down to one thousand pixels, updated three frames per second. His sight had already turned monochrome, but even yesterday there had been welcome gradations of gray, enough to anchor him into the visual landscape.

Now the pixels were only capable of registering on or off; it cost too much bandwidth to send intermediate intensity values. When Andrea was near him, her face was a flickering abstraction of black and white squares, like a trick picture in a psychology textbook. With effort he learned to distinguish her from the other faces in the laboratory, but no sooner had he gained confidence in his ability than the quality of vision declined even further.

By midmorning the frame rate had dropped to eight hundred pixels at two per second, which was less like vision than being shown a sequence of still images. People didn't walk to him across the lab—they jumped from spot to spot, captured in frozen postures. It was soon easy to stop thinking of them as people at all, but simply as abstract structures in the data.

By noon he could not exactly say that he had any vision at all. Something was updating once every two seconds, but the matrix of black and white pixels was hard to reconcile with his memories of the lab. He could no longer distinguish people from furniture, unless people moved between frames, and then only occasionally. At two, he asked Joe to disable the feed from the glasses, so that the remaining bandwidth could be used for sound and touch. Mick was plunged into darkness.

Sound had declined overnight as well. If Andrea's voice had been tinny yesterday, today it was barely human. It was as if she were speaking to him through a voice distorter on the end of the worst telephone connection in the world. The noise was beginning to win. The software was struggling to compensate, teasing sense out of the data. It was a battle that could only be prolonged, not won.

"I'm still here," Andrea told him, her voice a whisper fainter than the signal from the furthest quasar.

Mick answered back. It took some time. His words in the lab had to be analyzed by voice-recognition software and converted into ASCII characters. The characters were compressed further and sent across the reality gap, bit by bit. In the other version of the lab—the one where Mick's body waited in a wheelchair, the one where Andrea hadn't died in a car

crash—equivalent software decompressed the character string and reconstituted it in mechanically generated speech, with an American accent.

“Thank you for letting me come back,” he said. “Please stay. Until the end. Until I’m not here anymore.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Mick.”

Andrea squeezed his hand. After all that he had lost since Friday, touch remained. It really was the easiest thing to send: easier than sight, easier than sound. When, later, even Andrea’s voice had to be sent across the gap by character string and speech synthesizer, touch endured. He felt her holding him, hugging his body to hers, refusing to surrender him to the drowning roar of quantum noise.

“We’re down to less than a thousand useable bits,” Joe told him, speaking quietly in his ear in the version of the lab where Mick lay on the immersion couch. “That’s a thousand bits total, until we lose all contact. It’s enough for a message, enough for parting words.”

“Send this,” Mick said. “Tell Andrea that I’m glad she was there. Tell her that I’m glad she was my wife. Tell her I’m sorry we didn’t make it up that hill together.”

When Joe had sent the message, typing it in with his usual fluid speed, Mick felt the sense of Andrea’s touch easing. Even the microscopic data-transfer burden of communicating unchanging pressure, hand on hand, body against body, was now too much for the link. It was like one swimmer letting a drowning partner go. As the last bits fell, he felt Andrea slip away forever.

He lay on the couch, unmoving. He had lost his wife, for the second time. For the moment the weight of that realization pinned him into stillness. He did not think he would ever be able to walk in his world, let alone the one he had just vacated.

And yet it was Saturday. Andrea’s funeral was in two days. He would have to be ready for that.

“We’re done,” Joe said respectfully. “Link is now noise-swamped.”

“Did Andrea send anything back?” Mick asked. “After I sent my last words...”

“No. I’m sorry.”

Mick caught the hesitation in Joe’s answer. “Nothing came through ?”

“Nothing intelligible. I thought something was coming through, but it was just...” Joe offered an apologetic shrug. “The setup at their end must have gone noise-limited a few seconds before ours did. Happens, sometimes.”

“I know,” Mick said. “But I still want to see what Andrea sent.”

Joe handed him a printout. Mick waited for his eyes to focus on the sheet. Beneath the lines of header information was a single line of text: SO0122215. Like a phone number or a postal code, except it was obviously neither.

“That’s all?”

Joe sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, mate. Maybe she was just trying to get something through... but the noise won. The rucking noise always wins.”

Mick looked at the numbers again. They began to talk to him. He thought he knew what they meant.

“... always fucking wins,” Joe repeated.

* * * *

SUNDAY

Andrea was there when they brought Mick out of the medically induced coma. He came up through layers of disorientation and half-dream, adrift until something inside him clicked into place and he realized where he had been for the last week, what had been happening to the body over which he was now regaining gradual control. It was exactly as they had promised: no dreams, no anxiety, no tangible sense of elapsed time. In a way, it was not an entirely unattractive way to spend a week. Like being in the womb, he’d heard people say. And now he was being born again, a process that was not without its own discomforts. He tried moving an arm and when the limb did not obey him instantly, he began to panic. But Joe was already smiling.

“Easy, boyo. It’s coming back. The software’s rerouting things one

spinal nerve at a time. Just hold on there and it'll be fine."

Mick tried mumbling something in reply, but his jaw wasn't working properly either. Yet it would come, as Joe had promised. On any given day, thousands of recipients went through this exact procedure without blinking an eyelid. Many of them were people who'd already done it hundreds of times before. Nerverlinking was almost insanely safe. Far safer than any form of physical travel, that was certain.

He tried moving his arm again. This time it obeyed without hesitation.

"How are you feeling?" Andrea asked.

Once more he tried speaking. His jaw was stiff, his tongue thick and uncooperative, but he managed to make some sounds. "Okay. Felt better."

"They say it's easier the second time. Much easier the third."

"How long?"

"You went under on Sunday of last week. It's Sunday again now," Joe said.

A full week. Exactly the way they'd planned it.

"I'm quite hungry," Mick said.

"Everyone's always hungry when they come out of the coma," Joe said. "It's hard to get enough nourishment into the host body. We'll get you sorted out, though."

Mick turned his head to look at Joe, waiting for his eyes to find grudging focus. "Joe," he said. "Everything's all right, isn't it? No complications, nothing to worry about?"

"No problems at all," Joe said.

"Then would you mind giving Andrea and me a moment alone?"

Joe held up his hand in hasty acknowledgement and left the room, off on some plausible errand. He shut the door quietly behind him.

"Well?" Mick asked. "I'm guessing things must have gone okay, or they wouldn't have kept me under for so long."

“Things went okay, yes,” Andrea said.

“Then you met the other Mick? He was here?”

Andrea nodded heavily. “He was here. We spent time together.”

“What did you get up to?”

“All the usual stuff you or I would’ve done. Hit the town, walked in the parks, went into the hills, that kind of thing.”

“How was it?”

She looked at him guardedly. “Really, really sad. I didn’t really know how to behave, to be honest. Part of me wanted to be all consoling and sympathetic, because he’d lost his wife. But I don’t think that’s what Mick wanted.”

“The other Mick,” he corrected gently.

“Point is, he didn’t come back to see me being all weepy. He wanted another week with his wife, the way things used to be. Yes, he wanted to say goodbye, but he didn’t want to spend the whole week with the two of us walking around feeling down in the dumps.”

“So how did you feel?”

“Miserable. Not as miserable as if I’d lost my husband, of course. But some of his sadness started wearing off on me. I didn’t think it was going to... *I’m* not the one who’s been bereaved here—but you’d have to be inhuman not to feel something, wouldn’t you?”

“Whatever you felt, don’t blame yourself for it. I think it was a wonderful thing you agreed to do.”

“You, too.”

“I had the easy part,” Mick said.

Andrea stroked the side of his face. He realized that he needed a good shave. “How do *you* feel?” she asked. “You’re nearly him, after all. You know everything he knows.”

“Except how it feels to lose a wife. And I hope I don’t ever find that out. I don’t think I can ever really understand what he’s going through now. He feels like someone else, a friend, a colleague, someone you’d feel sorry for...”

“But you’re not cut up about what happened to him.”

Mick thought for a while before responding, not wanting to give the glib, automatic answer, no matter how comforting it might have been. “No. I wish it hadn’t happened... but you’re still here. We can still be together, if we want. We’ll carry on with our lives, and in a few months we’ll hardly ever think of that accident. The other Mick isn’t me. He isn’t even anyone we’ll ever hear from again. He’s gone. He might as well not exist.”

“But he does. Just because we can’t communicate anymore... he *is* still out there.”

“That’s what the theory says.” Mick narrowed his eyes. “Why? What difference does it really make, to us?”

“None at all, I suppose.” Again that guarded look. “But there’s something I have to tell you, something you have to understand.”

There was a tone in her voice that troubled Mick, but he did his best not to show it. “Go on, Andrea.”

“I made a promise to the other Mick. He’s lost something no one can ever replace, and I wanted to do something, anything, to make it easier for him. Because of that, Mick and I came to an arrangement. Once a year, I’m going to go away for a day. For that day, and that day only, I’m going somewhere private where I’m going to be thinking about the other Mick. About what he’s been doing; what kind of life he’s had; whether he’s happy or sad. And I’m going to be alone. I don’t want you to follow me, Mick. You have to promise me that.”

“You could tell me,” he said. “There doesn’t have to be secrets.”

“I’m telling you now. Don’t you think I could have kept it from you if I wanted to?”

“But I still won’t know where...”

“You don’t need to. This is a secret between me and the other Mick. Me and the other you.” She must have read something in his expression,

something he had hoped wasn't there, because her tone turned grave. "And you need to find a way to deal with that, because it isn't negotiable. I already made that promise."

"And Andrea Leighton doesn't break promises."

"No," she said, softening her look with a sweet half-smile. "She doesn't. Especially not to Mick Leighton. Whichever one it happens to be."

They kissed.

Later, when Andrea was out of the room while Joe ran some more post-immersion tests, Mick peeled off a yellow Post-it note that had been left on one of the keyboards. There was something written on the note, in neat, blue ink. Instantly he recognized Andrea's handwriting: he'd seen it often enough on the message board in their kitchen. But the writing itself—SO0122215—meant nothing to him.

"Joe," he asked casually. "Is this something of yours?"

Joe glanced over from his desk, his eyes freezing on the small rectangle of yellow paper.

"No, that's what Andrea asked—" Joe began, then caught himself. "Look, it's nothing. I meant to bin it, but..."

"It's a message to the other Mick, right?"

Joe looked around, as if Andrea might still be hiding in the room or about to reappear. "We were down to the last few usable bits. The other Mick had just sent his last words through. Andrea asked me to send that response."

"Did she tell you what it meant?"

Joe looked defensive. "I just typed it. I didn't ask. Thought it was between you and her. I mean, between the other Mick and her."

"It's okay," Mick said. "You were right not to ask."

He looked at the message again, and something fell solidly into place. It had taken a few moments, but he recognized the code for what it was now, as some damp and windswept memory filtered up from the past. The numbers formed a grid reference on an Ordnance Survey map. It was

the kind Andrea and he had used when they went on their walking expeditions. The reference even looked vaguely familiar. He stared at the numbers, feeling as if they were about to give up their secret. Wherever it was, he'd been there, or somewhere near. It wouldn't be hard to look it up. He wouldn't even need the Post-it note. He'd always had a good memory for numbers.

Footsteps approached, echoing along the linoleum-floored hallway that led to the lab.

"It's Andrea," Joe said.

Mick folded the Post-it note until the message was no longer visible. He flicked it in Joe's direction, knowing that it was none of his business anymore.

"Bin it."

"You sure?"

From now on there was always going to be a part of his wife's life that didn't involve him, even if it was only for one day a year. He would just have to find a way to live with that.

Things could have been worse, after all.

"I'm sure," he said.