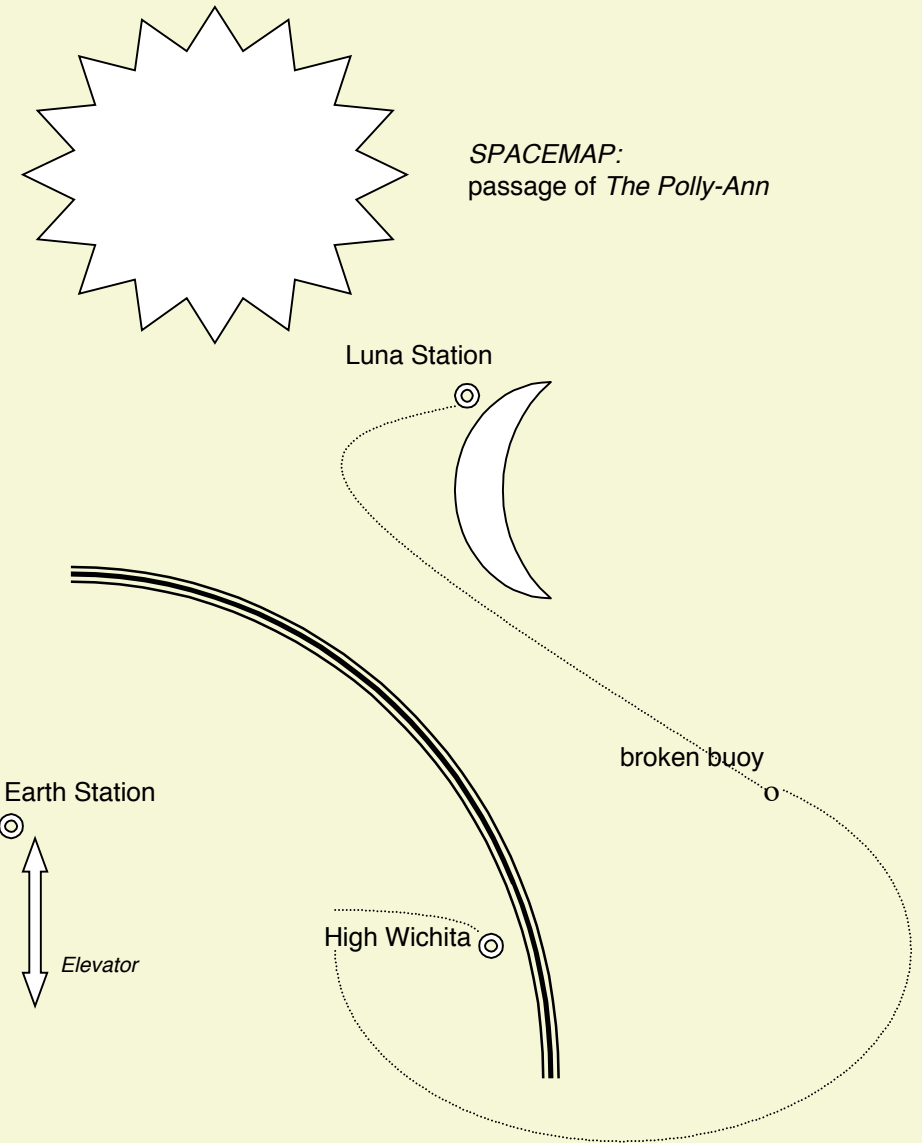


# High Wichita\*

Mark von Schlegell



\*from *Annals of Skaw*, E. J. Ryan, ed., Mercury Station Borstal info-net, alltime.

## PROLOGUE

*A fat moon hangs over Penobscot Bay,  
advertising COCAI-COLA.*

*It's 2133 and the night sky is jam  
packed with satellite towns and space  
junk. Logos and Heraldic designs liken the  
heavens to an enormous holonet page.*

*Crickets Chirp. Night things fly. A  
small research vessel is tethered to a  
creaking dock. Colored light flickers  
through a single window on the second  
floor of a charming 19th Century house,  
and reflects upon the twinkling cove.*

*There's a pong. Inside the house,  
Mistress turns over in her luxurious bed.  
She groans. She's fallen asleep watching a  
hologram news show. It's still running,  
filling an "infoball" -- the spherical  
grid hovering over her bed -- with 3d  
images. Over documentary footage of  
protesting marchers, Javanese News  
Broadcasts, helicopters, groups of world*

*leaders, packets of blinking information  
inviting access, Danish domes on Luna,  
Mars etc., an Announcer comments.*

"Hard to believe it was fifty  
years ago today when the nanotubes  
first attached Earth Station to  
Equator City. In those days no one  
dreamed how fast Earth Life would  
take to Space. Well we're well into  
the Dirty Thirties and new colonies  
and space stations pop up almost  
daily, but Earthside still hasn't  
even gotten it together to construct  
another Elevator. And today the fate  
of the C. Clarke seems increasingly  
fragile. Of course bad news for the  
Concerns is almost always good news  
for Spacers. For one thing, there's a  
surplus of nanotubing going  
round...."

*The pong repeats. Mistress reaches out a dainty hand. The infoball imagery gives way to a man's face. He's about 40, with a pipe, a thin moustache and a good deal of spirit. Below him are blinking the words:*

NICK. OCT. 26 2133, Luna Station  
Relay. 10:04 SAM.

*He speaks. "Nora?"*

*Mistress sits up and rubs her softling head. She looks our way, and we thrill at the recognition.*

*"Find him, Girl."*

*Delighted, eager we twirl. We ripple out the window.*

*We pause over the Bay. There are lights moving under the water's surface, but we focus on the sky. The moon (now advertising XYGENE) grows rapidly. We view tiny, newly perceivable patterns upon it.*

*We trace a vector moving away from the geometric lights of Luna City towards Luna Station, a smaller pattern hugging a comfortable orbit.*

*We approach this accelerating point, riding a single electromagnetic wave. Space expands.*

*Time constricts.*

*We emerge from the fish-eyed watchlet on a man's wrist....*

## 1

### HAIL POLLY-ANN

Painting is a perfect pastime for the long hours of space travel. As the Lunar linersshuttle came into equal velocity with the *Polly-Ann*, Nick Wesley was just putting the finishing touches on a rather successful paint-by-numbers portrait of his adorable wife. Now he laid his brush on the topler and strolled to the windowmirror to take a gander at that

legendary ship.

Four thousand kilometers over Luna City, Count Skaw's refit grainovator bulged with eccentricity and complication. The hull's quasicrystal skin shone yellow like a Chinese fish. Broad swaths of lightsuckers wrapped off and around the diamond barnacles of the sparkling, parasite autonomies, the stuck-on eateries, brothels, casinos, churches, markets and hotels, by which *Polly-Ann* paid for her own passage. The heraldry of the Concerns was not to be found among her bangles and baudles. Captain Count burned energy as he saw fit, without undue interference.

"Nora?" Nick spoke into his watchlet. "You awake?"

It was 4AM on the Northeast Coast of North America, Earthside. Nora, her chin peeking over her comforter, kept her eyes closed.

"It's you," she whispered, thick with

sleep. "Where?"

"We're coming to the *Polly-Ann*. Hey, that's perfect. Don't move." He returned to the painting.

Nora groaned. "What's wrong? You promised you'd be back on Sunday. I already invited Father and the Stevensons, and that old man who plays the electric violin that you always want--"

"Old Cyrus. Splendid. Don't move."

Nora paused, then sat suddenly up, squinting to see him on her infoball. "Nicholas Wesley. Are you O.K.? I can't see you. You know, you're not old for a man, particularly these days. And though you've retired from sleuthing to manage my family's finances, you have to go back to Space once in a while to see all your dangerous old friends. Is it that the Captain of the *Polly-Ann* is too much for you? Honestly, darling, who really cares? Just drop the Vermeer in Pamela's lap, give Reg Skaw the finger and come right

back home if -- You're smoking."

"It's an aid to ratiocination." Nick answered, daubing at the painting.

"Well I'll be. You are scared. ASTA darling? I'm going back to sleep. You stay with Nick and keep track of everything that happens. Particularly when he's smoking!"

## 2

### THE VERMEER

Nick arranged for his single suitcase, his painting materials and an object in storage to be tubed to the *Polly-Ann*. He removed his apron, cleaned his tuxedo and nuslax. He packed up his paints and his portrait of Nora. Then, lighting a new pipe, he turned his attention to the other painting in his possession.

Safe in synthetic allclear diamondwrap, gilt-framed, fifty-five

centimeters tall and forty-five centimeters wide, it was on first glance an unpretentious picture. Even rather plain. It represented a single moment. A small woman, young, in a fine yellow dress, looking into a mirror.

Middle-class, young, but not without experience, she stood in profile before a wood-worked window. A broad cloth-covered table took up most of the foreground. In two immaculately rendered hands she was holding a string of pearls out from her breast, gazing into a hard-to distinguish mirror hung beside the open window.

Bathed in the radiation of the window's white blaze, robed in yellow, she stood like a half-queen between worlds. Her eyes hung heavy with inner, unpretentious life. She was *Woman with the Pearl Necklace*, the first authenticized work of Johannes Vermeer to be auctioned in two centuries.

Nick exited the linershuttle module

holding the masterpiece under his arm. It was weightless and its casing virtually indestructible.



3

### "A LONG STORY"

Kulturators like Nora's Aunt Pamela Lamprey traded and dealt the many high-priced artifacts that had been popping up in free markets ever since the Sack of Europe. She claimed not to know which Concern had arranged to have her purchase the Vermeer when it came up for auction in the Danish domes.

But Pamela was born in a Luna City Lab after all, and she was making the Concerns pay down the line. She'd made sure to reserve the largest of feudal class suites on the G.A. liner. She'd brought along a veritable salon to accompany her as she escorted the Vermeer Earthside. Pamela's one hundred plus years might be showing but, as Nora liked to say, her verve was intact. She had entrusted the painting's safety entirely to Nick Wesley.

As the liner railed between the

linershuttle and the G.A. station on the *Polly-Ann*, Nick kept the Vermeer in the seat to his right. On his left sat Symbian Strode, kulturnaut in Pamela's retinue, engaged on splogging her profile for the nets. Strode had never been to space before.

"I think it's absolutely marvelous," the eunuch whispered. "Absolutely Pamela. No mercenaries. No space-cops, no armed guard. Just her very well-dressed nephew."

"Nephew-in-law." Nick looked glum, clenching his pipe between his teeth.

"Who once upon a time was the confidential assistant of Count Skaw himself."

"That's enough of that."

"Oh no it's not. It's a story I've splogged. A tale of when the Concerns were willing to sink so much wealth and resources into operations over which they had no control that the first generation of Spacers were able to create new worlds

as they saw fit. One of those rarest of moments when free-thinking and invention were fully supported by power on their own terms. A Renaissance." Strode pronounced that word the French way.

"Did you augment your oratory?" Nick wondered.

"Oh, but it was a fragile and short-lived flowering. As they grew richer, the Spacers accepted the Global Authority to keep a semblance of law and security enough to maintain their newfound personal wealth. But sure enough, the Concerns bought into the G.A. and clamped down on the Elevator. By the turn of the century even Luna City was no longer free enough for Reg Skaw.

"That's where Nicholas knew him, Luna City. Nick was sleuthing freelance. Skaw would use his services now and then, and he eventually asked Nick to become his confidential assistant. Nick said yes. Hell yes.

"He had his own room in his four-story brownstone in Parsons Crater, he ate food cooked to his personal taste by the best chef in AU's, and enjoyed a large expense account. Many interesting investigations came his way. He might never have escaped."

"Fate, however, was on my side," Nick said.

"Indeed. A certain society kulturator introduced him to her niece in the Danish Domes."

"The rest is history."

Symbian Strode laughed delightedly.

"The space-eyed Nora Wesley. Who wrapped him up and brought him back Earthside. But aren't you excited? Now you'll get to see your Count Skaw again. I think it was very generous of the Count to ferry our liner to Earth Station."

"Right."

"I like Count Skaw, though I've never met him. I like what he stands for."

"He stands for nothing," Nick said.

"Writ large. And if he thinks he can get the Vermeer from me, he's dead wrong."

Strode lowered voice and switched off watchlet. "Off the record. Pamela Lamprey is an extraordinary woman. But believe me when I tell you that she doesn't care about the Vermeer. She doesn't even know where it will end up Earthside. *Woman with the Pearl Necklace* deserves the gaze of real esthete. I hope Skaw beats you, Nicholas. I really do. I hope he strikes down your Oedipal challenge to his throne of sin."

Nick patted the little eunuch on the bald head.

"I have a quantum lock, Strode. Nobody beats a quantum lock."



**CUSTOMS & GREETINGS**

The squat cylindrical G.A. liner turned on symbiotic tether to the belly of the *Polly-Ann*. It gave the gangway on the inner band of its outer edge 1/3 gravity. Among spacers in blue overalls, bands of merchants, student groups, pilgrims and tourists of all race and kind, Pamela Lamprey looked like an icon of the new interplanetary elite. Wrapped in bio-furs and the mystery of her "age unknown," Pamela was attended by Symbian Strode, two ingenues, and Nick Wesley. The Vermeer was fixed safe under Nick's arm.

Though Nick had lit a pipe in anticipation of a wait, there would be no need of examinations. Pamela made quick work of the G.A. party at the Feudal Class Customs & Greetings. Young and handsome, fresh-faced Lieutenant Taylor had a brisk, dog-like manner about him. He offered to

show them to the cabins at once.

Pamela sighed dramatically. "I was under the impression, young man, that we'd be staying on the estate of Count Skaw on this journey. Your people's liners are so... well-used."

The Lieutenant reddened. "The Global Authority's liners are interchanged between interstationary haulers, ma'am, and must be, by law. Otherwise they're not--"

"Never mind all that, Lieutenant. My nephew-in-law is convinced that Count Skaw will try to steal our Vermeer. I believe in innocent before proven guilty. Do you work for the Count?"

"No ma'am. In return for taking our liner to Earth Station, Count Skaw gets raw energy relayed by laser from G.A. reflectors near Sun. That's the extent of it."

"The Count's estate is inside the original hull of the *Polly-Ann*," inter-

jected Strode. "He lives in a wind-juiced manor, built of homegrown timber and nu-rock, turning in the middle of the largest non-orbital arbo-ecology in the System. It's quite something."

"So I've heard. I can't wait to see it."

Taylor shook his head. "Unfortunately it's not permitted for G.A. passengers to cross into the main hull of the hosting hauler, unless on special orders. Spacers work hard for their privacy, Ma'am."

He led them along an inner ring, and up to the entranceway to the Feudal Suites.

Pamela took his hand. "My Control says you're to attend to my every whim."

The Lieutenant frowned. He looked warily at Pamela's battering eyelashes, and his nostrils flared.

"It's my express duty to insure the proper transfer of the painting, ma-am. As to fraternization with--"

"Please don't concern yourself with the painting. My niece insists that we leave it all up to Nicholas Wesley's discretion. I place all responsibility on his shoulders. In the mean-time I look forward to getting to know *you*, darling...."

As the Lieutenant looked resentfully his way, Nick tapped out his pipe.

## 5

### BLUE-BURST

Nick's feudal cabin provided a large bedsphere, kitchenette, personalized toilet, direct holonet to Earth, a windowmirror showing that planet, a self-cleaning carpet and a tended soft-drink bar. The room was rectangular. To enter, Nick followed a track down from a hatch in

its ceiling. There was enough gravity to keep things normally fixed below.

Nick set the Vermeer down on the kitchen counter, leaned it up against the shelves. He then set up his easel to display his portrait of Nora.

By the time he lit another pipe he'd managed to shower, dry, and change into a fresh tuxedo. He then sat down to pong Earthside.

Like magic, Nora was standing in an infoball hovering over the carpet. About the size of a fairy, she was in her sweats and touching her toes with her fingers.

Nick tapped his watchlet. Axes appeared in the stage and Nora expanded to life-size.

"My oh my," Nick said. "You look real."

She began to jog in place.

"Thanks. But it's morning, I'm late for the lab and because of constant harassment I didn't sleep so well."

"No sane man should have to suffer holograms with curves like that. All sorts of weird ways to pass the time come to mind."

Nora grimaced. "With both Reg Skaw and the G.A. monitoring? No thanks."

"Ever heard of a blue-burst?"

"I'm late, honey. Why did you call again?"

Nick turned the Iye to the portrait of his wife. Suffused with a golden sheen reminiscent of Warhol, the picture showed Nora's head atop the spread-eagled torso of Courbet's *Origin of the World*.

"My Lord," she gasped.

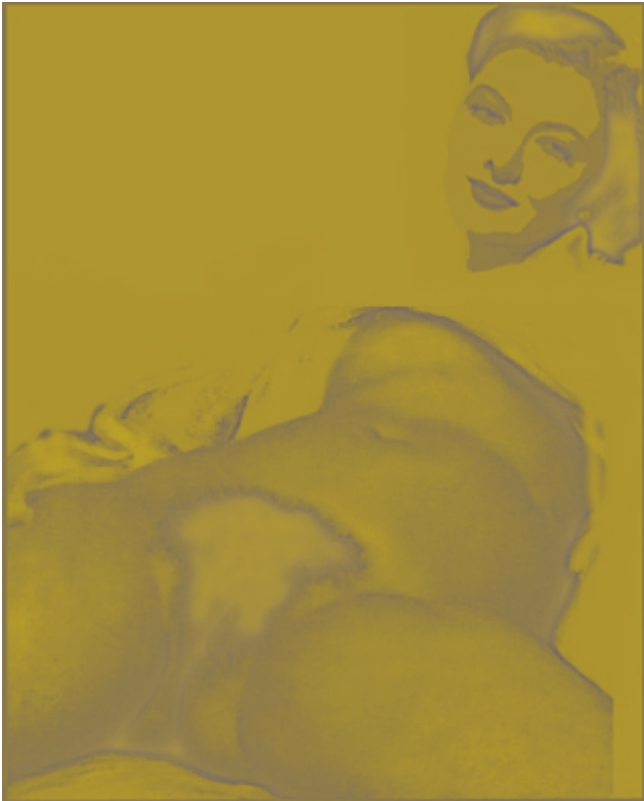
"You like it?"

"Say? How many drinks have you had today?"

Nick sighed, emptying his pipe into a vac. "Not a one."

"Well destroy that thing and head immediately to the bar..." But Nick didn't destroy it. After seeing to it that

Taylor's men would take the Vermeer off his hands while he went to the Feudal Lounge, he in fact left the portrait of Nora prominently on display.



6

### SKAW'S FIRST MOVEMENT

Symbian Strode had to hurry to keep up with Nick Wesley's long strides through the G.A. Liner tracktube. The eunuch tripped along awkwardly in his orange shipshoes, unused to low gravity, voicing concern, his black scarf trailing meters behind.

"Have you seen the nets? Violent turbulence in Equator City. They're saying the elevator might be shut down for who knows how long."

Nick said nothing.

"There's no defending against the hearts and minds of Earthsiders experiencing the end times of their various traditions in black-and-white, Nicholas. You forget how lucky you are to be in Space, where religion is outlawed."

"I live Earthside now, Strode."

In the Feudal Lounge infoballs were

rolling footage from Equator City. The Concerns defended the feed to Space with ranks of enhanced riot-police and the latest high-tech mob-tanks. Enormous crowds swarmed around base-station in protest, larger and evidently more rowdy than usual. But they were easily managed by the latest technologies and the C. Clarke looked to be in fine shape, shimmering with sun as it brushed an enervator ordinarily down Earthside. Nick turned his attention to the bar.

For reasons unknown, beer doesn't brew in space. Nick ordered highballs (zero-G High Kansan whiskey) for himself and Strode.

The lounge's booths tipped drunkenly this way and that. Tracks let up into the enshadowed aluminum sphere, twinkling with reflected light. Strode pointed out Pamela at 10 degrees, 11 O'Clock. She'd changed outfits and was entertaining the young G.A. officer, surrounding him with

ingenues at a high table.

Strode narrowed his eyes. "Shouldn't Lieutenant Taylor be guarding the Vermeer?"

"His men have it," Nick said. "No worries."

"Lieutenant Taylor has never come up against anything like Pamela Lamprey. Nicholas, I simply must observe. It's too wonderful."

"Go ahead. Scram."

Strode sachéed away.

Nick attached himself to the bar. He turned his attention to his drink. The geodesic glass minisphere surrounded a smaller sphere of very thin ice, which in turn surrounded a double-shot of High Kansan whiskey.

Nick rolled the glass on the bar. As it turned the little panels rearranged so that its mouth stayed to the relative top.

Beside him a non-descript Spacer in blue sailor's togs was also studying a

highball. As Nick looked his way, the stranger did the same.

A mirrored tooth winked out from the high corner of the spacer's V-shaped grin.

They both leaned back.

"Well how about that," Nick said, puffing at his pipe. "Kentrige Ord."

"Nicky Weinstein, I'll be damned."

A heraldic device (a tilted pentagram inside a pentagon) bearing the words *Polly-Ann* was patched on the breast of Kentridge Ord's jumpsuit.

Nick shook his head. "You working for Skaw full-time now?"

"Sure a little job. It paid well. Plus I get to hitch a ride to High Wichita."

Nick frowned. "High Wichita? This ride's to Earth Station."

Ord laughed. "Ah, it's all the same, init? It's all Space. But damn, Wesley. You've got a lot of nerve showing your face around here. The Count hates you something fierce."

"He's put you on snatching the Vermeer?"

"Me? No, I'm a mirror man, you know that. The Count's put Walker on the Vermeer."

Nick coughed on his drink. "Amos Walker?"

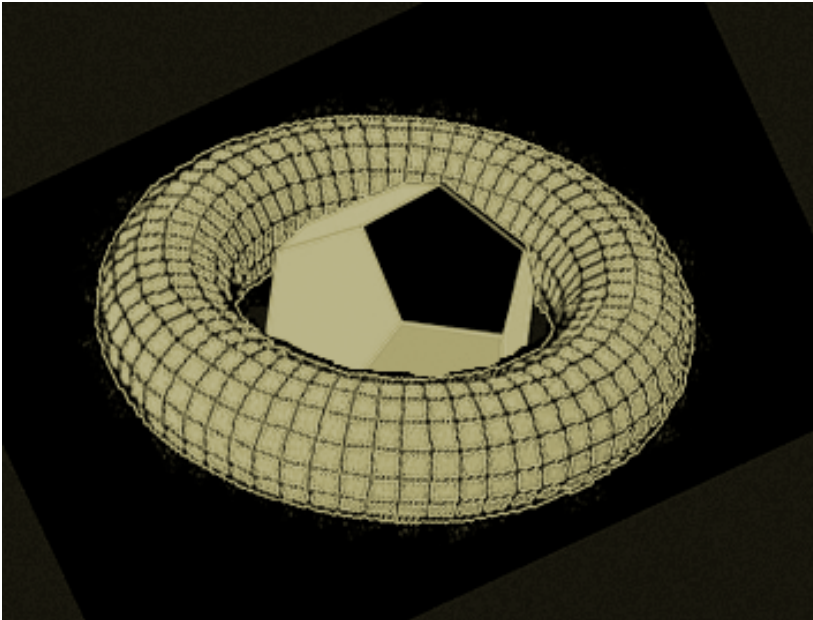
"Amos Walker. As you know, Walker's a very determined man. Even something of a pathological genius in his own right. An unstoppable force of nature. Give up now. It's no loss to you." The Spacer turned to his drink, shook his head.

"I have a quantum lock," Nick told him.

Kentrige Ord's eyes widened.

Just then, with a curious moan, all the lights went out.

Nick's pipe was burning a little circle of fire in the black of inter-system space. But as someone screamed, its light too was extinguished.

**QUANTUM LOCKED**

Roughly four thousand twenty-two kilometers later, Nick was talking again to Nora. He'd lit another pipe. Nick was seated on a comfortable settée, on the inside edge of the curved crust of a pie-shaped room. The room was far taller than wide, and constructed entirely out of wood, nu-rock and mirrorglass. The windowmirrors looked out onto a stabilized view of an odd zero-G parkland.

"I'm not in the manor proper. The manor is the dodecahedron spinning at the estate's center. It turns inside of a torus structure, which Skaw calls the ring. The ring is in turn cut into sections, each revolving independently around the toroidal axis. That's where I am. A slice of one of these sections is my new room."

From a hatch in the "ceiling," at

which point gravity all but vanished, a track ran down, spidering out to a number of comfortable hammocks. Plants and ivies were growing all around.

Down on the floor, Nick enjoyed a settee, a desk, a wet-bar and a small library. The furniture was tasteful, hand-made and comfortable. The portrait of Nora looked like it belonged right there, hung prominently over the fireplace.

But a live Nora was on infoball, floating over the hard-wood floor. She was wearing a rubber strap-suit and strange goggles, standing half emerged from the pool of a marine laboratory.

She looked around as if through a fog.

"But how did you get to the Estate? I thought you were in the G.A. Liner?"

"A solar relay buoy went down off High Wichita. There was a central black-out. The feudal class cabins were shut down under the new energy restrictions. Count Skaw naturally extended his personal

invitation to Pamela's party."

"I'm surprised Pamela accepted. Everyone knows he wants that Vermeer."

"It was either this or steerage."

"Ah. One can't see Pamela in steerage."

"Precisely."

"Nick, if you can't see, I'm working. If there's nothing else--"

"I wanted to tell you before you heard it from Pamela that we've been re-routed to pick up the buoy off High Wichita for repair."

Nora tore off her goggles, wide-eyed.

"Re-routed to High Wichita? Nick, I've been hearing the news. Things are deteriorating in Equator City everyday. You promised you'd be home Sunday."

"Look, that's why I ponged. Don't fret. This just gets us into Earth Station a day late. I'll still be in time for the elevator ride on Saturday. I'll be there. I promise."



"Well, All right then. I can trust you perfectly I suppose and Halloween Night being what it is and all, I intend to hold you to your word. Are you drinking enough?"

A large graduate student emerged from the pool below her, half-naked and masculine.

"Nick, I've got to go."

The infoball disappeared.

Nick rose and retrieved the Vermeer from under the *settée*. He poned directory and managed to get a line to Kentridge Ord.

"Ord?"

"That's right."

"I'm assuming your work for Skaw is done."

"Job's over. I'm just waiting for the ride to end."

"Skaw won't allow the tenders to give me whiskey."

"Ah."

"I'll be in the salon," Nick said. "And so will the *Woman*, if you want to take a look at her."

There came a knock and ponging off without an answer, Nick eyeballed the hatch. It slid open as under its own volition. A scowling Lieutenant Taylor and one of his armed men entered and tracked down into the room without invitation.

"The painting is here?" Or is it in the G.A. Liner's baggage bay?"

Nick gestured to the masterpiece perched beside him on the *settée*. "It's both."

"I think you're taking your responsibility to Mrs. Lamprey rather lightly, Wesley. Treating an original Vermeer like-

"It's not an original. It's a quantum lock, Taylor. One of a pair. That means you can't know if it's the original or not. A quantum lock is a perfect 3 dimensional print of a material object.

Once it's made there's two. Neither one is original, by definition, until unlocked. You get me?"

Taylor's face showed the beginnings of a reddening. Nick continued.

"The other one is in the regular baggage down on the liner. I have it on RFID. It hasn't been released by customs yet. When it comes out, I'll want your people to pick it up and transfer it here. In the meantime you're going to help me hang this one in the salon."

"But--"

The Lieutenant had just caught sight of Nick's portrait of Nora. He looked immediately away.

"Very well," he said darkly. "Let's proceed."

8

**"SPACE LAW SAYS..."**

The Salon's nu-rock floor filled an entire pentagon of the manor's revolving dodecahedron. Apart from the oddly sloping geometric walls and the white polar track spiraling unsupported straight through the ceiling hall, it looked something like a 2130's Bollywood set -- organic, thick with new plants, wind-powered and spacious.

The ship's great Bunsen Cells gave off O<sub>2</sub> as they moved electrons, leaving *The Polly-Ann* oxygen rich. An open fire burned all around the mantel, spicing the air with the pleasant scent of toasted carbon. There weren't any other artworks on display and the Vermeer looked appropriate against the room's cellular-themed woodwork. Taylor and his man were anchoring it just there.

Over by the wetbar, Nick was

supervising, the smoke from his pipe falling down around his knees.

"Make sure it's fixed nice and tight," he called out. Beside him, Kentridge Ord was still wearing his blue overalls. He had shaved and his mood appeared to have lightened.

"The Count won't like that," Ord observed, with some humor. "Disturbing his precious balance. Course, if he's not monitoring us, he won't know where it is till dinner, that's for sure. He keeps the same hours as always."

"8 sharp, Breakfast. 9 sharp, Gardens. 13:30, Luncheon. 15:00, Laboratory/Current Projects. 17:00, Gardens. 20:00: Dinner."

"Don't forget 21:30: Observatory."

"About those drinks."

Ord moved to fix two highballs. "Not a bad approach with Walker, either. Hiding it in plain sight."

"Well? What do you think of the painting?"

"It's interesting," Ord said, handing Nick a drink. "But--"

"To High Wichita at Midnight." Nick raised his glass.

Each man tossed the other his ball-glass, made the sign of space and drank.

Ord moved to fill them up again. As he did Lieutenant Taylor approached warily, clearing his throat.

"Kentridge Ord McAllister..."

Ord turned.

"Kentridge Ord or "K. O." McAllister, under the auspices of the agreed-upon laws of Space, temporarily upheld by the Global Authority of Interested Concerns but under the final determination of the people of Space, I am hereby placing you under temporary arrest."

Ord's eyes sparkled. He stepped away from the young officer. "What's this?" Silver flashed in his grin.

Nick put his pipe between them. "Ord is my guest, Taylor. I'm a free operative

in Space and I represent myself by challenging your right to authority. Who supplied your evidence against Ord?"

The young Lieutenant automatically looked to his man for support, but his man appeared to be an old-time Spacer, an Irishman, in fact, more interested in the wetbar than the in's and out's of G.A. law. He only shrugged, aware of Nick's prerogative.

"Count Skaw presented evidence that Mr. Ord was involved in the disruption of the relay satellite off High Wichita," Taylor explained. "Incontrovertible evidence."

"No information received from any source inside this peculiar house is incontrovertible. Do you understand that Lieutenant?"

"I viewed the evidence on the Liner."

"Do you have a ruling?" Nick took his refilled drink from Ord.

"No, but in the circumstances, with

the painting right here, Count Skaw and myself--"

"Pfui. Space Law says you are in contempt of my rights and must make negotiations as to the proper status of my guest until such time as a ruling is produced or twenty-four standard hours have transpired. Now, an Austrian scientist in the 20th century once posited what would happen to a feline when placed in a sealed box with a radioactive isotope that had a fifty-fifty chance of killing it."

The Lieutenant frowned, confused. "Schrödinger's Cat, sir. I'm aware of it. So what? A vial of hydrocyanic acid--"

"Never mind the details, Lieutenant. You recall that the point of the thought experiment was to demonstrate that the cat must be said to occur in a superposition of all states, until such a time as one cat-fate was finally accepted into an observation network of a particular

brane."

"The cat was both alive and dead," Ord said. "At the same time."

"Exactly." Nick knocked his pipe on his elbow and it bounced up daintily into the air, a low grav trick. Ord caught it in his free hand.

Nick took it back, and pointed it at Taylor's chest. "You've apprehended your man, Lieutenant. Let's leave it at that. One man's quarters are another man's prison cell, depending on observation, and we'll let Kent Ord stay for the time in my room. I'll vouch for his containment till High Wichita."

Abruptly, Nick turned. Ord had fixed two new drinks. Though both men were showing signs of immanent inebriation, they did another cheers and drank deep, before Nick led the way back to his quarters.

"Sorry about that," he said, when they'd settled in. "I suppose Skaw wanted

you off the gameboard."

"You got a wetbar in here?"

"That's right."

"I've got a book," Ord said. "*War and Peace*. I won't mind staying in till dinner. But no pipsqueak Lieutenant's gonna have me missing one of Anatole's racks of lamb."

"We'll work something out, I promise. And let's keep an eye on the news. If Skaw's going to bring the elevator down, I'll need to know it right away."

Ord coughed out some whiskey as he took this in.

"You're getting paranoid, Wesley. You think he can bring down the elevator?"

"It's all or nothing for him. And without probability-skewing macro-events, it's very unlikely he'll be able to pinch the Vermeer."

"You're both fucking crazy."

Nick's watchlet made a sound. "Ah," he said and ponged Taylor.

"Yes yes, Lieutenant, your man's well confined. But I'm hearing from the other quantum Vermeer now. It's come through Customs. Have an armed party pick it up and deliver it to my quarters. ASAP...."

9

#### THE GAME, A FOOT

"You know what?" Ord leaned over the hammock as Nick sat back on the *settée*, smoking thoughtfully, eyes closed.

"What?"

"My watch just flashed. The elevator is in fact down. Indefinitely. Temporary suspension of all elevator engagements."

"*Indefinitely.*" Nick said, sitting up. "Why that fat son of--"

"Hey, in the end, that Vermeer's going to the Concerns. Do you really care--"

"It's not the painting I'm worried about. I have a quantum lock on it. It's Nora. I promised I'd be getting back to Maine on Sunday. "

"Well, what's one or two--"

Ord stopped, just noticing the portrait of Nora spread-eagled.

"You painted that yourself?"

"That's right."

"I'm starting to see the size of your problem."

"Walker's neighbor in High Wichita, what's his name?"

"Buck?"

"Buck. Does he still drop capsules?"

"He does indeed. He can splash you down in Penobscot Bay. Direct from High Wichita. You'd be in an original 1950s model, coming down with a chute. A bumpy ride, but do-able. The price is the problem. But I'm sure Nora would pay up if you threatened her with that picture."

"Nora's not to be bothered with this."

"Well she could pay for the helicopter--"

"It won't be necessary."

"No." Ord picked up his book, understanding Nick wasn't in a playful mood. "Of course not."

Nick smoked away the following hour. At about six thirty Lieutenant Taylor's men delivered the other quantum Vermeer. Nick put it under the *settee*.

Then Pamela ponged.

"Darling, are you there? You look dreadful. Oh fear not, you'll see your Nora again. My Control assures me that this elevator nonsense is hot air. There was a perimeter break-through, but protestors were non-violent and the freight is already running again. It may be a day or so late, but we'll get home."

"Not in time for Halloween," Nick said darkly.

"Aren't we a bit old for trick or treat anyhow, darling? But Nicholas.

That's not why I'm calling. I'm calling because we were all gathering in the salon for cocktails --"

"The painting's still there?"

"Yes it is, I mean I think it is. It was, but I can't be sure it's there still because I'm not there anymore myself." Pamela laughed giddily. "That's why I called you, dear. We're in the smoking room. The butler --"

"The butler?"

"Yes, the butler. That strange man, he insisted the Count wanted all of us, every last one, in here. Then, when we did as he said, well he locked us in. Nick--"

"I see. The game's a'foot."

"The game? A foot?"

Nick ponged off. He swallowed his drink.

Kentridge Ord's V-shaped grin was visible from behind his book, but he made no audible commentary.

**PINCHED**

Whether or not the game had anything to do with it, Nick seemed to be getting his space feet back. Returning to the Salon, he walked upside-down on the tube's ceiling. Flipping sprightly over and landing silently on the nu-rock, Nick found the fancy room empty except for one man, not so fancy.

The large-backed "butler" was attempting to remove the Vermeer from its fixing place over the mantel. Stuffed into black finery several sizes too small for his burly, broad-shouldered frame, he had rolled up his sleeves for the work. The rough red of Van Allen burns on his forearms showed him a long-time Spacer.

Gravity was off. The butler had planted both his steel-toed ship-boots on either side of the Vermeer, and was grasping the diamond-wrapped masterwork

with two rock-like hands. He attempted to wrench it off the mantel.

When the Vermeer came free -- suddenly, entirely free -- the butler, still grasping it in his mitts, found himself launched backwards into the air of the salon.

Nick caught a hold of his ankle as he passed over. He held him there aloft.

After a pause, the butler growled, red-eyed, unshaven. "I can kick your head in with my other boot, Wesley."

"Amos Walker wouldn't kick a mate when he's down."

Amos Walker scoffed. "My mates don't work for the Concerns."

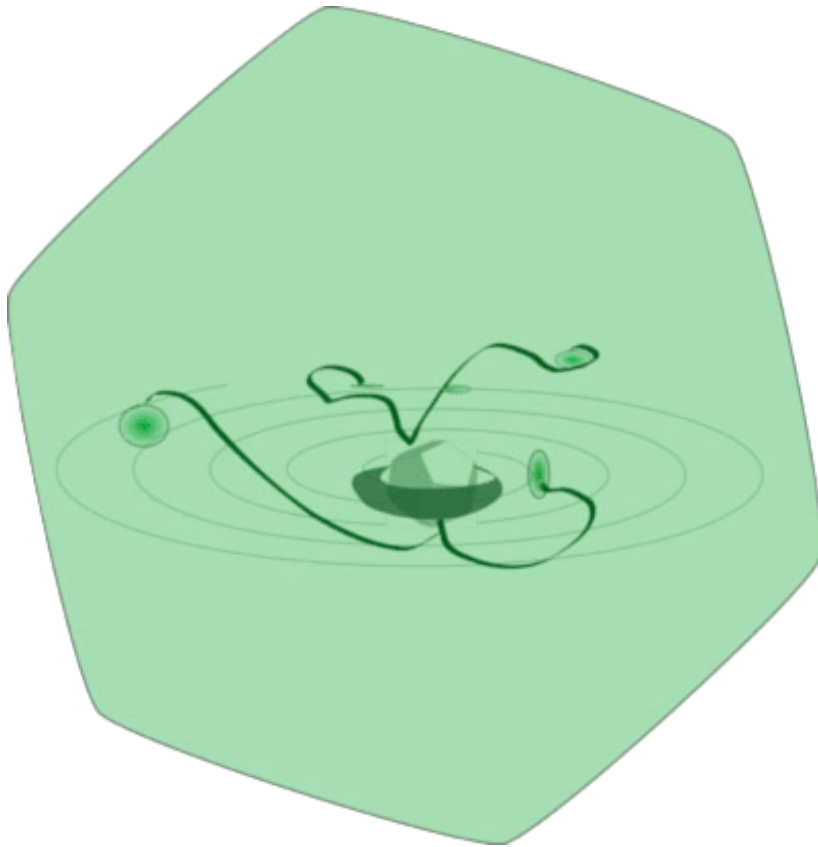
Nick brought him down to the track. Walker hopped immediately back from him. His huge widened eyes glittered. A haunting grin took hold of his square grey jaw. He held the pinched painting behind him.

He turned and swiftly fast-tracked up



the curling polar line.

After, extinguishing his pipe, Nick followed.



**PULVERIZED**

Pipe clenched in teeth, Nick surveyed the scene.

They stood on a circular garden-pad high above the manor. Fifty meters in diameter, the disk was floored by a thick root system and ringed by pines, arching their green-needled crust to the reverse side. Behind the ring of pine, penetrating the emptiness of the great expanse of the *Polly-Ann's* vacated holds, grew a vast network of bamboo. It made a rhizomatic and modular scaffold all among the weighty distances. Other tree-pads tipped this way and that, out in a fully weathered atmosphere.

Far below, or above, depending on POV, Skaw's Manor spun silently, a wind-powered gyroscope. Its various inter-related spinning structures pulsed heart-like in the center of the 3-D, omniradiated,

zero-gravity parkland.

Also visible: Ponds, tenant farms, vast banks of redwoods growing up, down, sideways, distant windmills, balls of water, mists, even a ministorm here and there soaking a band of roses.

Plump chickens flew by mid-air. A cow mooed in the distance.

Walker, whose boots clamped easily onto the roots of the floor, had crossed the garden-pad and brought the painting to a workman's shed on its other side.

Nick had to move around the edge of the pad, holding himself down with branches of pine. He stopped at speaking distance from Walker.

"It smells lovely out here," he said.

"The Count recycles *everything*," Walker answered.

"Did you know you'd be working against me when he hired you to snatch the Vermeer?"

"Not specifically," Walker answered.

"I believe he referred to you as 'whatever streetwalking whore the Concerns can purchase cheapest.'"

Outside the shed, a center-of-gravity pinned a neat stack of firewood beside a stump. A two-handed axe leaned there beside it.

"Why are you so attached to this painting, Wesley? Because it's art?"

Nick didn't answer. Walker placed the Vermeer on the stump.

"I must say," he said. "I was surprised it was you. Ordinarily, I would have backed off."

He took the axe up in his large, square hands. "But the Count put enough money on the toppler to make it worth my while. I've already made certain business arrangements, Nick. Can't go back now. I'm going to open a new bar in Wichita. Renovate the hotel--"

"That's a quantum lock there, not the original."

Walker lifted the great axe high over his shoulders. Its synthetic diamond head winked tiny rainbows in the weird light.

"Quantum lock?"

In sudden berserking fury, Walker attacked the quantum Vermeer. It took several thousand kilometers, but the possible masterpiece was, eventually, entirely and unrecoverably pulverized by the diamond-headed axe.

12

### THE FAT MAN

Hiking the little track back down through the lawns and up to the manor, Nick was asking a favor of Ord over watchlet. He poned off when he came upon Symbian Strode. The eunuch was excited -- huffing and puffing, scarf nowhere to be seen, triangular collar askew.

"Nicholas! Where have you been? Pamela's in a fizz--"

"Pull yourself together." Nick brushed some ruffle off Strode's shoulder.

"My Lord," Strode said, looking around. "It's marvelous!"

"And it all runs on hot air."

"Nicholas, you never came to let us out! We've all been locked in the smoking room for the last hour. As I'm the smallest, the others tossed me up. I crawled out a high window--"

"Who's in there?"

"Pamela, her girls. Taylor, his boys. And Skaw's confidential assistant, Eddie Ryan. But Nick what's going on? You look pale. Is the Vermeer-- "

"It's complicated. Let's go inside."

"Hey," Strode took his hand. "Just wait one minute."

Nick stopped, surprised. He took his hand back. "What is it?"

"That's right," Strode said. "I'll

give an order one time. Do you know the story of Han van Meegeren?"

Nick looked darkly at Symbian Strode. He started tracking back to the Salon.

"I've heard the name. Why?"

Strode followed. "He was the greatest forger the world has ever known."

"The world doesn't know the greatest forgers, Strode. Only the failures."

"*Touché* Nick. But seriously, his specialty was Vermeer. He worked between the World Wars of the 20th century. Van Meegeren's forgeries looked more like Edvard Munchs than Vermeers, but Vermeer himself had only recently been picked out of the dustbin of history. The art world of the time wholeheartedly believed a previously unknown body of allegorical work could be attributed to the inveterate realist. People paid millions for fifteenth-century masterpieces composed (on period materials) in the 1920s."

"Get to the point, Strode."

"Van Meegeren started out as an artist's artist, a true believer. A crusader, like you. He only painted his first forgery to prove the art-world was phoney. He planned to reveal it as a fake after it first sold at auction."

"Let me guess. He never did."

"Of course not. He had found his voice. Once he dropped his antique moralism, he made a wonderful career."

"I know the story," Nick said. "They caught him and he died in jail."

They had come into the Salon, and Nick seemed cheered to see a version of the Vermeer hanging over the mantel, as if it had never been forcibly removed by a butler at all.

"Actually," Strode continued. "After making millions, van Meegeren was discovered, yes. But he was put in a clinic, not a jail. He became a *pop star*. He died the second most popular man in Holland. The first was the King, Nick!

I'm only trying to tell you the wee secret that you're being a total fool. That painting there is nothing more than a dimwit's dream. Who knows who Vermeer is or was or will be anyway, the way things are headed? Down these mean streets a white knight need not go, Nicholas Wesley. If Skaw gets the original and Pamela the replica, nobody will ever know--"

But before Strode could finish, from the leafy shadows of the salon's far corner, an enormously delicate voice floated out on the air to interrupt.

"I believe you have misrepresented to Mr. Wesley, and to yourself, Ser Strode, the curious history of Henricus Antonius van Meegeren."

The speaker, a man so enormously obese and devilishly featured as to defy our high-tech descriptive powers, rose up with an impossible lightness -- on top of a small unicycle. He flew for a moment through the air, track-landed with high

delicacy, and dismounted lightly before them.

The fat man wore only a bath-robe and an old pair of ship-flops. He had the air of one disturbed by the most vulgar of annoyances and puffed angrily on a pipe much like Nick's. Two piercing eyes stared out between enormous brows, giving high drama to the distress visible on the pale-skinned, heavy-lipped expanse below.

"Why Strode," Nick said. "It's Count Skaw himself. And thirty whole minutes before dinner."

13

**"LEAVE US SPACERS BE!"**

Count Skaw stood silent for some time smoking at Nick, picking at the Van Allen peelings on his forearms.

"I interrupt you, Ser Strode," he finally said, "to inform you that the

forgery Van Meegeren was a life-long fascist. A hater of Jews like Mr. Wesley, né Weinstein, and of people with black skin like myself."

Strode frowned, perplexed. A whiter phiz than Skaw's very pale and flabby face would be hard to find.

But Skaw continued. "God knows what he would have made of you, Ser, sexless and sterile. Van Meegeren's fortunes took their final turn when he arranged for a spectacularly high-priced sale to the pseudo-medievalist Mr. Hermann Göring, at that time *Reichsmarshal* of National Socialist Germany. Göring paid him in cash, counterfeit cash, it turned out. The swindler was in fact swindled. For once value comes unfixed, Ser Strode, it becomes an extremely difficult matter to return it to a standstill. The money always gets away, and it always corrupts the swindler in its passage."

The Count here glared directly at

Nick. "Van Meegeren found that his vitriol would never be slated. He grew increasingly debauched, more violent, more inwardly obsessed. His personal tastes bordered on the extreme and the outré. His work suffered.

"Yet he was only finally discovered because of a post-war Dutch investigation into the Third Reich's cultural plunderings. Van Meegeren admitted to forgery only to get himself off the hook for the crime of selling national treasures to the Nazis. The scandal of his career was immense, and in the desperate desire for historical revisionism that followed the war, Holland was fascinated by the spectacle of this great deception.

"Van Meegeren was prosecuted and duly sentenced. But by this time he was a man hovering between life and death, a skeletal heroin addict with pock-marked veins and yellowed skin. So they sent him to a clinic, where he died quite

painfully, entirely unable to enjoy the fruits of what you term his success. But I run on. I am glad you are here, Ser. It will make the necessary hours with Mr. Wesley less taxing."

Strode was fascinated. "My Dear Lord, I am absolutely delighted to make your acquaintance."

Skaw's face lifted to express sudden comedy. "Delightful creature. Many earths ago, I made the mistake of engaging Mr. Wesley as my confidential assistant." Skaw's lips turned down, suddenly taking on all the seriousness of history.

"I've heard all about it," the eunuch replied. "He left you for a woman."

At this Count's expression collapsed, finally, into tragedy. "There has only ever been one woman in the world for me, Ser Strode. The rest of the gender is of no use aboard my vessel, igniting strife, disorder and making a mess of the scientific method. If at all possible, I

prefer to keep the fairer sex at an unfair distance. Yet if one in my position could be left for a woman, it would be no dishonor to be left for Nora Wesley, a scientist of admirable faculties, if questionable first premises." He glared. "No, it was not Dr. Wesley who is at the root of what is between Mr. Wesley and I. It was his own failure and my own ... disappointment, Ser."

In the silence that followed these words, a thumping was audible from the closed door to the smoking room.

Count Skaw continued. "Ashy disappointment. But nary surprise. The half-man one had plucked from disaster and offered such an education as should raise most beast-like humanoid out of animality could not rise to the opportunity offered by charity and generosity itself. The world had taught Nick Weinstein too well the wiles and ways of betrayal. He proved unfit for work, prone to drunkenness, lust

-- the affair with Dr. Wesley was simply evidence of a deeper rot. And now to find him aboard one's own ship, Ser, taking full advantage of one's well-known generosity, engaged on a Quixotic errand to prove one a common thief and cover his own thieving ambitions, I say, in the process. Please inform him, MY GOD, SER--"

Skaw sprang forward and bellowed in the eunuch's face: "*LEAVE US SPACERS BE!*"

14

#### A FIFTY-FIFTY SHOT

Throughout the harangue, Symbian Strode had remained composed. The eunuch wiped his face and turned now to the bar. Nick had wandered over to eyeball the *Woman with the Pearl Necklace* and as Strode moved away, Count Skaw's eyes slid for a moment to take the Vermeer in their view.

The Count's great face crumpled. He squinted, as if in sudden, mechanized pain. He shielded his eyes with soft, shaking hands.

"Eddie?" He cried weakly. "Where is Eddie Ryan?"

Nick approached the bar. "One for me too, Strode. And you can tell your interlocutor he'll find his confidential assistant locked in the drawing-room with his Lardship's other guests."

Count Skaw lowered his hands, but his eyes remained closed. "Ser Strode!" he shrieked. "Be so kind as to inform Mr. Wesley that I have purposely chosen to pay no attention to his antics. His expensive net calls, his imbibing of one's stocks, his private minutes catching up with old friends -- they are all, unfortunately, "on the house." Naturally, I realized that Mr. Wesley would assume I would monitor all his activities. I predicted he would go to all sorts of lengths attempting to



hide from me his real designs. Therefore I chose not to give him the opportunity -- and observed nothing. His gallivanting has been in vain. I play in the field of the relativistic real, Ser Strode, not the wishy-washy world of the quantum might-have-been."

Skaw relaxed. His face was now soft with the tenderest humor. "Poor Mr. Wesley, he's all tied up by his own snares. I hear he even had a quantum lock."

"Tell him I still do," said Nick, taking a drink from Strode. "Though the Count had Amos Walker, a.k.a. his butler, destroy one of the prints."

Strode was delighted. "He destroyed one? So this one absolutely has to be the original! Oho Nick, it looks like he really got you."

Skaw also hooted with thick joy. He walked into a grouping tall plants, examining, taking the strange fruit in his

fingers, smelling, holding down a huge laughter. Great tears roll down his jolly cheeks.

Nick pointed with his pipe. "Notice, by the way, how he can't stand to look at the painting--"

But he stopped talking. Skaw had vanished, as if into air.

Strode extended his nose. "What's that absolutely marvelous smell?"

15

### ANATOLE RISES

Having opened the smoking room, apologized for their "temporary dislocation," Count Skaw escorted his guests to the diningsphere, his mood greatly improved.

"My dear Ms. Lamprey, pardon my ship. The brute of a butler necessity has forced upon my poor house has locked you in on his own whim. If you had only informed me

earlier."

"Reg--"

"You will also pardon my appearance if you feel it is necessary to do so. This is my home and I am free to make its customs my own. After many years of struggle, I have found only one article of clothing rationally superior to nakedness. The English bath-robe, early twentieth century. It pains me to allow that noxious slice of a provincial planet's most provincial island any influence over my body, but such are the ironies we must suffer to be free."

The table was round and gimble. The party fixed themselves to small newcrot stools in synchronic orbits around it. Though the table toppled constantly between them, their relations relative to it and one another didn't change. The walls were stabilized windowmirrors, so that altogether it was impossible for one to perceive one's constant motion. The

table was large. Beside our friends, other members of the house staff were present, and other guests. There was a scientist, a landscape architect and a Tibetan Monk. Also, an enormous raven, black as milky night, sat perched atop a stool beside the host. Walker the butler placed a wide wooden bowl, a sort of bucket, before the bird.

Nick sat as far away from the Count as possible. They had a clear view of one another along the strange curves of the twisting toppler. Taking the place next to Nick was Eddie Ryan, Skaw's confidential assistant -- a pale and pimply, bespectacled youth.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Wesley," he said.

"Don't believe a word of it."

"Not from the Count. I mean from Kentridge Ord and Amos Walker. You're married to Nora Wesley."

"That's right. I took her name. She

took her chances."

"I'm a huge fan."

But there came a sudden shout,  
interrupting.

"Eddie Ryan!"

The conversation around the laden  
toppler dropped down to silence. Skaw was  
glaring at his assistant from afar.

"You well know it is the custom of  
this house, Sir," said the Count. "To eat  
in silence. Our guests will find attention  
to the delights of their meal will be  
rewarded if they refrain for vain  
chattering."

A dumb-waiter tube rose up through the  
center of the table and a flock of olives  
announced the multi-coursed perfection of  
Anatole's splendid culinary entertainment.

Judging from the various oohs, grunts  
and ahs, and one or two actual cries of  
delight from Ser Strode, the Count was  
proven correct.

A perfect pink, the lamb meat was not

so rare that it was stringy, yet not so  
cooked it was disagreeably dry. It was  
crusted with freshly grilled rosemary and  
thyme. Crow salad, Ionian Bufflefish, Eld  
and dried string-beans sautéed with a  
dollop of ground pork accompanied. The  
guests ate space-fashion, with pincers and  
soft, semi-leavened buckwheat bread  
gloves.

Count Skaw engaged this edible  
arrangement with high self-consciousness.  
He ripped into Anatole's fleets with  
military regimen. By the end of the meal a  
light haze of debris floated around his  
several chins, and he'd loaded the raven's  
bucket thick with half-picked bones.

The bird picked delightedly at the  
scraps as Skaw ate the last of his bread  
glove and licked his fingers clean.

Sometime later, when silence and soft  
awed breathing had settled down all  
around, Walker placed four cold bottles of  
beer before the Count. The Count's brows

arched darkly and he marked Nick Wesley from afar. "We have solved beer on *The Polly-Ann*. Each bottle is provided with its own orthogonal field. I regret it is a process too expensive to share with outsiders." He popped a frothing bottle and drank deeply, not without an expression of satiation upon swallowing.

"Satisfactory. Lord Henry?" He turned to the raven.

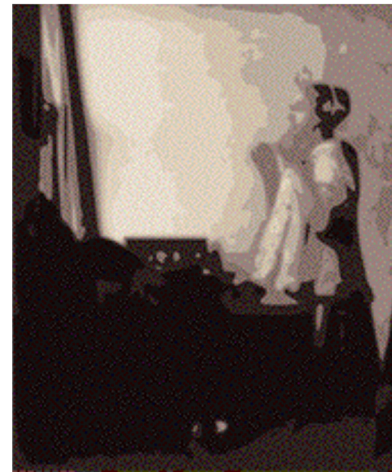
"Crow salad, cruel delight," said the bird.

There was agreement all round, a general celebration of Anatole's success. The scientist, the Gardener and the Tibetan Monk departed. At a nod from Skaw, Eddie Ryan followed them. The rest of our friends remained seated around the greasy toppler, sipping liquids of highly varying temperatures.

"Ladies, gentlemen and Ser Strode," the host began, upon belching. "It is with delight that I reflect upon the

opportunity of digesting this repast with you. Anatole, indeed, has risen to the occasion. I am particularly happy, because what we are now next to discuss, namely, the provenance of Johannes Vermeer's *Woman with the Pearl Necklace*, will be sure to distress you. For the fact is, Mr. Wesley, a man whose presence I had hoped never again to have had to have suffered in this life, has destroyed it."

Silence followed these remarks, as seven and a half pairs of eyes took Nick in their view.



**ENDGAME**

Nick smiled affably, sipping on a soda water.

Count Skaw swiveled to his left.

"Lieutenant Taylor!"

The young officer had been attending to the filling up of Pamela's glass with near-sun wine, and seemed to have lost interest in other proceedings. He sat up now to attention.

"My Lord!"

"Did I not warn you to incarcerate Mr. Kentridge Ord?"

Taylor reddened. "You did." He glanced with cold disdain at Nick.

"And you decided not to. A calamitous decision for yourself, young man. Unfortunate for Ms. Lamprey. Perhaps injurious to the history of art itself, though I do hope some small service will have been done in hope of foiling the

trickery of the pseudo-Vermeer, that 21st century chrononaut of minor talent who managed to so perplex the 20th century mind...."

Skaw's attention faded suddenly away. He had focused again on the eternally burning skin of his forearms. He picked at it with the obsessive animality of an addict.

Pamela looked at Nick. She frowned and took Taylor's hand. "What does he mean?"

"Nick Wesley's a buffoon," Taylor complained. "I'm sorry I let you put trust in him."

"I'm not the one who believes in chrononauts," Nick put in.

Skaw's attention returned, but chuckling and off-kilter. "The casual disregard of the Earthsider. No, no, I assure you Lieutenant, it is the Fabritius brothers I seek, not Jan Van der Meer. "

He took another deep draft of beer. His quick eyes rolled to catch his

assistant ushering Kentridge Ord into the dining sphere.

"Mr. Ord." Skaw pronounced the name like a belch. "It disturbed us to consider you at large. You have been hanging paintings, Sir, and dispensing beverages with high liberality."

Ord lit a lungprotector. "Yeah. So what?"

"Have you eaten, Sir?"

"No."

"Be seated."

Ord nodded at the gathering, and tracked to take the seat Eddie Ryan had vacated beside Nick.

He leaned forward. "Nick, Did you know--"

"Mr. Ord!" interrupted Count Skaw from across the table. "Anatole has requested your presence at this dinner. Be so kind to satisfy yourself at his invitation. But keep your mouth otherwise shut, while I address my guests."

Pamela spoke up.

"Would someone explain what is going on? The Vermeer is hanging in the Salon, is it not?"

As an individual meal-kit appeared from the dumbwaiter before Kentridge Ord, the Count waved a hand. The dining-sphere's surrounding windowmirror walls winked a new view. They showed the empty salon, close-on the Vermeer hanging over the mantel.

"The destruction of a priceless masterwork is the price of quantum tomfoolery," proclaimed Count Skaw. "The painting above my mantel can never be said to be the real work of your Vermeer, never again." He waved a meaty finger at a quiet Strode.

Pamela was looking at Nick through narrowed eyes. "What is he talking about. Is that the painting or not?"

"Not necessarily," Nick said. "There used to be two quantum copies. Only one of

them was the actual original, of course. But no one knew which one, by definition. Count Skaw's butler, Amos Walker, destroyed one of the copies with an axe while you were locked in the smoking room."

"Are there witnesses?" It was Taylor, attending to Nick's explanation.

"I witnessed. So did ASTA, for that matter, Nora's pet singularity."

"ASTA!" Pamela looked our way, despairing. "You tell us. Is she real or isn't she?"

"I think she's marvelous," mumbled Strode, in an advanced state of inebriation. "Quantumfied or no."

Seven and one half pairs of eyes turned to view the picture in the salon.

The Count made a high pitched noise from the back of his throat.

"On Earth Station," Nick said. "There's a key. Only my hand can turn it. When I do, the copy is washed away for

good. We'll find out then if she's real or not. For the Count's sake, I hope she is."

Kentridge Ord cleared his throat.

"Excuse me," he said. "Nick --"

"Not so fast, Mr. ORD!" shrieked Skaw. "You have already violated all public trust in your testimony and shall kindly keep your attention to the grilled rack of lamb before you. Unless you would rather it were taken away?"

Kentridge Ord returned to his meal.

A look of kind pity now untied Skaw's remarkably expressive face. He gazed across at Nick with sudden tenderness. He blinked big watery eyes and popped another beer.

"Poor Nicky," he said. "Poor, poor Nicky. He looks rather peaked, don't you think, Eddie Ryan? It may be that after two aphelions Earthside he can no longer stomach High Kansan whiskey in zero gravity. No, Lieutenant, Mr. Wesley is no buffoon. He sought to play his game

without conscious, rational plan, relying instead on subconscious inspiration and improvisation. There is no other way to battle a superior intellect. Yet still, he's lost the game." Skaw's eyebrows arched up in the center of his forehead, likening his face to a church.

"Lieutenant," said Pamela, taking hold of Taylor's hand. "Please take the painting into G.A. custody, right now. Bring it--"

"Silence! The host is speaking! A free Spacer now claiming homestead rights to the fate of the undefined object on the mantel in his salon." His voiced boomed: "Ready, Mr. Walker!"

The butler, Amos Walker, appeared in full windowmirror view, entering the salon. Walker had stripped to his undershirt. Large kidney-shaped sweat-patches emerged from under each of his arms as he gripped the twin yellow handles of an enormous, shoulder-mounted demolator

rig.

Foreground the G.A. Guardsman, the Irishman, floated by, snoring happily, accompanied by a drifting highball.

"Every willed action demands a motive idea," Skaw explained. "Mr. Wesley has ascribed to me the most despicable of motives. Greed. No doubt his observational faculties are entangled in an anxiety of influence that would be quite moving for an old and childless man to consider, were it not so utterly a fantasy. Of course, he was correct that one had designs on the Vermeer. One wanted it very badly, indeed. One *yearned*. But not for the motive Mr. Wesley presumes."

Walker aimed and set the demolator. The windowmirror winked to a close-on view of the Vermeer.

"A crucial mistake," Skaw whispered. "For *I wanted the painting only to destroy it!*"

"Guard!" Taylor barked into his watch.



A hole burned in the synthetic diamondwrap of the Vermeer, and a thumbsized mushroom cloud popped out on the *Woman's* forehead, exploding into tiny fractalled fragments on its swirling event horizon.

Walker pulled hard the demolator's handles.

The mushroom cloud expanded, evaporated and left an empty space on the wall. The entire second quantum Vermeer had been annihilated.

Walker released and the demolator kicked off before it had compromised extra dimensions.

"Mr. Ord," barked Count Skaw in the silence. "You may now inform Mr. Wesley of what it is you had to tell him."

Ord had finished his meal. He was puffing an LP, and like everyone else staring at the image of the empty mantel on the windowmirrors.

He turned to Nick. "Earth Station is gone. And the C. Clarke's down," he said.

"For good."

Taylor spoke up. "But I was told Equator City was under control."

"Oh, it was," Ord said. "But the elevator was taken out from space. Free Spacers. Pirates, terrorists. Who knows?"

The ensuing silence was broken by the enormous crow. "Satisfactory," it said.

Skaw popped his final beer.

"Ms. Lamprey, your painting is no more. It has been successfully removed from its current state of historo-interference by Mr. Wesley and his now forever lost quantum key. Because his quantum trickery has eradicated the work's status as an original, I can not be said to owe you more than the price of two well-made forgeries. Eddie Ryan will draw up a check. I must inform you that our time together is happily drawing to an end. We soon lock velocity with High Wichita Station and I've been ordered to let you and all other Earth Station

passengers off for transfer back to Luna. The *Polly-Ann* will rendezvous at Earth Station to pick-up evacuéés. Ser Strode, a final word. The attraction between us is undeniable. To you I extend an offer to remain on board the *Polly-Ann*. We have a library, easy access to the information nets and a satisfactory chef. To the rest of you I say good evening. Eddie Ryan!"

Pamela rose but only to collapse in a sudden swoon. Lieutenant Taylor caught her in his arms.

In the confusion, Nick Wesley saw reflected in Kentridge Ord's hand-mirror his last view of Count Reginald Skaw, launched by his unicycle like a great football punted out through an invisible tube to the observatories, Lord Henry on wing beside him.

## HIGH WICHITA

If the G.A. Liner was reminiscent of a twentieth century ocean liner, the esthetics of High Wichita Station were like a U-Boat. Steel framed painted stairways, small rounded hatches and doors adorned a utilitarian, functional environment able to be subdivided and abandoned quickly.

Nick was hooked into a small bar in a welded off bubble, separated from the larger spaceport cabins by an aquarium. Colored fish floated every which way.

Spacers leaned here and there anonymously smoking and drinking, most of them watching the grassy tetrahedron of a spoccer field revolving on a single infoball in the center of the bar.

A real bartender, complete with tails and a white collar, was filling up Nick's drink.

"You don't recognize me, do you Mr. Wesley?"

Nick frowned. "Mac Olson. I sent you upright in '24."

"'25. I did three long orbits on Mercury, pulling slag. Changed my life for the better. Now I own this joint. This one's on me."

Nick raised his ballglass as Kentridge Ord hooked in beside him.

Ord looked at him with narrowed eyes. "You really O.K. with what happened?"

"Of course. My contract was filled. He didn't steal it, after all. Pamela's Control is happy as a clam. It's a legal loss, and apparently enough to take down an entire middle insurance Concern."

"And the elevator? That doesn't bother you? People are saying Earth will lose Space for good now."

"Pfui. Earth is Space. And if I'm not mistaken, you're about to hand me enough dough to buy a ride down to Penobscot Bay

Sunday afternoon."

"That's right," Ord said, placing a fat envelope on the toppler. "Enough for the chopper pick-up too. Though I can't understand how Eddie Ryan got so much cash on a Saturday."

"Confidential Assistants can only stomach Skaw if they've got their fingers in other pies. Eddie Ryan's other finger is in the ideological wing of an old-time terrorist collective. He's a mole, gathering intelligence about possible applications of some of Skaw's research into time travel. It so happens he's got access to Concern galore, cash down the line. And he also happens to be a big fan of Nora's, can't say I blame him."

"To pay that much for that ... that portrait you did?" Ord look disturbed as he sipped his highball. "That's not fandom. That's dangerous obsession."

"Signed by me, it's one of a kind. I've had her, you see."

"Yes," said Ord. "I see. Well, here's to..." They toasted and drank up.

As the two men exited the bar, Ord wondered what Nick was carrying wrapped under his arm.

"I thought you got rid of your last painting?"

"As you remember, the portrait of Nora was handed over to Eddie off of its stretcher. I had clipped that canvas on top of another painting. This is the one that was under that canvas all along, on the same stretcher. It's my anniversary present to Nora."

"What's it of?"

"It's an old painting. Untitled, really. Shows a girl by a window."

Ord stopped, jaw dropping. "Do you mean to tell me--"

Nick shushed him and looked our way. "Hey," he said. "Let's keep it a surprise."

## EPILOGUE

*Speeding in perfect synch with the earth's rotation, roughly 38,000 kilometers above the confluence of the Arkansas and Little Arkansas rivers, High Wichita forbids digital monitoring of all kind. Pets are not allowed.*

*Master swings a hand our way.*

*"Scram!"*

*As he strolls with Kentridge Ord towards the access-tube to Douglas Airvenue, Amos Walker now joining them, we sink back through the shell, and out among a great conglomeration of harvested space junk and re-fit orbital farms.*

*We taste the all-night.*

*The Polly-Ann is already rising through signs saying HIGH KANSAN HERE, FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD and FREE CORN 4-EVER. We bark at her good-bye.*

*Knowing how Mistress loves to read, we make this novella novel of recent events*

*and we post it with us, cosmic ray direct.  
Time expands.*

*Space contracts.*

*We emerge upon her slender, sleeping  
wrist and fall then, finally, up among her  
snow-white sheets.*

*She sleeps.*

*We must function.*

*We are out again to our post, at the  
edge of the night-time bay. We work. But  
we wait. We wait for her to wake and read.*



Mark von Schlegell  
High Wichita\*

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