

January 25th, 2025

Issue 18 | Time

SciFANSat

The Monthly Magazine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Micro Fiction & Poetry

Morgan RR Haze

M. H. Thaung

Jorge Candeias

Flash Fiction

Alastair Millar - "Don't Look Back"

Kayleigh Kitt - "It's Only Skin Deep"

Alan Vincent Michaels - "One Second"

Sean McGillis - "Midnight Horizon"

That Burnt Writer - "On the Origin of Species"

Short Stories & Serials

Nicholas Woods - "The Rinse"

Eric Lorenz - "Das Baby"

D Bedell - "The Navigator"

Nancy Chenier - "In the Loop"



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Cover Illustration "Chronokinesis Key" by
Jason H. Abbott

Layout & Typesetting
Kimberly Abbott

For more information, address:
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Editorial

Welcome to our eighteenth issue of SciFanSat for January 2025! Time keeps on slipping into the future as we enter a new year and remain your home for science fiction, fantasy, and more in this little spot of the multiverse. I'll tell you about the wonderful assortment of speculative fiction that we have in store for you momentarily, but first let's get to the announcement you've all been waiting for:

The results are in, and the winner of the 2024 Bartleby B. Boar Award is...

Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil! For their exemplary science fiction short story, ***We Are Stardust!***

Congratulations, Sam! From the staff of SciFanSat and all who voted for you, you've earned this! And what have you won? It's a [Bitchin' Camaro](#)— no, I mean it's the highly coveted and honest-to-goodness spiffy commemorative 2024 Bartleby B. Boar Award Trophy and its associated, frameable certificate of achievement! Huzzah!

Runners-up deserving honorable mentions were Alan Vincent Michaels for *Liminalities in the Travelverse*, A.A. Rubin for their poem *Pinball Wizard*, M.S. Dy-Liacco for *Better Halves*, and Peter J Gilbertson for their *Skyring Derelicts* serial. Praise and thanks to all of you, and everyone submitting pieces to, or just reading, SciFanSat! Now our task is to fill 2025 with works of equal or greater caliber than those we honor in this moment: for folks will always need stories. For refuge and escape in the toughest days most of all.

Our January issue tackles that challenge head-on and features fantastic submissions for your reading pleasure, all aligned with this month's theme of TIME.

Morgan RR Haze, M. H. Thaug, Jorge Candeias, and Alan Vincent Michaels grace us with their microfiction and poetry, each told within a seconds hand's full-circle. Prose then takes over the minutes with five flash fiction contributions by some of our favorite authors. Alastair Millar schools us on why sometimes it's better not to know in "Don't Look Back", and Alan Vincent Michaels returns with "One Second" and a protagonist trying to convince the internet that he saw it first. Kayleigh Kitt shows us a future that might be running out of time in "It's Only Skin Deep". Thereafter, That Burnt Writer prompts a reevaluation of where and when we come from with their piece "On the Origin of Species". Sean McGillis closes out our quintet of

science fiction flash with a race against the clock, save for some *Déjà vu*, in his witty “Midnight Horizon”.

I could spend hours praising our four featured short stories this month, but it will suffice to say that if you give them your time, you won't regret it. “Das Baby” by Eric Lorenz interlopes the TikTok age into late nineteenth century Austria-Hungary, with a black comedy take on a surprisingly common conundrum facing temporal travelers. In “The Navigator”, author D Bedell takes us on a harsh journey through frigid latitudes that's both cerebral and spiritual to deliver a precious gift, once mundane, but now a matter of faith. Then Nancy Chenier's brisk storytelling with “In the Loop” entertains as it bickers with itself and unravels.

Last but not least is Nicholas Woods' “The Rinse”. Woods opens this gritty tale of post-apocalyptic survival in a panicked rush for shelter and keeps the tension high as the story unfolds in a world where humanity's remaining days on Earth are burning away in fits and strokes. With gripping human concerns and stakes, he presents an excellent page-turning read that delivers through and through.

As many of you probably noticed accessing the magazine, SciFanSat launched an updated website to coincide with our first issue of the new year! More than a visual makeover, we've refined its layout to aid in finding its content and sections. We've also added a new landing page we're using in submission calls, something that should simplify the process for first-time submitters by having all the pertinent options they need in one place. As some may recall, Kim created the original, fully functioning website from scratch within a few weeks: an impressive feat even for a team of people. Since then, she has made lesser improvements and changes piecemeal, but our dedicated web-mistress has been laboring hard on this spectacular, comprehensive update and overhaul for months. Outstanding job, Kim!

Alright, stop hanging out here and start checking out the exceptional pieces found in the rest of the magazine! As always, we're thankful for all the authors, poets and readers who contribute to SciFanSat: keep writing, creating, and being excellent to one another. You are the magic that makes this happen, and please, join us again in February for our upcoming theme of... RESIST!

Jason H. Abbott
Editor, SciFanSat Magazine



Poetry

Time for Musings by Alan Vincent Michaels

"We are like butterflies who flutter for a day and think it's forever." —Carl Sagan, Cosmos, 1980

"Time exists in order that everything doesn't happen all at once...and space exists so that it doesn't all happen to you." —Susan Sontag

"Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." —Anonymous

00:07

Time is what you make of it
It's not how much Time you have
It's how you spend what you have
You make Time yours or waste it

00:06

When you Time travel away
Always know your anchored place
Always factor endpoint space
Time travel's no game to play

00:05

If your granted breaths were known
How different would you live
How much of Time could you give
Yourself and to friends love shown?

00:04

Gaze upon stars far away
The Time taken by their light
The journey to reach your sight
And others' along the way

00:03

Each star's illumination
Stays you from dreading darkness
Stays you from feeling loveless
Time's merciless direction

00:02

Think about multiverses
Sum of all possible Time
Sum of all thoughts in that Time
Still raised fists and frail curses

00:01

How would you live forever
As a young child's wild spirit
As an old, tempered spirit
Sailing Time's mighty river?

00:00

To shine for a brief moment
Living in the now, this day
Living in Never's tight sway
Is to escape Time's torment

Find the Author

 AlanMichaels.com

 [@AlanVMichaels](https://www.instagram.com/AlanVMichaels)



Micro Fiction

A Story of Lack of Time by Jorge Candeias

Time was never enough for him, but he couldn't understand why. He didn't have that much to do, at least comparing his life to his friends'.

That's when he saw it, in a glimpse, hovering an inch above his left shoulder: a time vampire, with its trunk stuck to his aura.

Find the Author

 [@jorgecandeias](https://twitter.com/jorgecandeias)



Second Chances by M. H. Thaung

In the transit chamber, Jack “Ham-Fisted” Rowan settled into the protective cradle, nervously gripping sealed orders. Director Gillian had said he’d change history on this unprecedented mission, not merely observe.

She still believed in him! He blushed, remembering those recent misadventures. That lost vidcam at Thermopylae. Letting it slip who’d win the seventeenth Intergalactic Championship. This time around — he crossed his fingers — he’d do better.

Through the observation window, the director mouthed, “Ready?”

Jack nodded.

Power surged. Consciousness fled.



The chamber door opened.

Gillian retrieved the newborn Jack. This time round — she crossed her fingers — he’d do even better.

Find the Author

 MHThuang.com

 @mhthaung



The Loop by Morgan RR Haze

We used time travel to escape the shackles of time, only to find we created a loop.
We can live forever, but only for a day.

Find the Author

 MorganRRHaze.com

 [@morganhaze](https://www.youtube.com/@morganhaze)



Flash Fiction

One Second by Alan Vincent Michaels

Look at that sky!

I hope to see a real flying saucer today. They always seem attracted to lightning.

I point my Pro Max cellphone at the sky and capture the ominous, dark thunderstorm clouds rolling in from the east.

At 30 frames per second, I'm sure to get at least one wicked lightning bolt that I'll spice up as an art print and sell online.

Three minutes pass and the storm hammers the house. I go inside to the studio, wiping the water off the cellphone. I switch on the laptop and transfer the vid to the editing app.

Watching in anticipation...yes! Three gorgeous bolts!

But what are these black dots flashing against the grey and white clouds?

"Great," I mutter. "Probably birds or bugs, again."

I pause the vid and step through it frame by frame.

In a one-second segment, I see not one, but two different black somethings racing across the sky. A short one flies left to right and, after a delay, a longer one flies right to left, covering the sky shown in the frame width.

The crazy part is each something travels its respective path in a half a second.

Wow!

No bird or plane in the sky and no bug right in front of the lens can travel that apparent distance in half a second.

I have proof of two UFOs, UAPs, what-ers!

I edit the vid down to the one-second segment, then save the 15-ish frames with the somethings in them, making a slow-motion slideshow of how they move. Each something is visible in about every other frame, like they're skipping stones against a glassy pond in the air.

I watch the slideshow loop for a few minutes, then push away from the desk.

I'm exhausted but full of excitement.

I can't hold a thought in my head for more than a few seconds, except for the clear belief these blobby, black somethings are alien spaceships.

As hard as I try, I can't think of any way or reason why somebody might punk anyone in this situation.

Just being at the right place at the right time with a cellphone.

Look, I keep up with the latest UFO news online, especially about the weirdest sightings and all the "UAP and UFO disclosure" stuff that's been happening, well, everywhere. Podcasts, conspiracy forums, U.S. Congress hearings, the latest ads for candy bars.

Yeah, everywhere.

Maybe, it's just brain overload. Too many people watching vids showing orbs and blobs and smudges zipping across the sky. I really don't believe all the commentaries. I think most are CGI fakes.

Plus, the vids look terrible. Seriously. Almost every vid is taken by the high-def camera in a cellphone, yet all we see are blurry and shaky images.

It's great if aliens exist. I mean, in such a huge universe that is getting older and bigger each time they put a new telescope into space, there's likely to be millions or billions more worlds out there teeming with intelligent life.

It makes logical sense, right?

Arthur C. Clarke once said, "Two possibilities exist. Either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally frightening."

To me, the question isn't "Is there intelligent alien life in the universe?" but rather "Why do they bother coming to Earth?"

But maybe aliens have been coming here all along, and we're just, finally, figuring out they are moving much faster than we ever thought possible.

Maybe you must be in the right place at the right time to see real UFOs zipping across the sky.

Like me!

I post the UFO vid to Discord.

One second passes.

A "Cool!" comment displays, then the trolls descend like a plague of locusts and they don't leave the post alone.

I stare in disbelief as the rush of comments fill my feed:

"FAKE UFO VIDEO"

"I WANT THE REAL ALIEN SHIP PICS"

"STOP POSTING THIS CRAP"

"YOU'RE THE WORST-OF-THE-WORST"

It only takes this one-second vid to ruin my online UFO life, and maybe my real life, too.

I close the laptop.

"I guess trolls do what trolls gotta do," I sigh.

The cellphone chimes, startling me. On its screen is a text from my best friend, Amy: "Saw your vid Jewel ❤️ OMG bad timing Check the NEWS 😮"

I swipe to the news app and there, in a big, all-caps, black-as-a-troll's-soul headline, are the words ALIENS ARE LANDING EVERYWHERE pasted above a four-box, split-screen vid showing a glowing, silvery spheres landing next to the Eiffel Tower, the Washington Monument, Stonehenge, and a reporter saying, "The ships are landing simultaneously in hundreds of cities and places around the world."

"No, no, NO!" I shout, dropping the cellphone, a tear on my cheek. "Dammit! No! My one-second UFO scoop ruined by real freaking aliens!"

Find the Author

 AlanMichaels.com

 [@AlanVMichaels](https://www.instagram.com/AlanVMichaels)



Don't Look Back by Alastair Millar

When I saw him in the student bar, I knew something was wrong. Professor Oran was a stodgy old stick, rarely touching even a glass of wine at Christmas. But there he was, downing whiskey like tomorrow was going out of fashion. In retrospect, perhaps it was. Yet he was a colleague, so I ambled over and slid into his booth.

"You okay George?" I asked.

"Oh. Hello Harry. No, I don't think I am."

"Want to talk about it?"

I was expecting a sharp rejection, but maybe the alcohol was having an effect.

"Well, something's happened. And it's a bit embarrassing, but that's not the worst of it."

"Not woman trouble, is it?" I asked. It seemed unlikely, but who knew?

"It started with a woman," he replied. "A very long time ago, when I was your age."

"Oh. Go on."

"I was doing some research. Not everything was digitised back then, so I was working in the library when I looked up and saw her leaning against a stack with a book in her hand. The light from the windows caught her, and she was ethereal, not part of this world at all, lost in whatever she was doing. Utterly beautiful. I was entranced. Then some idiot student interrupted me to beg for an essay extension, and when I looked up, she was gone. But I never forgot her. You know I work on chronodimensionality problems?"

I nodded warily; he never published anything I could understand.

"Well, that's why. It sounds foolish, but I wanted to find a way of reliving that moment. Not time travel!" he added hastily, "The energy needed would be insane! But what about a viewer? Time is only a dimension. If we can look up, and down, and sideways, why not back as well?"

"I see the logic," I said.

"Three years ago, I cracked it. I built a working chronoscope in my lab."

My jaw dropped. "You didn't publish this?"

"No. It wasn't practical, you see. The calculations for planetary rotation, solar orbit, galactic drift, they were too complex; it could only be used for its own location, and only when Earth was roughly in the same place. So a year back, or a hundred years, but not three months. But I thought if I could make it portable, I could take it to the library. Then maybe sell the idea to historians or archaeologists."

I gaped. The potential was immense. State Security would love it for a start: imagine studying a year-old crime scene and seeing a murder or an indiscretion. It would be worth millions!

"So I compressed, and modified. Used the latest quantum chips and holographic displayers, and I did it. I made a mobile version. Yesterday, on the anniversary of the day I saw her, I took it there."

"Did it work? Did you see her?" I realised I was holding my breath.

"Oh yes," he said sadly. "But *she saw me* as well."

"That's impossible!" I blurted.

"I thought so," he said. "But it happened. So someone has cracked the mathematics, or will do so. And solve the energy problem to travel to our time."

"That's incredible!"

"No, you fool, it's terrifying! Because if they can do that, what can they change? What have they already changed? Don't you see? Our future isn't ours anymore. With technology like that it can be shaped any way they want it! I can't prove it, and I can't unknow it!"

I sat back, appalled, and understood why he was drinking.

Find the Author

 [alastairmillar](#)

 [@skriptorium](#)



It's Only Skin Deep by **Kayleigh Kitt**

A whirring sound shears the monotony. The wall-fixed mechanical eye roves the room, its overlapping lenses adjusted by a remote operator. With the explosion of AI techno over the last decade, she knows it could easily be a steel sentient stored in a dark, faraway server.

Machines are now trusted with lab-grown human faces, pulled taut to obscure plastic and metal components.

Above the locked double doors, the digital display shows 4, accompanied by tinny, off-key muzak mingling in the chem-vanilla atmosphere.

Her number is 10.

Scheduled appointments are for eight minutes. Daydreams are a rarity in this place. Instead, it's a place where dignity and free will withers then dies.

Faded, pitted pistachio walls show brown-edged water marks dripping from the ceiling. She wonders what causes the tea-coloured stains, but dismisses the notion of looking it up. Instead, she recalls a story Old 3 shared, before litter mountains swallowed cities and plastic strangled the seas. She'd have liked to have seen the ocean once in her lifetime, even if it's sterile.

Opposite, a man notices her staring at his bouncing knee but does nothing to resolve it.

Numbers 5 and 6 are called by a fixed smile 'noid. 10 refuses to attach the "human" prefix to 'noids.

The mechanism releases, the double doors swinging away, revealing white-coated officials going about their duties, gliding along sleek sparkling floor coverings, e-tablets clutched in their manicured fingers, with perfect nails.

Rubbing a hand over her stubbled scalp, which perfectly deters lice, she skims the room. Those waiting slump on machine-molded seats — formerly tangerine, or perhaps lemon, it's impossible to say — now bleached. All occupants are the same age, that is, born in the same decade. She knows they brought her and the others to the cattle market for one purpose: screening. For breeding.

The powers that be need a population, a commodity. Living specimens that work, breathe and pay levies before death claims them. Over thirty years, singular households have become multi-generational, reverting to ghosts of the past, easing child and social care burdens.

Numbers 7 and 8 are called, the doors opening and admitting two more of her peers. Her fingers worry at the hole in her sleeve.

It's all too soon.

9 and 10 are called.

Now it's her turn.

Find the Author

 [Dragon's Quill](#)

 [@spellboundscribe](#)



Midnight Horizon
by Sean McGillis

We've been immersed in this mission for what seems like ages, although it probably hasn't been two hours yet. My palms are sweaty and my heart races like a miler in the homestretch. Jensen maneuvers the commandeered Python-XZ away from the enemy spacecraft in a series of twists, rolls, and turns that make me feel like we're on an amusement park ride rather than running for our lives.

"Hey, Jenny! Trying to make me lose my lunch? It's working!"

"Relax and live a little Cisco! Buckle up, zip your trap, and enjoy the ride!"

Although I highly doubt that I'll 'relax and enjoy the ride', I know one thing. We're in good hands. Tom Jensen is by far the best space jockey this side of the galaxy. His fancy flying weaves a web with us starring as the spider in the center. No need for venom injecting fangs though, a few wiggles and waggles later and the fighters following us have blown one another to smithereens with their pulsars and photon torpedoes. Nothing but stars in front of us, I hoot and holler. "We're in the clear!"

Laughter comes from behind me. I turn to look at Princess Sunshine and can't help but smile. She's clapping her hands and carrying on like an unhinged six-year-old at recess. I'm sure she's delighted to be free from her captors, but her behavior is highly, *unprincesslike*.

Century City will rejoice at her safe return, and I can only imagine the festivities that will take place across Entromine. It's a giant planet, but the news of her rescue will travel quickly. Giving her a reassuring nod, I turn around and get lost in my thoughts.

Something at the back of my mind begins bothering me; I'm unsure what it is. Rather than trying to coax it forward, I beat it back with thoughts of a hot shower, a stiff synth-bourbon and a call to one of the beauties in my electronic black book. I can't wait until we land and debrief. Life is grand! Rudely, my daydream is snapped by a grunt from the cockpit.

"What's wrong, Jenny? Bored now that we don't have the Royal Dragons breathing down our neck anymore?"

"No. It's that noise again, mate. Can't you hear it?"

I hear something, but the problem with his sentence is the word 'again'. I haven't heard anything up until now. I'm not sure what he means by 'again', but I don't like it. That little demon called unease reappears in my head. Again.

Time for me to come in handy. I'm not just burly and trained for the violent parts of these missions. I'm also a highly skilled mechanic. Methodically, I make my way through the Python, trying to locate the source of the noise, which has become slightly louder alongside vibrations through the ship. Glancing at the princess, I observe that her smile has vanished. I can't think of anything clever to say so I keep my lips zipped. Nothing here is scripted like in some ancient motion picture. This isn't a movie; the stakes are high.

Every time I think I've figured out where the sound is coming from, it seems to move. Illogical! This crate isn't tiny but it's not exactly a behemoth either. I'm becoming more than a little perplexed and my mind begins to race. Inexplicably, my thoughts come in the form of a bulleted list.

- Penetrate enemy compound ✓
- Free the princess from the dungeon ✓
- Set explosives to destroy planet ✓
- Escape from compound with no harm to princess ✓
- Meet the pilot at spaceship ✓
- Eliminate pursuit force ✓
- Escape radius of explosions

Hells bells! Are we clear of the blast zone? Have we taken too long eluding the enemy fighters? Finally, why is this collection of thoughts coming to me in the form of words in a pulsating, neon colored Helvetica font?

A sense of *deja vu* washes over me. Although confident by nature, I begin to feel overwhelmed. It's dawned on me that the noises we're hearing aren't coming from inside the ship, they're minor impacts on its exterior: the preliminary duotonium explosion shockwaves from the bombs we planted to destroy the planet. And I'm afraid they're relatively minor compared to the cataclysmic one they're building up to that'll annihilate everything within 80 astronits of it.

"Jenny, how far are we from Maltropia?"

Brow furrowed, he checks the instruments as I become anxious. "About 65," he replies.

"Damn! Can you make this crate go any faster?"

"No, Cisco. I'm giving her all she's got, anymore and she's gonna blow!"

Glancing over my shoulder, I see that the princess has her eyes tightly shut and appears to be praying. The space behind us goes from pitch black to uncomfortably bright as Maltropia vaporizes. We need all the prayers we can get.

The sight convinces Jensen to give the ship more thrust. Sweat glistens on his forehead as it begins to shake. A klaxon sounds and the LED display screen flashes:

DECREASE SPEED OR SHIP WILL DESTRICT IN 1 MINUTE!

Through the chaos, I begin hearing a voice. Oh great, all this and now I'm hearing voices. This one sounds even more frustrated than I am. I picture it belonging to a petulant fourteen-year-old boy:

"It's not fair!"

Yeah, kid. There's a lot in life that isn't fair.

...SHIP WILL DESTRICT IN 20 SECONDS!

Another young sounding male voice joins in. *"Quit yer whining ya wanker! None of us has made it this far."*

"I'm never playing this again! This game is rigged!" Whiny and fourteen huffs.

Game? The nerve of that brat! This isn't a game! We must save the princess and the universe. This isn't a game, this is—

GAME OVER

Find the Author



On the Origin of Species

by That Burnt Writer

The grays, greens and browns slowly coalesced into recognizable outlines, although it still wasn't clear to Tara exactly what the shapes were. Cold air burned her throat, her head was pounding, and she involuntarily shivered. A nearby buzzing sounded like a cloud of insects.

"Concussion", she thought, as she screwed up her eyes against the brightness of the daylight. "Maybe, just maybe, I can lay here and wait for the nausea to pass, then I'll..."

The careful, deliberate thought process was interrupted by a rustle nearby, and her combat training kicked in. She rolled away, pushed herself up, and vomited as waves of dizziness hit her, leaving a metallic taste in her mouth as she spat blood.

Still, the years of military conditioning had her on her feet, albeit shaking and unable to stand straight. Her gun was in her hands, pointing at what appeared to be local vegetation on whatever this godforsaken rock was. The barrel wavered back and forth slightly as she tried to steady herself.

The memories were flooding back. She'd been the pilot of a small fighter, and had escaped after her colony ship, along with the two capital ships and multiple dreadnoughts protecting it, were destroyed by the single Kyl'Draa vessel which had just materialized out of nowhere. It had swatted fighters away as if they were inconsequential. There was guilt over abandoning her post — she should have been waging war, defending those who couldn't do it for themselves — followed by the realisation that her backup had been obliterated and she wouldn't survive against such an overwhelming force. There'd been no point throwing her life away for nothing.

She recalled the school of strategic thought which suggested leaving one survivor to warn others was a good thing, that it added to the legends that accompanied the aggressors. The Kyl'Draa didn't subscribe to that theory so, if she'd wanted to live, to warn others, she'd had to run.

Then there was the chase.

Oh gods, the chase; they'd somehow pursued her through the short hyperspace jump, which bent gods-knows how many laws of physics, and materialised almost on top of her. She'd barely managed to make it to the uncharted planet, and had run dangerously low in the thin atmosphere, jinking and dodging through ravines and mountains as some of their pursuit craft had matched her every move. The realisation made her adrenaline pump again. It was an old adage, but a true one: she'd never felt so alive as when she was so close to death.

Finally, she'd pulled up, thinking she might head for open space again, try to jump back and hide amongst the debris of what used to be her fleet, but a stray laser bolt had put paid to that plan. It had clipped the fusion drive, burned right through the shielding and protections and shorted something.

She'd careered back toward to the surface, barely maintaining control, and had ploughed a furrow through a forest, ending with a smoking wreck in a clearing from which she'd stumbled, disoriented. The enemy had performed a few flypasts, but for some reason hadn't been able to detect that she was still alive, so had dropped munitions around the site and gone off to rejoin their battle group.

The resulting explosion had lifted her off her feet from two hundred feet away; the last thing she recalled was flying through the air, headed straight for the centre of one of the huge indigenous tree-analogues.

So now, she waited to see what was in the fern-like undergrowth. Her flightsuit, although not the latest model with full AI integration, had clearly got some level of decision-making power, as it had calculated that atmosphere was breathable and non-toxic, at least in this part of the planet, and had released her helmet before she'd awoken. Maybe it had known that she'd want to throw up.

Still wary, she risked a glance at her chronometer and hissed in a breath. *Damn.* She'd lost around ninety minutes to unconsciousness, and counted herself lucky that she'd not been attacked, mauled, or even eaten by whatever lived here.

She suppressed a snort of laughter; maybe they were all vegetarians here and she had nothing to worry about. The noise was getting louder, whatever it was getting closer.

She stepped back, braced herself against a vast tree trunk, and offered a silent prayer to a god she'd stopped believing in decades ago.

And then it emerged. Small, furry and, she supposed, quite cute if your tastes went that way. It didn't appear to have eyes, but was feeling its way forward, stopping every so often to pull a leaf from a bush and, presumably eat it, although from her standpoint it simply disappeared into the mound of fluff.

She lowered her pistol slowly; it was clear that this thing was going to go straight past her without even noticing she was there. She crouched down to get a better look at it just as something huge and with razor-edged teeth leapt from a branch and landed between her and

the furball. As it landed, and its camouflage adapted, she could make out a form similar to that of an old earth-style velociraptor, although this was over ten feet tall.

She dived to the side as it lashed out, raising her weapon and loosing off round after round until it stopped moving, its jaws outstretched toward the smaller creature.

"Gods," she muttered to herself, standing again. "Fully formed *dinosaurs* had extraterrestrial origins? Must've colonised Earth. You learn something new every damn day."

As the smaller creature continued on, oblivious to its near-death experience, Tara went over to give the predator a kick, then turned towards the crash site.

Maybe there was something there that could help her get off world or signal another human fleet. Or maybe just help her to survive this place if were to be her new home.

Find the Author

 [@thatburntwriter](https://twitter.com/thatburntwriter)



Short Story

The Navigator An Allegory by D Bedell

One

Arkady, a Navigator of the Order, held the tiller firmly in his gloved hand as he pressed close to the wind, just short of shipping water, heading for the west shore of The Great Bay. The wind was freshening two points off the port bow, filling the Bay with chop and salty spray. Fine rime from the prow wave covered his sealskins and beard with a shimmer under the taut ox hide sail.

He could not be on the Bay much longer; the wind was bringing a storm and turning the chop to snapping whitecaps. The cargo he carried, the valuta, was too valuable to risk losing in the icy water that would surely kill him in minutes if he capsized. He would not have chanced it anyway: He had a Dream to avoid.

Arkady lowered sail and glided the tiny sloop onto the rocky snow glazed beach. He unstepped the mast after furling the sail and hauled the boat well above the tide line, careful not to puncture the seal skin hull stretched across the bone and wood frame. Rolling the boat onto its starboard side, he anchored the bow and stern with stakes and line for a windbreak shelter and fire lee. A solid fire was a necessity; the wind and cold North of the 60th parallel would not abate in the long night. Ironhead ax in hand, he went to collect driftwood along the shore in the quickening storm. The wind gusted with sleet, pausing him in his steps. A washed-up tree stopped him, and he knew he was beginning to see the Dream.

This is it.

The Dream descended in familiar clarity as he chopped and moved with mindful precision, sensing the portent. The memory flashed and he stopped mid-swing; the ax did not skitter off the tree and cripple him. He smiled to himself and made wood with confident vigor: The Dream had passed punctually. The fire would be good.

He dropped an armload of kindling by the boat and made two more trips to the tree to have a respectable stack for a night that would be below freezing. After stowing the ax, he opened his greased canvas kit bag for his flints and tinder. An ember struck on the second try and he carefully tended the ball of dry grass until a flame took hold. The wood was well weathered and caught easily, the heat reflecting from the hull behind him as he knelt and fed the fire until it was burning steadily. He unpacked his kit for willow bark tea and filled his pot with snow to melt by the fire. Dried fish was his meal, but he ate little, restless even after a hard day's sail, anticipating an important Dream. When it came, he saw himself building cairns to mark time and place for Believers. The storm grew and snow banked against the boat. Ice floes crashed and floundered far out in the Bay.

Two

Daylight came late; the Sun was heading to Equinox and the Southern Hemisphere. Light would grow shorter until twilight marked the day's tenure, dimmer as Arkady moved North to the Arctic Circle. The storm had calmed to a whisper, but the Bay was still too rough for the sloop and skirting the shore likely would put it on the rocks. It would be at least a day on the beach. Arkady's internal clock tolled, bringing him from the Dream.

Matins.

After ablutions, Arkady revived the fire for bark tea and retrieved his cargo from the sloop. The sun, low on the horizon, was nearing its Zenith. He knelt on the beach by the flickering flame and opened a worn wooden box, lifting aside the white rabbit fur that cushioned his valuta, the matched trinity of chronometers and sextant, symbols of his Order. It was time to wind and compare the two clocks, a necessary ritual at the same hour and minute every day for accuracy. Time would give his meridian; the sextant, his parallel and local noon. It would place him in the world. Knowing time and place was valuta in the Circle and the purpose of a Navigator to provide.

He took off his gloves and reached into his parka under his sealskins, pulling out the winding key he carried on a leather thong around his neck. Closing his eyes, he brought the key reverently to his lips before giving each clock three full turns exactly. He made local noon with the sextant and compared it to the clocks to calculate a meridian. Stiff fingers around a thin stick of charcoal scribed on a deer hide scroll. A sight on the Polar Star would fix his parallel and mark his heading North from a new position. Time had to be delivered to the Circle and the clusters of people desperate to believe a hint of the world elsewhere and their place in it. A Navigator of the Order was welcomed by most, but not all: Arkady was always cautious in his approach. The solitude of his journeys was for the Dreams; they filled him with sight, guiding him away from peril, soliciting the future for good or ill: He had grown old in their service.

A competent hunter as well as a sailor, he took three large Arctic hares with his bow. The furs were good. He scraped the flesh away with a shell, rolling them into a bundle that he stowed in the sloop for signals and token tributes according to custom. He rigged a spit over the fire and set one of the hares to roast; the other two he laid near the fire to keep from freezing. While the hare cooked, he went to the tree for more wood. The premonition did not

return, and he chopped steadily. After he made wood, he built a cairn to mark his position and fulfill the Dream. It came again as he picked up the last stone. He built one every day forward, adding to his ritual, marking it on the deerskin as he made his way North to the dark.

Three

The village children were the first to see the sail. The ever-present dogs bayed and bounded along the beach sounding the alarm. The people gathered to watch Arkady approach, attentive to his seamanship as proof of his Order. Visitors were rare, usually traders from the South with metal tools scavenged from the long dead factories of a vanquished world. The Navigator was expected and true to the Time, a comfort to Believers.

It was Arkham's village, a young leader who valued the farfaring ways just as the Order had in the diaspora years after The Collapse, the sundering of nations in the zero-sum game that none could win and only destroy. Arkady wrapped one of the white hare skins around an arrow and arced it onto the beach, the accepted signal that he came with good intentions. Arkham waved him ashore emphatically. Dogs and children splashed into the water when the sloop beached.

Once ashore, Arkady embraced Arkham and others he had known for many years. His welcome was undisputed: He would Set the Time, the annual devotion that oriented the people to time and place at the Circle, the source of Dreams at the Zenith of the world. Arkady was relieved the Equinox ceremony was near as he walked reverently between two lines of the devout with his valuta to Arkham's wood and stone cabin. He would winter over at the village, spending some time with each Believer. The hospitality was welcome and would give him time to prepare for the next season. Arkady looked forward to the hunts despite the added hardship of Winter darkness; he enjoyed being on the perilous ice, a test of his Dreams that he relished for a nagging doubt.

Inside the cabin, Arkady revealed his valuta to Arkham by firelight and recited the invocation somberly: "Time is Zenith; Time is Nadir; Time Eternal Without Fear." Later, the village watched as Arkady took a sextant sighting on the Polar Star, the breath of the people filling the silence. It was a place in the world.

Four

The ceremony required Arkady to go from cabin to cabin to fix the people's time and place on the Earth at the Equinox for another year. He completed the ritual for all who wanted it and was received well by those who did not Believe, a minority in the village. Arkady ministered the ritual only to Believers; the rest were adrift without a course by his Creed. It was the way of the Order, important to his Dreams. The respite in the village hopefully would be good for Dreams that benefitted his hosts. If not, their place, at least, was fixed by the cairns Arkady made by their dwelling entrances acknowledging them in the world.

Arkham pressed Arkady for an apprenticeship; he was fascinated by the ciphers on the deerskin. He absorbed the meaning of 23 1/2 degrees at the Circle, the tilt of the Earth, the parallels of the same degree and the Equator, time and its rituals. Acolytes were rare for the solitary Order and Arkady was unsure. Arkham was apt, but the village likely would suffer from

his absence and perhaps he was ill suited for solitude after communal life. Arkady would Dream about it and know with certainty the path to follow.

The Aurora was unusually active and so were Arkady's Dreams. They began to merge with the life of the camp and he moved with near constant prescience. Hunting Dreams were the most common, a necessity for survival of the village. He was in much demand for hunting parties and their success was testament to his devotion as well as his competence as a hunter. The villagers believed he brought the game in a Dream. He carefully adhered to his Dreams; there was no need to interpret, they were facts of the future.

Five

Arkham was adept in the rituals by Winter Solstice and pressed Arkady about Dreams, eager to know the future. He would not accept that Dreams could be dangerous and not everyone survived them. Arkady feared that Arkham was not cautious in his approach and, if improperly instructed, the village would suffer from his brashness. It was an unwelcome distraction from his own Dreams.

A hunt was due and scouts had spotted walrus, prized for their fat and hides in the Circle. Arkady enjoyed the hunts, the village believing that his Dreams called the prey. A successful hunt would be a great benefit to the winter stores. The men paired off and Arkham stuck close to Arkady, watching for signs of a Dream, wondering of his own. Arkady knew he was being watched and felt an unusual sensitivity.

The scouts were accurate and hunters picked their prey, lances thrown smoothly with lines attached to keep a wounded walrus from escaping to the Bay or into the darkness. Arkham struck a large bull, and Arkady joined him hauling on the line until other hunters could finish it by rushing in to drive a lance deep into the thrashing animal. Arkady gave the line over to another hunter and circled the walrus to drive his own lance in for the kill of his Dream. He drew back for the thrust when a Dream came an instant too late, failing Arkady. The walrus slashed with its tusks, rending his thigh to the shattered bone, his blood a black shadow freezing against the ice.

Arkham and the hunters killed the walrus before attending to Arkady. It was the Circle code, and the hunters stood back to watch him die without taking on his dreamless luck. Only Arkham knelt beside him, gripping his shoulder with expectation, perhaps ordination into the Order by the dying Navigator.

"Follow the cairns," Arkady breathed and fell into Time Eternal Without Fear. The Dream was done.

Arkham rose and began to look for stones to mark the Navigator's Time and Place.



Das Baby

by Eric Lorenz

Brooke and Kelly ascended the guesthouse stairs. Outside, a crystalline blue sky domed the bucolic town of Braunau am Inn now that the rainy season in Austria-Hungary had relented. Little of that beauty crept inside, however; a stale chill permeated the meanders of the claustrophobic hall the two friends proceeded down, with its low-arched plaster ceiling and stone floor lending the feel of a medieval catacomb. Except most catacombs aren't built over working taverns.

At the end of the hall, a dark wooden door spat a sliver of sunlight. Kelly slipped through first, the door heavy and creaking on its hinges as it gave. Brooke followed close behind, her backpack bumping against the jamb. They entered a homely studio apartment. No sign of their quarry. The pair ducked through a door to their immediate left.

"Is this it?" Brooke asked, her voice hushed.

"Pretty sure," Kelly replied, shutting the door behind them.

"No. Not 'pretty sure.' Considering why we're here, you need to be damn sure —"

"I'm sure, I'm sure." Brooke immediately shushed him down. "Sorry," Kelly said, attenuating his volume. "I'm sure."

Just one modest window in a room smaller than Kelly's old dorm, but with the curtains drawn wide, this was a veritable sunroom after the dankness of the hall. Garish floral wallpaper surrounded them on all sides. To the left sat a small table draped in a red tablecloth, a stool beside it, and a chest. To the right a wooden cradle.

"I can't believe we're actually here," Brooke marveled. "It's still wild to me that the Physics Department had a working time machine in storage."

"I know. I was moving old A/V carts and found it under a tarp. Amazing what people hold on to."

"No, Kelly, not wild that they held on to it, wild that they *had* one in the first place."

"Oh. Well, anyway, we need to hurry."

"Yeah, no telling how long those kids will be distracted by that Nintendo Switch. Although, if you're any indication, we have hours."

"I still can't believe you gave them my Switch, Brooke."

"How else were we going to get in here? We couldn't very well do this with those two up in our business. Sacrifices, Kelly." He didn't appear placated. "You can steal it back from them when we leave."

"I guess."

There came a rustling from the cradle. Brooke and Kelly, each a shade beyond twenty and eschewing Spring Break for present matters, froze, bracing themselves for inopportune attention. *Please no*. They shared the thought. But the rustling stilled, and the two could exhale.

"Anyway, Momma is the bigger concern," Brooke continued. "Caught a break with her leaving for the market when we arrived, but we gotta dip out before she gets back. Who knows when that'll be."

"You're sure his dad won't be coming home?"

"Nah, according to Wikipedia that abusive asshole doesn't give a shit about his family. Probably blowing off work to go balls deep in another cousin. It's the mom who could fuck this up royally."

"We could probably accomplish the same thing if we convinced his father to hug him once in a while."

"Remind me, what'd you get on your psychology midterm?"

"Cs get degrees, Brooke." Kelly smiled. Without looking, he knew she was, too.

The pair approached the cradle. Inside they found a mound of blankets, and swaddled within those blankets was a baby: cherubic cheeks and a full head of dark hair that already reached down toward the eyes. And those eyes, blue-grey and sprightly, gazing up wondrously at the two new faces peering into the cradle. A coo floated up from the child.

From his jeans pocket, Kelly removed the butcher knife. "Here ya go."

Brooke gripped the hilt but wielded the knife loosely above the baby, like a slasher movie villain with rheumatism. Another coo drifted to her ears.

"What are you waiting for?" Kelly asked, nudging Brooke's arm.

"He's gonna cry."

"If you do it right." Brooke remained unmoved. Kelly tried again. "I mean, he won't cry for long."

He failed to coax her to action. Instead, she moved back a smidge.

The baby cooed a third time, those hypnotic eyes piercing through Brooke's own. "I can't do it," Brooke said as she backed away from the cradle, the backs of her thighs rocking the small table against the wall.

"What?" Kelly's brow furrowed. His friend's face, framed by clawed fingers, was screwed into a grimace. "This whole thing was your idea."

"I know, but, he's a baby!" Brooke pleaded, hands now clasped in front of her.

"He's baby Hitler," Kelly whisper-shouted. "You knew he was going to be a baby when we got in the time machine."

"Look at those cheeks, though. The guy on the History Channel has a stabbable face. I could do *him* like a Jack-o'-lantern. But as a baby? Don't you just want to pinch those chubby little things?"

"Hitler was born April 20, 1889. You said, 'Let's shoot for early June. His mother might be more likely to let him out of her sight for periods of time by then.' Remember?"

"Yeah, but—"

"So here we are, in Austria-Hungary, in early June, alone in Hitler's bedroom with baby Hitler, and you can't go through with it." Kelly's voice cracked from all the whisper-shouting.

"I don't see you killing baby Hitler, huh? Big man can't even murder a baby."

"I'll murder the hell out of a baby."

She handed him the butcher knife. "So do it then."

"I will." Kelly returned to his position over the cradle. The blade gleamed silver in the sunlight. He stared in. Lingered. Brooke returned to his side, looked to Kelly and back into the cradle. Kelly continued to stare at the wriggling bundle.

"Are you hoping diphtheria beats you to it?" Brooke asked. Her eyes revealed the smirk she otherwise suppressed.

"Shut up." Kelly closed his eyes. "It's not a baby. It's not a baby. It's Hitler. Pure evil. Kills millions of Jews. Starts World War II. You can do this, Kelly. Just because Brooke is a coward doesn't mean you are. You can do this. You can do this. You can do this." Baby Hitler giggled. "Oh, come on," he said, throwing his hands up. "Hitler can't giggle." Kelly leaned over the cradle, pointing the blade's tip at the baby. "You're cheating."

"It's impossible. The baby-to-Hitler ratio is weighted too far toward baby," Brooke said. "He can't even do the, you know, the arm thing." She pantomimed the Nazi salute. "Wait, he might...he might be...no. He's just reaching for my hair. Dammit."

"Here." Kelly set the knife on the table and pulled a Sharpie from his jeans before bending over the cradle.

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see." He reached in, shielding Brooke from view. "That's more like it. Yeah, now we're talkin'." When Kelly finished his work, baby Hitler sported a black square scribbled under his button nose.

"That was your plan?"

"Hey, you said yourself he wasn't Hitler-y enough. Well, nothing screams Hitler louder than that dumb mustache. Looks a lot more like that guy with the stabbable face from the History Channel now, doesn't he?"

"Kelly, that's not a Hitler mustache. It's a baby you tagged with a Sharpie."

Kelly sheathed the marker and rubbed his forehead. "We clearly need a new plan."

"Luckily, I brought one." Brooke removed her backpack. She began to unzip it when a loud bang came from the hall. "Check on that."

Kelly retreated to the main door and listened. *Don't be home, don't be home.*

Only one way out existed from this apartment. If someone were coming, escape would involve a mad dash past the interloper, possibly even using the knife. Capture. Arrest. These were not options.

Over his own thudding heart, Kelly heard footsteps, but they were growing distant. Still, he waited a beat before poking his head out. When he did, he caught the tail end of a shadow descending the stairs. Kelly shut the door and returned to the anteroom. "Looks like we —" Kelly came up short when he saw Brooke holding her now-empty backpack over the cradle. "What are you doing?"

"Plan B."

Kelly couldn't even fathom a guess. He warily approached the cradle, and before he could see the baby, he could see her handiwork. (And he was right; he never would have guessed.) Brooke had dumped dozens — perhaps hundreds — of one-inch-diameter rubber bouncy balls into the cradle with baby Hitler, now little more than a face and one free arm in a rainbow constellation of vulcanized rubber. "This is Plan B?"

"Kelly, these things are serious choking hazards. He's bound to put one in his mouth, and then we can let nature take its course. No getting our hands dirty."

"It looks like you buried him in sherbet-flavored boba balls." Kelly watched Brooke zip the butcher knife in her backpack. She offered him no response. "Well, your plan's a flop. He's not putting them in his mouth." The two watched as the mustachioed baby palmed a half-red, half-green ball with his pudgy fingers. He let go just as quickly. It never came near his mouth.

"Give it time. Babies can't help but put things in their mouths. They're like porn stars."

"It's pretty obvious neither of us is gonna kill this baby," Kelly said. Baby Hitler tossed a green-with-white-swirls bouncy ball from the cradle. It *bwopped* around the room. Baby laughter ensued. "Oh good, baby Hitler is yukking it up."

"Maybe he thinks you resemble Neville Chamberlain."

"Or he's dreaming about annexing the Sudetenland." Kelly took a seat on the stool, resting the back of his head against the wall. "So much for being heroes. Maybe we should travel to 1907 and bribe that art school in Vienna to accept him."

Brooke stepped to the window, her backpack dangling from her fingers by the strap. The street life below carried through the glass panes: people shouting to each other, carriages rattling along the cobblestone street, the clapping of horse hooves. Brooke wondered how those people would react if they knew one of history's greatest monsters lay no more than forty feet from them, nestled in a cradle under a gross of bouncy balls.

Directly under the window passed a mother, baby bundled in the crook of her left arm. Her right held the hand of a young boy, maybe five years old, who was throwing a very public tantrum. When his histrionics grew intolerable, she gave him a firm jerk to come along.

"New plan, Kelly," Brooke said, turning from the window. "We don't kill baby Hitler."

"How is that any different than the present plan?"

"I heard about this British nanny who went to prison for shaking a baby to death. We go get *her*, bring *her* back here, leave *her* with baby Hitler — maybe give him a good poke to stir the pot — and let her natural child-rearing instincts take over. No muss, no fuss."

Kelly snapped his fingers and pointed to his friend. "Now you're cookin' with gas."

Brooke flung her backpack over her shoulder and followed Kelly from the room. He poked his head out the main door; the hall was clear. Kelly returned the door to its former position, with the sliver of sunlight against the far wall, and they made for the stairs in lockstep.

A tall woman with dark, plaited hair, fair complexion, and blue-grey eyes passed by at the top of the stairs. She paid Brooke and Kelly no mind, busy lecturing a boy and girl in tow — no older than seven, either of them. Her words of reprimand were foreign, her tone kindly yet insistent. Her left hand held her bag from the market; her right held a plastic contraption, flugelhorn tooting out the *Animal Crossing* theme.

The children longed for their toy.

Kelly, too.

Find the Author



In the Loop by Nancy Chenier

"Piss off," Terrance growled, staring into campfire, the only light on the entire plateau. No stars, no moon. The darkness beyond oppressed him. He could feel its teeth on his back.

"C'mon, Terry, humor me," the younger man said, voice too chipper. "It's not like we're going anywhere."

The older man narrowed his eyes at the younger. "Don't you call me Terry."

"Fine, fine." He pawed a hand through his dark, thick hair. He leaned toward the older man, elbows on knees. "Do you remember this at all?"

"No, moron, it doesn't work like that," Terrance said. "When the loop closes, this reality ends. No memory makes it onto the main timeline." Terrance couldn't explain the campfire though, a parody of a fire with bland amber flames.

"Think back to when you were my age. Was there a time you felt weird, like *deja-vu*? Or a weird burp?"

"That was forty years ago. I don't remember feeling anything."

"Well, thanks a lot for dragging me into your mess, then," the younger man complained, but there was an infuriating merriment to his tone. "Well, since you owe me, out with it. What do you remember of your first meeting?"

Had Terrance ever been this annoying? The other had a point, though. The younger man was locked in this closing loop because Terrance had wanted to see Clara. "I met her at a cafe on campus."

"At the orientation," the younger man said with a tilt to his head. "The cafe was the first semi-date."

"Who's telling this?"

The younger man spread his arms, palms up and open. "Go ahead."

"She would tilt her head while listening, like she was listening to something between the words. And when she talked — no matter what the topic — she was totally engaged."

The younger man grinned, nodded. "For sure."

Terrance flinched. "I watched her for over an hour before I got up the nerve to approach her. It was late summer, still hot. She had this light blouse and black shorts." Terrance had seen her leaning across a wood table, some frothy drink forgotten in favor of the attention she gave to the other person at the table. "And tanned hiker's legs."

The flames seemed to draw heat rather than warm. "I stood behind her at the refill line and asked if she'd ever been up to Angel's Crest. Turned out we were in the same department."

A sterile grey light flickered on along the horizon, the color of TV snow. The darkness paled to indigo.

Terrance forced his breath steady. "We started meeting up in the stacks, competed for top scores in our mathematical physics classes."

"Where she kicked our butts," the younger one put in. If he was off put by the change in light, he didn't show it.

Terrance broke into his own grin. "Yeah, she sure did. What she saw in a dunderhead like me, I'll never know."

The young man snorted. Terrance resisted the urge to clench his fists.

"She got first pick for her post-doc, while I somehow squeaked into the same research facility. I was supposed to follow her there, but I was an idiot."

That's how he'd always told it, but he wasn't convinced his choice had been the wrong one. He hadn't wanted to *follow* anyone, not even someone as wonderful as Clara. He wanted to find his own way.

"I wasn't ready to settle down. I joined the military, became a pilot."

The other man nodded to himself. "A job that would make your life seem more exciting than anything she could do," he murmured.

Terrance frowned. The younger man wasn't military material at all. "I signed on as a test pilot. I flew some of the most cutting-edge flying machines the world has ever known."

The younger man didn't look impressed. His dark eyes reflected the twisting flames. "You left Clara because your ego couldn't handle her excelling over you."

It was true, but Terrance hated hearing it, especially from his younger self. Clara was unrelentingly competitive, a trait he both adored and despised because he was too.

"I got over that," Terrance conceded. "I caught up with her after seven years. She was seeing someone, but agreed to meet. It was like no time had passed." His tone sounded like bragging. Maybe it was. "This time I was ready. *We* were ready. It was meant to be. The wedding was on a mountain top with the wedding party in hiking boots."

The younger man gave a slow clap.

Anger simmered in his gut with more heat than the unchanging fire. "Hey, bud, you asked."

"And so you came back to relive that first blush of romance."

Terrance scowled at the other man, smug in his youth, arms folded across his chest. What did he know? In Terrance's time, the work projects had peeled Clara from his side. For the last decade, they'd worked the Aeon Project together, her work theoretical and his practical. She'd wrapped herself so tightly in equations he could barely touch her. He sought touch elsewhere, but it was never satisfying. So on the latest test drive, he'd taken a detour.

"She remembered," the younger one said. "She knew it was you, the old codger mooning over her. And she was jealous for her future self."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't remember. We met at the orientation, already knew one another before hooking up at the cafe — which was her idea, by the way."

"That's impossible. I distinctly remember watching..." The line of black shorts against a bronzed thigh, the arms resting on the table.

"Oh, you describe her well enough, but did you ever listen to her? The woman is ruthlessly clever. It's what I love about her."

Terrance furrowed his brow. The pale line along the horizon stretched upward to blank out the sky.

"See, Terry," the younger man said, voice weary, "I bet she let you take your little detour knowing full well there'd be a split which would lock you here."

"She wouldn't—"

"Think so? Your memory's not what it once was, buddy." The younger man tapped his temple with his finger and stood.

They stared at one another across the mockery of a campfire.

"I'm going back," the younger Terrance said and turned to face the sterile, washed-out space. Did he see the same thing as Terrance? "And I won't be joining the military."

"Wait!" Terrance remembered being every bit as arrogant in his youth as this man. "Don't be a fool!"

But the younger man was gone into the oblivion of a closed loop.

Or had he gone back to a newly constructed mainline, locking the elder Terrance out of reality?

Terrance rose to his feet. Clara had explained the math to him, warning him to avoid paradox. He tried to remember her exact expression when she'd told him that. Had she known, even then, what he'd been up to?

He closed his eyes and stepped away from the campfire. The loop of time closed around him like a noose.

Find the Author



THE RINSE

by Nicholas Woods

THE FIRST DAY OF THE END OF THE WORLD

I often wondered, why me?

Why do we exist when we do?

Our time on this one Earth, chosen at random.

Why me?

Why now.

At the end.

Footsteps crashed through leaves and a desperate hand grasped nearby bark so roughly she was sure she'd stripped skin free. A sound crackled like a whip, not behind her, but above her, so loud that the woman sucked one single breath into her lungs before continuing her sprint.

Michelle Parker rounded a corner, head glancing back for only a second, as if she was being chased, before crashing right into something.

She didn't even scream before the thing she barreled into was grabbing her.

"Where have you been?" James Parker glanced behind her, wild fear in his eyes.

"Is it happening?"

"Come on, we have to hurry." James pulled her through the remainder of a forest before the trees gave way to a clearing, a cabin seen in the distance.

Something cracked in the sky again, sending James and Michelle to the ground, an invisible wave of energy knocking them off their feet. Michelle recovered, the cabin's front door mere feet away, but she needed to see it. Needed to look at the sky one more time.

High above the horizon spread a gaseous ripple, no larger than a full moon in harvest season. Its deep red color gave it the appearance of an angry eye, with amber and emerald haze swirling behind it.

Michelle felt James pull her into the house, and for a moment she was grateful, because if he hadn't, she might have never peeled her eyes away from that awful sight.

They moved across the living room, passing a small electronic device left on the kitchen table— a Geiger counter, its radiation detection meter sitting in the green. But if one looked closely, they could see the needle ticking, slowly at first, but gaining a pulse that beat toward the red.

At the end of the hallway sat a lone, metal door, a massive painting of an English Airedale Terrier leaning against the wall off to the side.

Michelle raced down the steps into a basement, watching her footing, passing by Phil Parker, twice her age in his early sixties who sealed the metal door shut. Her instincts pulled her eyes to the walls lined with food and water, before moving back toward James' father, who sat down at a computer system and a radio microphone.

A news broadcaster's voice was heard over the stereo. "Everyone is being told to seek shelter. Concrete or metal structures."

Michelle looked at James. "Are we safe in here?"

But Phil was the one to answer her, turning in his chair. "This room was built to survive beyond a blast range of one-hundred kilometers."

James, usually so strong, so carefree and sure of himself, choked on his rushed words. "From a bomb, or a nuke, but..."

"That's not what this is." Michelle tried to keep her voice level. If she could find steadiness in her words, perhaps the rest of her body would follow suit.

Phil nodded, attempting comfort. "I know darling. But we're safe down here. We just have to... hang tight."

James exhaled. "But for how long?"

Michelle's eyes drifted back to the food and water.

We made it three hundred and eighty-eight days.

The door to the cellar creaked open, the metal hinges tight from disuse. Michelle walked through the dusty, empty house, her eyes going to the Geiger counter on the table. She replaced the batteries, the meter showing what she already knew. Green. Safe.

The next several days flowed like a strange dream, a detached sort of waking up after a long disorienting nap. She tried not to dwell on the fact that most of the world, God only knew the numbers, was gone.

Phil tried to repair his garden, the vegetables and herbs there long dead. James made repairs around the house, and Michelle helped where she could, all the while avoiding looking at the Ripple which appeared even brighter and deeper in color than it had before.

Then, the sun would grow white and hot and angry. They would have to run inside the basement, again, and again. When the radiation levels cooled, they would emerge, and attempt to rebuild.

Again, and again.

The reasons that had led Phil to prepare for an off-chance inevitability, that had become a reality, were never dissected. Michelle was, in the end, just grateful that the man had whatever godly foresight or fear or paranoia that made him prepare. The cabin had a well they could pump for water, and James could hunt in the forest for meat. The white solar flares that penetrated the earth seemed to be slowing, giving them more time in between to rebuild.

Michelle thought the tension in her chest may finally release. She didn't have any family of her own, there was no one to mourn except for her friends and those at work that she cared about and tried her best not to think of them. They were gone, and perhaps, no, for sure, they were the lucky ones. Uncertainty brings its own kind of terror. And she thought she at least was starting to understand the nightmare she was in.

Then, one day, she woke up shooting from her bed, racing for a toilet, heaving the night's meager rations from her stomach into the bowl. A cup of water, three minutes to relieve herself onto a plastic stick, and two pink lines were all it took.

The thought of starving didn't scare me.

Or radiation poisoning.

Or the sun's white fury melting the skin from my bones.

Nothing, compared to this.

SEVEN YEARS INTO THE END OF THE WORLD

What do you tell a child about the world ending?

Tell me, I'd love to know.

"Just a little further!"

The boy's begging wasn't petulant; there was sincerity and maturity in his request. Perhaps, that's what made it so hard to refuse. The week before, he wanted to see the lightning struck pine-tree, a mile away from the cabin. Before that, he asked to see the wooden woodpecker house, a half mile away. Since he had turned six, each week he wanted to venture further and further. He was asking more questions. Questions Michelle didn't have the answers to.

"No, Joseph. We need to get back. It's going to get dark soon." Michelle took the boy by the hand. They made their way through the forest, back toward the cabin. "Grandpa will be up soon; he'll want to read with you."

In the last few years, Phil had grown accustomed to sleeping during the day so that he could keep watch at night. They had only one incident with a Roamer in the past few months, but those types were desperate, dangerous, and Phil claimed to feel more content keeping watch while the parents kept a normal schedule with their son.

Michelle looked down at Joseph. Her son seemed so full of curiosity, so seemingly knowing, but of what reality Michelle couldn't guess. All she wanted in the entire painful

universe was to show her son a beautiful world, before he learned about the one they were truly in.

"Wanna race back to the cabin?" Michelle found a smile she had learned to wear, a convincing excited façade that displayed anything other than what she truly felt inside.

With a nod, Joseph ran to the cabin, Michelle on his ever-quickening heels. The moment he reached the door, she grabbed him. "I got you!"

A fits of giggles took him before he slipped from her grip and moved inside.

The cabin's interior no longer appeared as it once did. Colorful sheets were torn to stream from ceiling to banister, hand-crafted paintings and beautiful pieces of artwork torn from books and magazines now lined the walls. Her goal was a kindergartener's classroom on steroids, and Michelle thought she hit the mark well.

"Where's Dad?" Joseph asked, looking around.

"He must still be at work."

At work. James' day-job consisted of foraging for supplies, avoiding exiles, bandits, and Roamers. Working with other survivors on the mountain to trade goods for their water supply. While others had various items to offer, their cabin had one of the few wells that was dug deep enough to avoid radiation when solar flares struck.

When those unfortunate days would come, Michelle would make a game out of it, getting Joseph downstairs with the rest of the family in a manner that not only didn't frighten him, but made him happy and excited. It was all she could do.

Joseph moved up to Michelle. "There's a picture in your room, of Dad and Grandpa, when Dad was little. Where were they?"

Michelle's heart froze in her chest. She knew the photo. Were they in Chicago? She was pretty sure.

"I want to go there," Joseph said, and Michelle realized she hadn't responded. She took a deep breath and kissed her son's head.

"One day, we will."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Maybe they would, somehow. For seven years, she hadn't so much as gone down the mountain. James barely went past Auberry, the small town at the foot of the pass, unless scavenging was incredibly desperate. It was just too much of a risk to go much further.

That evening, James returned home, washing himself outside before moving into the house, a dark expression on his face he tried to cover up. He wasn't as good at pretending as Michelle was. That was okay. He had his job; she had hers.

Earlier that day, James had mentioned that he thought it was time Joseph learned to use a rifle. The boy was getting bigger. Michelle had found James in the bedroom before he went out for the day.

"Look, I thought about what you asked the other day, and I just don't think it's a good idea." Michelle saw the frustration in his eyes but remained strong. "No guns. It's too early."

James took a breath. He'd never yelled at Michelle, ever lost his temper, though if he had she probably wouldn't have blamed him. The things he had to do, the things he did on a regular basis for the family, were enough for anyone to need twenty-four-hour therapy. But

James had no one. Except for her. But he was soft with her, even when he was in a tough place, and if his mood was especially dark, he would take time to himself until he was better.

His eyes found hers, steady. "He needs to learn some simple skills. Self-defense."

Michelle fought the urge to snort. The idea was almost comical. "At his size, who is he going to be defending himself against? That's our job."

"He's big enough to pull a trigger." James went quiet, guessing the words would rock Michelle. And they did. He continued. "And when was the last time you practiced your shooting?"

It had been a while, she had to admit, but stayed focused on the part that mattered most to her. "He's just a boy."

"He's getting older, baby. Asking more questions. We're going to have to tell him something about the world."

In her heart, she knew he was right. Speaking to a child about the normal world would have been difficult. What does someone tell a six-year-old about disease, suicide, and murder? But now, with the world the way it was, it seemed an impossible task. One wrong word, or rather, one truthful one, could rip the veil of childhood from his eyes and replace it with a lens she never wanted him to see through. But perhaps, it was inevitable.

That night, she looked over at Joseph, who sat at the dinner table next to a quiet James while she stirred soup on a portable gas heater. Footsteps creaked on the floorboards, and Phil entered the room.

"Was that you I heard running around earlier?" Phil directed a mock-stern look at Joseph who only stifled a grin.

"Sorry, Dad." James wiped at his face, clearly exhausted, but knew sleep was far from near.

"Don't be." Phil settled into the table. "I like the noise. Funny. Your Mom and I bought this place, well, to get away from the city. Get some peace. Three months in we looked at each other like we were crazy."

Michelle turned to look at James, both sharing the same thought: *thank God you did.*

Later, Phil read to Joseph from *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White. Michelle listened while she cleaned, his voice speaking a question posed to Dr Dorian asking if he believed animals could talk. The doctor's answer — that he'd never heard one say anything, but maybe he wasn't paying attention and that children pay more attention than adults — resonated deep within her.

Michelle looked at Joseph, his brown eyes staring back at her.

After reading, she tucked him into bed, kissing his forehead.

"Are you going to sleep?" Joseph asked, that curious tone in his voice searching for more.

"No, we are going to be up a while." Michelle stood, moving to the door.

"Doing what?"

Michelle stood by the door before closing it. "Grown up things. Get some sleep."

She took one last look at the boy who settled into his blankets.

Michelle moved downstairs, and out of the house, into the exterior garage where she knew James and Phil would be waiting.

The garage functioned nothing like it once had. It was now the base of operations of everything they had to do to survive. Weapons lined the walls, cleaning supplies for the guns neatly stored as well as ammunition that Phil had stockpiled.

Michelle entered the room to find James at the center table, cleaning a pistol, while Phil moved in the background, a long-range radio held to his ear. "Three gallons for how many carrots? No fucking way Rich... Yeah, yeah, okay now you're talking. And some sweet potatoes."

James stepped toward Michelle, his anticipated eyes making her nervous. "What's going on?"

"There's something you need to hear." James motioned her over to the radio controls. Michelle watched as he dialed into a nearby keypad.

A voice sounded over the speaker. "Thank you for calling the Co-Op information channel. Please enter your designated pass-key to receive the latest local information." James typed in their family's designated code.

Michelle's eyes went to a sticky note above the keypad that read: *6, 7, 8 months since last big one.*

Once the passkey was accepted, the neutral voice spoke again. "Thank you, INDEPENDENT HOUSE, PARKER FAMILY, ST. PAUL'S MOUNTAIN. Here is the local forecast. Radiation activity in your area is clear. There have been increased reports of criminal activity and Roamers gathering in the southern towns of Prather and Auberry."

James scribbled on the notepad: *Roamers gathering?*

The voice continued its log, "Eighty percent chance of solar flare expected October Thirtieth."

James' hand found the paper once more: *Storm in three days?*

Michelle felt her throat go tight. Three days. They were prepared to go down at any minute, but the thought of going into that cellar was difficult to accept. Solar Flare radiation was different than other forms of disastrous radiation. The cosmic rays and radiation emitted from the sun during a Solar Flare storm would be devastating while it was active, but the moment the sun settled and the ejection was over, the radiation would clear up quickly, unlike the effects of a bomb or nuclear power plant meltdown. But while the storm was hot and white, they would need to be locked downstairs for as long as it lasted.

Michelle sat down at the chair, her thoughts racing, her eyes moving along the notes and taped information around the equipment.

Her eyes found a map of St. Paul's Mountain. On the west side stood the Parker Cabin. Four names were written in various other spots around the mountain, noting the other independent families, each whom had some sort of shelter to protect against solar fares. Whether they were as updated as the one in Phil's cellar, none of them knew, as this was not information freely given on the rare chance the independent survivors got to chatting.

On the far side of the mountain was a drawing of a collection of buildings with *CO-OP, 58 members*, written below. Below the mountain were names of other cities and their population changes. *San Jose: 971,233, 459. Fresno: 545,277, 240.* And so on. Michelle found it difficult, still, to comprehend such devastation.

Michelle turned to James. "Roamers are gathering? They never come up the mountain." There was little for the Co-Op exiles to forage, and Co-Op rangers would shoot any of them on sight if they were seen. At the start of the Co-Op's formation, they had set out rules. Many similar to the laws society previously held. Punishment for the simplest infraction was banishment from their shelters, their food supply, and most importantly—their equipment that detected solar flares.

"Only one reason to gather in mass. They must have caught wind of the storm coming. I think they're finally going to try." James didn't hold a trace of worry in his voice.

Michelle guessed James believed the Co-Op could hold their own if the Roamers made an attempt to take the radiation shelters they had. She squeezed her hands together attempting to stop their trembling.

James turned to his dad, whose voice grew tense.

"How long has it been since anyone's heard from them?" Phil nodded gravely, eventually ending the transmission. He looked at Michelle and James. "It's confirmed. A storm's coming, people are preparing. But no one had heard from Ali Elrod, or her family, in a week."

James moved around the center table, adjusting a map, looking at the Elrod's southern position on the mountain. Their cabin sits at the lowest elevation. The first to be reached if Roamers came up the pass. "The Co-Op usually looks into these matters. Are they going to check on them?"

Phil frowned. "They've been contacted, but no straight answer has been given. Someone needs to check in on them though."

The rest of the night was spent preparing. It was decided in the morning, James would go take a look at the Elrod house and see what he could find while Phil and Michelle prepared supplies for the storm.

Michelle moved into bed that night, an uneasiness in her entire being. She was scared, but she had learned over the years to live with terror. She could hold it around her, let it sit at the gravitational edge of her being, and not let it fully in. Eventually, James came in and joined her. They had few moments alone with one another, quiet in the feigned peace that night presented. She reached for him, and he took her hand. His touch was warm, but his grip was tenuous. Slack. All she wanted was for him to grab her and hold onto her. To squeeze her so hard that she felt *something*. Pain. Safety. But he could not read her mind. So, instead, she turned to him, wrapping her arms around him. She held him fiercely, letting him know with every taught muscle and fiber of her being, that she hadn't given up. Not yet. Not ever.

When she slept, her courage left her and the doorway to her fears were flung wide open. How cruel for dreams to bring her such awful terror. Dreams were supposed to bring what day and life could not. A hand shook her, a life line out of her fitful nightmares.

"Michelle!"

She jolted awake, dawn's sunlight embracing her before she opened her eyes to see James.

"Bad dream?" James was dressed, leaning over her.

"Just one of the usual ones." Michelle tried to find a smile, but embarrassment couldn't overwhelm the fear that still held her.

It took an hour for her head to clear. James left shortly after her rising, headed for the Elrod's cabin to see why they had not been in communication with anyone.

Michelle sat at the kitchen table; Joseph close to her. "Will you play with me?"

She looked at her son a long time, a smile on her face, counting on his innocence to hide her poorly worn mask. It would be a hard day, but they've had plenty hard ones.

Later, in the early afternoon, Phil rose to teach Joseph a few agreed upon lessons. They would hold off teaching him how to hunt until his next birthday, but in the meantime, he could learn the aspects of the weapon and the fundamentals of how to safely operate one. Michelle wished he didn't have to ever learn how to use a gun, but she knew some things were out of her control. What was in her control, was how he viewed the world.

So, after lessons with grandpa there were lessons with Mom. She read to him, showed him paintings, listened to music, and read him poetry. A beautiful world. Or at least, the remnants of one.

Then the sun set, and James hadn't come home. Michelle waited by the window, trying to keep her nerves below the surface. Phil busied himself by preparing the cellar, storing water, checking their dried and canned food supplies, doing calculations. There wasn't more information on how large the storm would be. Perhaps the Co-Op didn't know. What remained of the scientific community worked within their boundaries, but Michelle was sure they kept some information to themselves.

"Dad's home!" Joseph moved to the front window, truck headlights shining on his face.

Michelle raced to the front door, opening it. She stood on the porch and could see Phil's truck. But it didn't drive into the property. Why wasn't he coming in?

Phil appeared next to her, a radio in his hand.

"James, come in." Phil clicked the radio and the silence that followed seemed to last an hour. But after a moment, they heard James' voice.

"I'm here."

"Why aren't you coming in." Michelle now held the radio.

"You need to put Joseph in the cellar and lock it."

Michelle and Phil exchanged a look of deep wariness, unsure of the why but knew the request would not have come if it weren't something serious. Something bad.

The cellar no longer looked like the emergency shelter for three. The space wasn't terribly large, although it did have a small closed off bathroom, and a divider for a single bed. But Michelle had done her work on it, making the place colorful and friendly. In the center of the room was a two-person tent. Michelle led Joseph to it.

"I need you to stay here, and not move. Can you do that for me?"

The boy's face crinkled. "Why?"

"Because, something... happened to Dad at work, and I need to help him."

"I can help." His voice was earnest.

"I know you can. But right now, you can help me, by staying in here. Can you please do that for me?" Michelle tried to put authority into her words, but she didn't want to risk him breaking down, crying. He came first, no matter what.

But to her relief, he nodded. "I can do that, Mommy."

Michelle left the little boy. She didn't lock the metal door, but she closed it almost all the way. Then, she moved outside to the truck.

Phil was next to the back door looking at something, James standing, back turned. When Michelle approached, he turned around, her eyes horrified at what she saw.

He was covered in blood. She raced to him, worriedly checking every part of him.

"Don't worry, it's not mine." James gave her hand a comforting squeeze, sticky dark left on her wrist from the gesture. She didn't care.

"Help me get her into the garage," Phil said, and James moved to him. Out of the back seat, they lifted a young girl, unconscious, blood leaking in heavy pools from her side. Michelle figured the poor thing couldn't be more than seventeen. What had happened to her?

Inside the garage, they laid the girl out onto the center table. Together, they lifted the side of her shirt and found her wound. A large tear through her side, but nothing vital seemed struck. She had lost a lot of blood, but if they could bandage it, she would perhaps live.

"Who is she?" Michelle asked as she wiped blood from around the gash.

"Co-Op," James answered. "She was... there when I arrived, tied to a chair. The Elrods..." He looked at his father, knowing the words that were to come would hurt him. "The whole family was left in an open grave in the backyard."

Phil's face went dark. "Roamers?"

James nodded. "I crept up to the house. Was going to leave, but I saw her. Her truck was outside, you know the white trucks they all drive."

Co-Op ranger's vehicles were all decal'd with the same phrase CO-OP: KNOWLEDGE AND PROTECTION. AT THE END. They were said to be impervious to solar flare radiation. Some Co-Ops had special garage entrances where their people could enter and exit in the middle of a storm.

James eyed Michelle. "I listened for as long as I could. There is a group of Roamers, all gathered, all working together to take the St. Paul's Mountain Co-Op and its shelter. But some are splitting off. Taking houses with shelters, like the Elrods."

Michelle's heart started to hammer. "Do they know about us?"

"I don't know." James' breathing never seemed to settle. "We should assume they do. And that in the next day or two, before the storm, they'll come try and take this house."

Everyone went quiet. Less than an hour of work and the girl's wound was clean and sewn. They didn't ask James what happened next, though Michelle could imagine. If he was here, with the girl, then he had killed the Roamers in the Elrod house. She didn't feel sorry for them. They were murderers. They'd killed an old woman, her children, and grandchildren. They deserved what they got.

Michelle moved outside with James, near the well, and helped clean the blood from him. They didn't speak a word the entire time, just moving in step, filling clean buckets, dumping murky red ones. Ringing red liquid from rags and starting again. It took over an hour, this marital ritual of theirs.

When he was cleaned, she found his eyes in the moonlight. He looked into hers, but there was a hollowness to him. She knew they exchanged the same feelings, the same unspoken

words of the unfairness of the world. The difficulty of their situation and how maybe, perhaps, it would be better to just have died with the rest of the world.

They stared at each other a long time, no words passing, for there were none that could comfort one another or speak what the other didn't already know. That this was their life. That all they could do was keep moving, keep surviving, and pray that throughout, they could find moments of peace and joy.

James turned to her. "Is Joseph inside?"

"Yes," Michelle responded, her heart clenching. "He should be in bed."

"Good." James looked down, as if his shame was a weight drawing them to the ground. "I don't want him to see me. Until I... I just... can't see him right now."

He meant he couldn't pretend. Michelle understood. For the night, he had been strong enough. There was only so much a person could take.

Michelle found his hand in the dark and led James to the house. They moved inside where it was blessedly quiet. Michelle wanted time to take care of James, but those hopes were dashed as someone appeared at the stairwell.

"Joseph, I need you to go back to your bed," Michelle instructed, but to her great surprise, the boy raced down the stairs and threw his arms around James' legs. Michelle glanced at James, who was stunned, but seemed to take a deep breath, trying. God help him, he was trying. Phil entered the back door and Michelle saw him take in the scene, quietly, not moving.

Michelle and Phil watched as James looked at Joseph with that same hollow stare he gave her. Then, he hugged his son fiercely and did something that completely shocked her. James began to weep. Joseph's eyes went wide, shooting to Michelle with confusion, worry, and a sheer lack of knowing what to do. It broke her heart in a thousand pieces as the boy lifted a hand and patted his Dad's head.

"It's okay, Daddy. You're home now."

James seemed to give a final shudder before gulping down his emotional release, pushing it down, and standing. Without a word to anyone, he moved Joseph aside and headed up the stairs.

Michelle looked at Phil. The man gave her a small nod that said, *this is normal*. Phil had served in the military, seen battle. Partially why he was so adept at survival and weaponry. So, he knew what his son was experiencing. The erratic toll it took. That was why the next day was so difficult.

"I told you to stay inside"

Michelle raced outside toward the shouting. It was James, gripping Joseph by the shoulders.

"I'm sorry," the little boy squeaked. "I just wanted to see the girl."

Michelle had told Joseph about their new 'houseguest' who was resting in the garage. That was her mistake. But she had never seen James like this.

"What's going on?" Michelle said moving between them.

James turned away from her, picking up the rifle he had tossed to the ground.

"I told Joseph to stay inside today. It's too dangerous, it's too..." He was about to start screaming again, she could see it in the veins of his neck. She held up a firm hand.

"James. I'll talk to him." He looked like he was about to say something else, anger still coursing through him. "James," she said again, gentle but firm.

James took a deep breath, shame starting to douse the fires inside of him. "It's too dangerous."

Michelle nodded to him, and grabbed Joseph by the hand, taking him inside. She sat the boy at the kitchen table. He looked utterly stricken, face red, eyes cast down. She felt bad for him, despite that fact that he *did* disobey them.

Then, Michelle's mind painfully went to James. Often, a new great fear would bubble up inside of her. What if she were killed? What if it were just Joseph and James? James surely couldn't keep up this act, pretending with the boy that the world is an albeit odd but safe place. As much as it pained her to think this of her husband, with terrible sadness, she knew it to be the truth.

He couldn't pretend.

"I just wanted to see her."

Michelle's attention snapped to Joseph. She knew she shouldn't have mentioned the young girl in the garage. She was awake, still sore and weak from her injury. Michelle knew she was probably hungry.

"Stay here." Michelle said to Joseph. "I'm going to see if our guest wants to join us for lunch."

It turned out, the young girl was very hungry. Ten minutes later she was sitting at the kitchen table across from Joseph, canned peaches and soup before both of them. She ate the fruit like it was best thing to touch her lips in years. Perhaps it was. Who knew what the Co-Op fed its people. Partially why the family never wanted to join. Everything that one ate, drank, and did was determined by them.

Joseph stared at the Co-Op girl in fascination. She was the closest person in age to anyone he'd ever met. "Are there other kids, where you live, like me?"

Michelle felt her heart ache at that. There was only so much she could give him, this she knew. The girl shot a glance at Michelle, but Michelle had told her the rules about what she could and could not tell Joseph.

"Yes, a few," she answered.

Joseph's eyes went wide. "What's your name?"

"Abby. After my mom."

"Where's your mom?"

Abby's eyes went soft, then glanced at Michelle for help, having been put in a tough corner.

"Let Abby eat her lunch." Michelle took a bite of her own food, although her appetite hadn't been great the past few days, but she knew she needed her strength.

"Can I show Abby the basement?" Joseph asked Michelle.

"Not right now." Michelle exhaled, frustrated with herself more than anything. They shouldn't be revealing the details of their shelter to anyone.

Joseph turned back to Abby. "We hide in there when the sky goes white."

Abby wiped her mouth, then looked around the house nodding. Michelle pursed her lips but kept her face even as she could. An act for two.

Joseph set down his spoon and pushed one of the drawings around him toward Abby. It was of the Ripple, but bright green. "I know the Ripple is red, but I ran out of red crayons."

Abby looked at the picture, tilting her head seeming slightly impressed. Then, her eyes moved curiously to Joseph. "Do you know what the, *Ripple*, is?"

Joseph shook his head.

Abby sat back. "The Ripple, it used to be a star. A sun, like the one in our sky that sometimes turns white." Joseph listened intently. "When stars get old, just like people, they die. But when stars die, they explode. The Ripple was very close to us. So close it..." Abby's words trailed off before she found the right ones. "It's not the first time it's happened on Earth. Scientists say it's happened several times over the last hundred thousand years. And that trees, inside their bark, keep records of these supernova events."

The last Michelle found intriguing, although the first part had been known to her. In a flash, the ozone layer was burned away. Now, without the Earth's protection, solar flares were able to penetrate the surface, over and over again.

"But that's all going to end," Abby said casually, picking up her spoon to another mouthful of canned peaches.

Michelle narrowed her eyes at her. "What do you mean?"

Abby shrugged. "*The Rinse*. It's ending. Didn't you know?"

To Joseph's extreme discontent, Michelle placed him back inside his tent in the cellar, quickly whirling back on Abby who shifted uncomfortably on the couch, her wound obviously causing her discomfort.

"What do you mean, the Rinse is ending?" Michelle demanded.

"They didn't tell you? The Co-Op?" Abby seemed genuinely confused.

"No, they didn't. They just said another storm is coming."

Abby shook her head, perhaps frustrated by the institution she served. "Yeah, a big one. Should last a month. But, the ozone layer. It's built itself back up. This storm should be the last."

Michelle couldn't believe what she was hearing. Could it be true? She feared to hope. "Can you prove it?"

"No, not here. But I know, for certain, that's what all the Co-Ops have been relaying to one another. Been preparing. Maybe that's why they kept independents out of the details. They want to be the first to claim whatever they want in the new world."

The new world. Michelle's heart began to race, for the first time with purpose, not terrible fear and dread. She grabbed a walkie and called Phil and James back home. They arrived and Michelle took one of their rifles to guard the exterior while Abby told them what she just revealed to Michelle.

Michelle moved along the perimeter, eyes scanning through the trees, her mind on the future and what possibilities were to come. She never once considered this a potential reality. No more hiding, no more fear of nature trying to wash them off the planet. Sure, there would be trials ahead, a new world to build, but that would be a beautiful pursuit. Something she

would relish to share with her son, and not the black hole of inescapable terror that had been their life for nearly a decade.

For the first time in a long time, a genuine smile touched her lips.

She doesn't even hear the person step up behind her until a hand clasped over her mouth.

Michelle kicked out, but someone else, a woman punched her in the stomach. Michelle doubled over, the rifle in her hand pulled from her grip. Michelle looked to see a man towering over her. A Roamer, by the look of his scars. His long black hair hung in strands down to his shoulders, two bright blue eyes behind dark stringy shadows. Next to him was a woman, dirty auburn hair, and a bald, skinny man. All held the same burns that came only from radiation exposure.

The blue-eyed man knelt down to her. "Scream, and I'll kill you. You got one chance, to save yourself, and that little boy in there. Tell me. Are the others armed?"

Michelle's mind raced. These people meant to take the house. Were they giving her a choice? To keep her and Joseph alive?

The bald man coughed a sickly sound. He might be contaminated on the inside, his body scoured with radiation cancer. He didn't have long. Maybe months.

Michelle nodded. Knowing James and Phil were armed might keep them from attacking. At least, that's what she hoped. When the three produce guns of their own, eyes on the house, she realized she was wrong.

The red head revealed ropes and tied Michelle to a nearby tree. Off in the distance, through the woods, Michelle could see a white truck with decaled letters on the side. They must have stolen it off some Co-Op rangers. Michelle turned to her captors.

"Please. Please, don't hurt them. We can give you food. Water."

The Roamer woman looked at Michelle without an ounce of pity as she placed a gag in her mouth. "Not your food or water we want. Plenty of that in our truck. It's your shelter. Storms coming."

"Let's do this." The blue-eyed Roamer gripped his gun, and the others followed him. Michelle had to watch as they advanced on her house, her family. Michelle tried to scream past the cloth in her mouth, but the words were caught in the fabric. She yanked at her hands, pulled at her bindings, her flesh tearing, sticky liquid now coating the rope. But she couldn't break loose.

Michelle looked through the trees and saw something terrible, yet it brought her great relief. A gunshot rang through the air, the bald roamer outside the eastern section of the house going down, a bullet hitting him right in the belly.

Good. James and Phil were aware of what was coming for them. Her relief was short lived, as more gunshots pierced the air.

Michelle yanked at her bindings, pulling the rope tight against the bark. In smooth motions, she moved chord up and down, up and down. She moved fast, starting to feel the barest ease in the tension binding her. The only thing that stopped her was the erratic succession of bullets. It wasn't a standoff with unlimited ammo. No. These shots came in carefully, as if each bullet fired had a chance to take someone she loved.

She could only imagine what Joseph was thinking right then. She prayed he was still in the cellar. Prayed he wasn't scared.

Just when she thought her bindings might be loose enough to get a hand through, Michelle heard something that made her soul slip from her body. Not a bullet. No. This sound was like a whip cracking through the air.

Michelle looked up to see the sky, its familiar blue now turning a terrifying white.

The storm was early.

Michelle could hear calls from the distance as the blue-eyed roamer shouted to the red head. She couldn't hear what they were saying. It didn't matter. She probably had five minutes tops before radiation would fill the air.

Her bloody wrist slipped through one of the bindings. She ripped the gag from her mouth then uncoiled her other hand. Then she sat back on the ground yanking at the knot around her legs.

There was one last gunshot, and Michelle heard the yell of someone screaming ring through the air. It didn't sound like James, but it was hard to tell. She couldn't think, couldn't imagine all the terrible possibilities that were out there. She just had to get free.

The knot finally gave a sliver of purchase, and she was able to push the rest of the rope away. She jumped to her feet, turning around, ready to spring home when the barrel of a gun pointed right at her face.

It was the blue-eyed Roamer. He held his side which dripped with blood, a pistol pointed at Michelle. "In the truck, now."

"Please, just..."

The man silenced the rest of her words with a sharp jab of the metal into her side. Michelle didn't know what to do. She moved toward the Co-Op truck, her eyes looking up through the trees to see the sky a deep pulsing white. Mere minutes were left.

They moved to the truck. Michelle, hands up in the air, looked over her shoulder to see the man trying to reach into his pocket for the truck keys, all the while keeping his pistol aimed at Michelle's back.

He fumbled for them, his finger's slick with his own blood, dropping them into the dirt. He cursed, reached to get them. Michelle saw his gun hand waver, just for a second, just enough for it to move its direction away from her.

It was the image of her family that was in her mind, when she turned and kicked the Roamer square in the jaw. He fired a bullet that made her shudder, but it bounced off the impenetrable truck's glass before he tumbled over. Michelle made her move, reaching for the car keys, unlocking the truck, and jumping inside.

She closed the door just as bullets flashed against the glass. She jolted, terrified. But the glass held. The blue-eyed Roamer screamed bloody murder outside the truck. He pulled on the door handle, but thankfully, it didn't budge. He stepped back and pointed his pistol at her.

Michelle yelled, bracing herself. But the bullets just bounced right off. She looked to the corner of the truck. There was a dial adjacent to the speedometer, a meter she knew quite well. Its needle ticked in the yellow, edging toward red. Michelle stared through the windshield as the sky went pure white.

She looked out toward the blue-eyed Roamer. She pointed to the sky, a smile on her face. Realization dawned on the Roamer, just a moment too late. The air began to turn white all around them, the snapping sound like lightning cracking, consuming everything. The Roamer screamed, holding his hands out before him.

Michelle held her breath, the white wave all around her, but the truck kept her safe. It seemed like an eternity, but in reality, it was no more than a minute, until the white light disappeared, and the forest around her appeared normal.

But it was far from normal, far from safe. She looked the truck's radiation meter. It was deep in the red. Michelle knew it might be for weeks. She didn't let herself panic. The red head said there were supplies in the truck. Michelle reached toward the back, into the covered trunk, and saw a massive heap of food, water, and other survival gear. Plenty for just her to last a long time.

But what about her family? Did they make it into the cellar? Was anyone hurt?

Michelle looked around and found a radio. She tuned it to the channel the family designated on, but she only heard static. Then, slowly, the crackling gave way to voices.

"She'll be okay." That was Phil. Phil was alright.

Michelle pressed the button on the radio, speaking into it. "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

No response. Then, another voice was heard.

"How do you know?" Abby asked. Abby was with them.

The outgoing mechanism on her radio must be fried, but it was picking up their signal. But what about James and Joseph? Michelle's heart began to race, heavy, and aching. James didn't make it back, did he. Her paranoid thoughts of every possibility continued to assault her like the sun's radioactive discharges upon the planet. It was too much.

"I don't. I just know in my heart. That girl's a survivor." Phil's pride in her pulled her back to the present, helping her not fall into despair. "I'm going to rest a minute. The channel's open. Keep an eye on the radio. And them."

Then, through the radio, she heard something. Laughter and crying can often sound like the same noise, but a mother knew. Joseph's laughter trickled in over the radio. It was more than she could bare to know he was safe.

"Your name is Borqiz and you're a troll!" Joseph said.

Then, she heard James.

"Borqiz. What kind of name is that!" James called out. She could hear the strain in his voice. Worry, she knew, was for her and her safety. But there was something else on top of it: a command of will, pushing his tone to be comforting. "Alright, well you better hide because Borqiz the terrible is coming to eat your bones."

For a long time, she just listened to the sounds of her husband playing with their son. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Where she was supposed to go. But it didn't really matter. She would survive. More importantly, so would he.

Michelle put the key in the ignition and fired up the truck, pulling down the forest road, the only thing guiding her in the sky the dark red of the Ripple.

Three months.

I'll see you then my love.

*I can't wait to show you a new world. I'll see you then.
At the beginning.*



SciFanSat News

The Bartleby B. Boar Award for 2024



goes to

Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil

for their work

We Are Stardust

About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly magazine of science fiction, fantasy and more! We are open to fictional prose and poetry that shelters with the range of speculative fiction genres.

Full guidelines can be found on our submissions page, but in a nutshell, we are looking for and will accept poetry of 500 words and under, and prose in the following categories: Micro Fiction (100 words and under), Flash Fiction (101 to 1,000 words), and Short Stories (1,001 to 7,500 words). Each issue has a theme, and submissions for that month are encouraged to include or at least allude to it.

SciFanSat publishes on the last Saturday of every month. [Submissions](#) for the next issue open the moment the [current issue](#) publishes, and remain open until midnight on the next-to-last Thursday of the month.

Next Issue Prompt

SciFanSat

The Monthly Magazine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!



Issue 19
Theme is
Resist

Submission Deadline Thursday, February 13th, 2025

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