

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
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Among myriad definitions of science fiction and just as many differing opinions about how it operates, two scholars and authors offer helpful defining characteristics of the genre: Professor James Gunn writes that, “Science fiction is the literature of change” (vii), and Professor Christopher McKitterick adds that, “more than just a literary mode. SF is an ongoing conversation” (19). Some scholars believe science fiction to be prophetic, others simply view it as a form of escapism, and still others see it as a genre that investigates the changing human species. This thesis concerns itself with claims that science fiction is a genre that grants its readers the ability to examine the other and the process of othering. In the critical foreword of the project, the research of Edmund Husserl and Janelle Marie Evans will be utilized to define these two terms, “other” and “othering.” Husserl places the other in opposition to the self and defines the other as all an, “individual considered deviant, abnormal, outside of the real or fathomable, and therefore inhuman” (Evans 151). Based on the work of Husserl, Evans defines othering as, “a phrase that indicates negative differentiation between any given person or persons and another group of individuals” (151).

Analyzing two short stories, “Desertion” by Clifford Simak and “The Streets of Ashkelon” by Harry Harrison, and the novel, *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville, this foreword posits that science fiction may be uniquely equipped to examine and subvert notions of the other because of the genre’s ability to be interpreted both literally and figuratively. Samuel Delany described the science fiction sentence as one which, “might be interpreted one way, but that, if [it] appeared in a mundane text, might be interpreted another” (139). A literary technique employed by science fiction is the cultivation of empathy for the other by situating stories from the perspective of the other. Science fiction also makes use of a seemingly innocuous stand-in for a person, organization, or concept in the real world to facilitate examination of challenging issues, such as stories that focus on immigration issues but use aliens from Mars as the stand-in for refugees.

The three original stories contained in this collection all investigate the other and othering. "Broken World, Broken Hearts" interrogates humanity in a postapocalyptic world through the eyes of the other, a cyborg detective. "The Garden" posits that the other doesn't have to be an alien, machine, or monster; the other are humans who value individual profit over communal creativity. In "Death's Queue," the other is a seemingly immortal being who is gradually gaining humanity to its own detriment.

Key Words: "science fiction", othering

DYSTOPIAN DREAMS OF DYING WORLDS:

A TRIO OF ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND AN ANALYSIS OF
HOW SCIENCE FICTION EXAMINES THE OTHER

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Dystopian Dreams of Dying Worlds: A Trio of Original Science Fiction Stories and an
Analysis of How Science Fiction Examines the Other

Science fiction is as a lens through which humanity can examine itself, its motivations or desires, its biases or prejudices, and facilitate difficult discussions by interrogating the other. In order to examine the other, readers must first have an understanding of what it means to be human or a part of humanity. So how does science fiction accomplish this feat? Much of science fiction interrogates how humans view the other by examining the ways in which humans interact with aliens, but another way to perform this same interrogation is by looking at how humans interact with the others that already share this world, domesticated animals. The science fiction sentence provides yet another means by which the genre accomplishes this examination of humanity. Samuel Delany discusses the science fiction sentence in several essays and interviews, including one that was published in *Science Fiction Studies*. In that conversation, Delany describes the science fiction sentence as one which, “might be interpreted one way, but that, if they appeared in a mundane text, might be interpreted another” (139). This is one example of a code that, as Delany describes it, can be used to differentiate science fiction from other genres. One example of such a sentence that Delany uses is, “Her world exploded” (139). In science fiction, this allows for the literal interpretation that an actual planet has been blown apart, but in more other/more realistic genres of literature, the connotation would be figurative: the character is experiencing some kind of emotional trauma. One sentence from “Broken World, Broken Hearts” that exhibits this technique is, “Rosie’s heart broke for the somber newcomer, or it would have if she still had one”. Readers unfamiliar with the science fiction genre might interpret this figuratively, to mean Rosie is a hardened

bounty hunter incapable of compassion, but in the story the meaning is literal: she is a cyborg detective who lost a valuable piece of technology in a card game.

Professor James E. Gunn, a science fiction author, educator, and scholar, wrote that, “Defining science fiction is like measuring the properties of an electron: you may think you’re measuring a solid object, but it’s really a wispy cloud” (ix). This description indicates that science fiction is a nebulous and constantly evolving genre. One artifact that exhibits this aspect of science fiction is actually not a monograph or single story, but rather a piece of art titled “The History of Science Fiction” by Ward Shelley. Shelley’s piece looks like many things from a distance--a giant sea monster, a vivisected organ, and a peacock to name a few--but upon closer inspection, it offers a detailed glimpse into the history of the genre. On the far left, two tentacles named “fear” and “wonder” intertwine as a representation of the very early proto-science fiction works. As the viewer’s eyes move across the image, additional tentacles form, and by the time of the Enlightenment, several bright new colors explode into the image, creating myriad branches that twist together to form new subgenres, such as the Gothic novel, the adventure fantasy, and the space opera as time progresses up to 2002, when the image was created.

The science fiction genre is relatively young compared to other genres of literature such as romance or mystery. One date often cited as the birthday for science fiction is April 1926, the date of publication for the first issue of *Amazing Stories*, the science fiction magazine which was edited by Hugo Gernsback. This first edition contains reprints of classic stories from people like Jules Vern, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe, and enclosed within its pages is also an introduction by the editor in which Gernsback writes, “*Amazing Stories* is a new kind of fiction magazine! It is entirely new-

-entirely different--something that has never been done before in this country” (3). In his introduction Gernsback announces that these types of stories form a new genre, one he called “Scientifiction” (3), a moniker that would later be split apart into the two pieces that comprised it--science and fiction. The introduction Gernsback wrote is presenting the idea that science fiction operates under a different set of conventions than those that readers are familiar with up to this point.

Professor Gunn offers an alternative to the 1926 birthdate for the genre. Gunn’s *The Road to Science Fiction* series is a set of six volumes that offers a timeline for the history of the genre and provides examples of short stories and excerpts from longer works to highlight important moments and additions of subgenres within the field. The first volume, *The Road to Science Fiction: From Gilgamesh to Wells*, covers the approximate period of 2000 B.C. to 1900 A.D., and Gunn posits that, “Science and technology created social change, and the awareness of social change created science fiction” (x). Gunn explores historical works like *The Odyssey* by Homer and *The Clouds* by Aristophanes to tease out elements of what he deems proto-science fiction, such as the relationship between the natural world and myth, which, when combined with human curiosity, ignited the spark that would become the science fiction genre. However, as part of the introduction to this first volume Gunn also notes that, “No true science fiction was written prior to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818, and perhaps not until Jules Vern’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth* in 1864” (xviii). Renowned science fiction author, Samuel Delany, disagrees with Gunn, as evidenced by his comment that, “There’s no reason to run SF too much back before 1926” (Delany 138), and he goes on to explain

that his own timeline for the genre is connected to the time frame when a specific set of codes or conventions began to be applied to items that fall under the science fiction label.

Scholar Arthur B. Evans dedicates his chapter in *Science Fiction: A Literary History* to what he calls “early SF” (Luckhurst 11). Evans notes that other authors and scholars prefer the term “proto SF,” but he believes this term implies, “that no *real* SF could have existed before the twentieth century” (Luckhurst 11). Paul Kincaid is one of the scholars who prefers the term proto SF, but he also has an incredibly loose definition of what classifies as science fiction, so his timeline begins far earlier than that of other scholars. In the anthology *Teaching Science Fiction* Kincaid writes that he believes science fiction is, “a form of the literary fantastic employing any of a wide variety of commonly recognized themes, techniques, tropes, and approaches that have tended to braid together over time into something to which we now give the name science fiction” (21-22). As a result of his broad definition, Kincaid cites *Utopia* by Thomas Moore as one of the first works in the genre, placing his timeline approximately 300 to 400 years further back in time than that of Gunn, Delany, and others. An example of a science fiction trope is, “exotic settings on other worlds” (Kincaid 31), and an example of that trope is seen in “Desertion” by Clifford Simak, as evidenced by the story being set on Jupiter during a time when humans are able to land on the planet and explore it.

In an essay titled “The Literature of Change,” Professor Christopher McKitterick defines science fiction as, “literature about scientific discovery or technological change” (19), and yet, McKitterick acknowledges in the same essay that this sentiment alone is not enough to provide a complete picture of what makes science fiction a distinct genre from that of other fiction. McKitterick eventually settles on an incredibly broad definition

that science fiction is, “more than just a literary mode. SF is an ongoing conversation. It is a community of writers and other professionals, of scholars and fans” (19). Professor James Gunn has a similarly broad definition. In his anthology *The Road to Science Fiction: From Gilgamesh to Wells*, Professor Gunn writes that, “Science fiction is the literature of change” (vii). However, this is a definition that he has simplified over the years he has spent writing, studying, and teaching the genre; Gunn’s previous definition was that science fiction is:

the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger (vii)

Gunn offers both broad and narrow definitions of the field, and his work also demonstrates how the genre, and the traits used to classify it, can change over time.

In his essay, “Theorizing Science Fiction: The Question of Terminology,” which appears in *Teaching Science Fiction*, Gary K. Wolfe offers five different ways to distinguish science fiction from other genres: definition, classification, theme, context, and technique (42-51). In the definition portion of Wolfe’s essay, he differentiates between three types of definitions: functional, rhetorical, and theoretical. Examples of functional definitions are ones that are, “essentially admissions criteria for books and magazines--what should or should not, for practical purposes, be counted as science fiction” (43). These definitions were largely cultivated by editors, publishers, and other people who were categorizing the genre based on how they would market it. In contrast,

rhetorical definitions were generally crafted by, “practicing writers in the field, some with a particular ax to grind” (44). Two rhetorical examples Wolfe cites are the humanistic one generated by Theodore Sturgeon and the hard science fiction focused one of Robert Heinlein. The final type of definition, theoretical, is reserved for academia which is, “generally less prescriptive than functional or rhetorical definitions” (44).

The next methodology Wolfe discusses regarding distinguishing science fiction from other genres, classification, relates more to being able to subdivide the genre into its various parts, such as space opera, New Wave, and time travel. This requires that readers are extremely familiar with the conventions of not only the broader science fiction genre but also the much more specific characteristics that define the various subgenres. There are a few problems with this ideology, mainly that it requires people doing the distinguishing to agree on what classifies a particular piece as a space opera, it assumes those classifications will stay the same over time, and it forces the works to be narrowly defined by one characteristic when many are usually at play in science fiction works, especially at the novella and novel length. Wolfe’s next methodology, theme, is equally nebulous and geared toward distilling science fiction into further subgenres rather than attempting to create an all-encompassing definition. Some examples Wolfe uses as evidence of themes in the genre are, “robots, space travel, genetic engineering, aliens, [and] time travel” (47). One example of theme as a methodology for genre sorting in practice is placing “Broken World, Broken Hearts” into a category specifically for robot stories; this genre assignment ignores other elements of the work such as the setting, which also plays a significant role in determining genre. The problems with this method are the same as those of classification.

The final two methodologies Wolfe describes, context and technique, seek to create much broader categories for science fiction, but they are also both incredibly biased based upon who is utilizing them. For example, if the Science Fiction Research Association is molding the definition for science fiction based on their context, they're going to lean toward more scholarly and academic definitions, whereas publishers or editors creating anthologies for retail purposes are going to have a definition that is skewed toward a commercially successful context. The technique methodology requires the classifier to dissect the work and determine if there are enough individual components to classify it as science fiction. Wolfe notes that, "all the conventional terms of literary art--plot, character, conflict, exposition, dramatic arc, style, figures of speech, and the like--are as relevant to science fiction as to any other sort of fiction" (51), so someone wishing to define science fiction by technique would need to be able to identify those elements present in the genre that are absent from other types of fiction, such as the science fiction sentence Delany describes.

Another way to understand science fiction is by examining it in comparison with mainstream fiction. In this examination, mainstream fiction is literature set in worlds readers understand because the fictional setting is familiar; mainstream worlds operate under similar rules, mechanisms, and constraints as the non-fictional Earth. Science fiction has a different set of conventions. Andy Sawyer and Peter Wright co-authored a chapter in *Teaching Science Fiction*, "Design, Delivery, and Evaluation," that contains a chart comparing mainstream and science fiction literature across five traits: subject matter, world building, focus, world functionality, and characters. The first of these, subject matter, declares that mainstream fiction subject matter, "focuses on human

personalities and human relationships” while science fiction subject matter, “concentrates on the created environment and the interaction of characters with that environment” (234). One example of this trait in action is “Grandma’s Garden.” The personal relationship between the main character and her grandmother is discussed in the story, but the focus of the narrative is on the purple plants that are now going extinct, so the characters are secondary to the environment. Sawyer and Wright also note that mainstream fiction tends to have humans focusing internally on their psyche while science fiction looks outward at the human position within the larger galactic context. These are certainly potential distinctions between some pieces of mainstream literature and science fiction literature; however, this differentiation is not as strong or widely applicable as some of the others listed on the chart because many science fiction stories actually deal with human relationships, internal dialogues, and human experiences with the psyche.

The second, third, and fourth points of comparison Sawyer and Wright mention all work together to make a convincing argument that there are recognizable differences between mainstream literature and science fiction with regard to how the worlds are built, where the story is focused, and how the worlds function. When discussing mainstream fiction, Sawyer and Wright note that the fictional mainstream worlds are indistinguishable from the one we experience every day. In contrast, science fiction worlds have been altered in comparison to our reality, and this alteration can come in many forms large or small. An example of such a change includes purple apples that grow on seemingly normal trees and contain a substance that increases creativity as seen in “Grandma’s Garden.” The fourth point easily provides the best evidence for

mainstream literature being functionally different from science fiction. It is in the discussion of the fourth point that Sawyer and Wright note, “readers of mainstream fiction can assume that they know how the world works,” and they go on to contrast this with science fiction where, “readers can make no such assumption. They must construct and revise their conception of the fictional world as they glean more information from the events of the narrative” (234). By altering the basic rules for how the world operates, science fiction authors are able to question what makes a human as they explore whether or not humans as we know them can exist in these spaces.

The fifth and final point of comparison looks at the types and purposes of characters authors of mainstream stories and science fiction place into their worlds. Sawyer and Wright observe that mainstream fiction, “concentrates on individual characters and their personal development” while science fiction, “is more concerned with the individual as a representative of humanity as a whole” (234). This can also be interpreted to mean that science fiction is able to help readers understand the other because it provides them with characters who are intended to represent the other, and often alongside human characters. One example of this is seen in “Death’s Queue.” In that story, each of the lives taken by Death is a human or an animal that could exist outside the fictional realm, but the narrator of the story is an other in the form of Death. In the beginning, Death is simply taking the assigned souls in his queue without any thought other than questioning how the queue system works. As the story progresses, Death connects more with each person who appears in the queue, and by the end, Death comes to the realization that he will end up in the queue of another of his kind because he is developing empathy and becoming closer to human. Through the lens of Death as an

other, the reader is able to examine the human traits of compassion, curiosity, and empathy, thereby gaining a better understanding of what it means to be part of humanity.

Close readings of several different science fiction stories, “Desertion” and “The Streets of Ashkelon” and a novel, *Perdido Street Station*, reveal how science fiction explicitly utilizes literal and figurative language as a writing technique to interrogate what it means to be human, how humanity sees and understands itself, and the ways in which readers view and treat the other. “Desertion,” by Clifford Simak, is a story that helps us understand the other by challenging the human idea of anthropocentric superiority. The story begins with Kent Fowler, the person in charge of a Jovian survey, contemplating his next move. Fowler has sent out four of his men, “into the howling maelstrom that was Jupiter” (Simak 36), and though not a single person has returned, he is about to send out a fifth. The complicating factor of this particular mission is that humans are not able to withstand the environment of the gas giant, so all four previous men subjected themselves to a process of physical transformation in which they literally became an alien lifeform. After several years of failed experiments and continuous research, the team realized if humans were ever to explore the surface of Jupiter, they will need to do so in the bodies of Lopers, creatures thought to be the highest lifeform on the planet and whose appearance resembles that of large slugs. After the fifth man did not return, Fowler, unable to select any further names from within his stack of files, makes the decision to put himself and his dog, Towser, next in line for transformation and exploration.

To fully understand the anthropocentric ideology in this story we need to closely examine Fowler’s thought processes as he works through the facts known to him before

ultimately deciding to go out into the acidic atmosphere himself, accompanied by his pet. Fowler wonders if the error was in choosing Lopers as the lifeform to become, and his first thoughts default to there being some kind of inherent deficit with the Lopers. The biologists on the team previously determined that Lopers are the most intelligent creatures on the planet, and yet Fowler questions whether there is an error in their research because he knows that, “if the thing Man became did not have capacity for intelligence, Man could not for long retain his own intelligence in such a guise” (Simak 40). This statement implies that human intelligence is superior to that of other beings, and it judges all other forms of intelligence based on how they compare to the human interpretations of it. Fowler’s thoughts also consider the possibility that, “Man’s intelligence could not function correctly through the sensory apparatus provided Jovian life” (Simak 41), but this too privileges the human over the other by assuming that Jovian bodies are not capable of processing human intelligence. Eventually Fowler does consider the possibility that, “the fault might lie with Man... Some mental aberration which, coupled with what they found outside, would not let them come back” (Simak 41). While this train of thought does indicate that Fowler does not fully believe humans are superior to the other, he goes on to posit a scenario whereby humans that transform into Lopers are driven to insanity by the experience, which implies that being a Loper is so horrific that humans are unable to retain their humanity after the transformation into the other that was intended to be temporary.

Another way of examining the other in this story is by seeing it through the lens of the canine companion. Towser, the dog, is first introduced when Fowler is in the midst of contemplating whether or not Lopers are too alien for humans to be able to

successfully transform into them and then come back from the experience. Dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, lizards, and fish all cohabit with humans, and there is no single shared language between humans and any of those species that can give humans insights into their inner thoughts. In “Desertion” Fowler ascertains that Towser is happy because the dog wags his tail when he walks into a room carrying a bone given to him by the cook and sees Fowler sitting behind his desk, but this behavior does not tell us anything about the dog except that he is loyal to his human. The ways we interpret animal behavior in attempts to discern their moods always center upon humans and make the assumption that positive behavior indicators are due to affection felt toward the human.

Animals do not have bodily autonomy in our world, and they do not have any greater amount of freedom in the one inhabited by Towser and Fowler. Rather than send another one of his crew out to face the unknown, Fowler chooses to become a Loper. Against the wishes of the conversion operator, Miss Stanley, Fowler decides that Towser would make the transition into a Loper with him because, as he tells Miss Stanley, “Towser would be unhappy if I left him behind” (Simak 42). Simak gives us no evidence to suggest that Towser would be happy or unhappy if left behind; the reader only has Fowler’s anthropocentric assumption that the dog would be emotionally distraught without his human to give his life meaning.

Once Fowler transforms into a Loper, he realizes that all of his assumptions about what it would be like to experience Jupiter from its surface were wrong. Looking through the eyes of the other, he sees “drifting purple mist that moved like fleeting shadows over a red and purple sward” where he had previously only seen “a hell of ammonia rain and stinking fumes and the deafening tumult of the storm” (Simak 42) through the view of the

television screens in the dome. Fowler also feels muscular and powerful in ways that he did not as a human when he tries out his new body, and he acknowledges to himself that, “it had been hard to imagine a living organism based upon ammonia and hydrogen rather than upon water and oxygen, hard to believe that such a form of life could know the same quick thrill of life that humankind could know” (Simak 42). This is the first moment Fowler fully accepts that there are lifeforms that experience the world in ways similar, equal, and even superior to that of humans. Lopers are not from Earth, and yet Fowler and all the other humans living under the dome had been judging them and making assumptions about their existence based upon a terra-centric, anthropocentric perception.

As Fowler moves about, he realizes that he is able to perceive the world around him through more than a sense of sight. Fowler notes that, “Pleasant scents seeped into his body. And yet scarcely scents, for it was not the sense of smell as he remembered it. It was as if his whole being were soaking up the sensation of lavender--and yet not lavender” (Simak 42-43). Even though it is noted earlier in the story that this transformative technology has been used to explore other planets, the reader has no indication that Fowler himself ever experienced the process, so it makes sense that he might be unable to conceive that senses are processed and perceived differently by non-human organisms. Perhaps the most radically changed sense, however, is connected to Fowler’s ability to recognize other beings.

After getting his basic bearings in his altered body, Fowler attempts to locate Towser, and he faces the realization that he is no longer capable of speaking words to call out to the creature that was previously his pet. Fowler’s brief moment of panic subsided when he, “became intensely aware of the bumbling, eager friendliness of the shaggy

animal that had followed him from Earth to many planets. As if the thing that was Towser had reached out for a moment and sat within his brain” (Simak 43). Simak only has words to communicate the gist of this conversation to the reader, but he notes that the sensation Fowler experienced is, “Not words really, better than words. Thought symbols in his brain, communicated thought symbols that had shades of meaning words could never have” (43). Similarly in “Death’s Queue,” the reader is given no indication of how Death communicates with Sampson, the cat who requested to be taken two years before his life was scheduled to end so he could accompany his human in death.

The moment in which the Loper that was formerly Towser communicates with Fowler is the first time the reader gets to actually experience this encounter through the lens of an other that is familiar and relatable while still being somewhat alien: the dog, Towser. Though the reader does not get to experience the moment of transformation with Towser the same way they do with Fowler, Simak indicates this shift in physical form is easier for the former canine by showing no hesitation or questioning what it means to be in a different body. Over the course of the first few sentences the two share between them, Fowler remarks that it is incredible that Towser can talk, to which the former dog replies, “I always talked to you, but you couldn’t hear me. I tried to say things to you, but you couldn’t make the grade” (Simak 43). Fowler was able to understand when the dog communicated his basic needs for food, water, and going outside, but now Fowler is being told he had only scratched the surface of comprehending what the animal was trying to share. Humans tend to other those they cannot communicate with easily and directly, and unfortunately, there is no easy transformation process or universal translator at this time that can remove language difference as a factor in othering. An example of

language used as a dividing force is the English language. English is the official language for many countries, including those that are not European, due to the long-term effects of colonialism across the globe, but many inhabitants of Earth do not speak this language. Immigrants or tourists who arrive in places like the United States of America without the ability to speak English are seen as others by people born into the American culture. Just like Towser in his original dog form, immigrants and tourists who do not speak English will be unable to communicate more than their basic needs.

“Desertion” ends with a scene in which the pair spend time exploring the nearby musical waterfalls, dazzling cliffs, and glittering rainbows before Fowler has a realization that he is, for the first time in his existence as a human or a Loper, using the entirety of his brain. Fowler is making even more of a shift to becoming an other, and he is beginning to understand that the human body is flawed. “Maybe we are the morons of the universe. Maybe we are fixed so we have to do things the hard way,” (Simak 44) Fowler muses in conversation with Towser about their increased brain capacity and ability to access knowledge as Lopers. Ultimately, both man and dog refuse to return to their original forms, bodies that were aging and unable to readily converse with each other. William Lomax writes, “In [Simak’s] stories, we meet the alien--and he is us”, and he goes on to note, “readers of a Simak story are drawn into a projected world of humanness in alien form and are forced to face themselves staring back from otherness” (143). It is only through a literal transformation that Fowler is able to gain insight into the other, but through the transformative story of Fowler and Towser, the reader gains a greater understanding of humanity.

Physical transformation into another being is perhaps the easiest way for humanity to develop an appreciation for and understanding of the other; however, there are other ways to gain better perspective regarding those who have a different physical appearance and are perceived as the other. One such method is by examining actions and laws. The novel, *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville, takes place in the world of New Crobuzon. The city is described by Lin, one of the characters in the tale, as “a huge plague pit, a morbidic city. Parasites, infection, and rumour were uncontainable” (Miéville 9). Lin is a khepri. According to Lin’s lover, Isaac, khepri females have the body of a woman and a “chitinous head” (Miéville 9), but from Lin’s perspective, “Humans have khepri bodies, legs, hands and the heads of shaved gibbons” (Miéville 9). Within the first few pages of this novel, readers learn that the beings inhabiting New Crobuzon are divided into two categories: humans and xenians, and xenians are any being that is not human.

Xenian races are radically different from humans in physical appearance. The literal differences in the novel between humans and xenians are greatly exaggerated, but there is a more subtle comparison to be made in the non-fictional world with the ways in which people who are not Caucasian are perceived by those who do fall into that categorization. As Lin attempts to cross the city to get from Isaac’s apartment to her art studio, she must consider things like whether or not cab drivers will be willing to accept khepri passengers in the same way Black or Latino people might have to wonder if they will be given access to transportation. The khepri females have heads of scarabs, and the only method they have for communicating with humans is through a non-verbal method of signing with their head legs. Among their own species, khepri are able to speak to each

other through various clicks and chemical sprays. In this example, khepri women are stand-ins for those who are deaf or differently abled in some other manner that makes it difficult or impossible for them to communicate via spoken word. The khepri women are not deficient because they cannot speak, but they are treated as less than human because of their status as an other in this fictional world. In fact, the khepri are superior to humans in a few specific ways: they have a greater ability to perceive the visual world due to their compound eyes, and they can tell things about the environment, such as, “how many of which race lived in which building” (Miéville 16) because of their ability to taste the chemicals given off by each individual in the air. Additionally, khepri are also much more sensitive to vibrations in the air around them, which often makes them more perceptive than the human characters in the novel.

The xenian races of New Crobuzon are numerous, but in all situations, the humans are privileged above the other. Similar to the marginalized people of our non-fictional societies, xenians have fewer opportunities to improve their lives or their station compared to humans. For example, at the time of the events of the novel, xenian students had only been granted access to an education at the local university within the last two decades (Miéville 13). Further, the xenians are typically found living in ghettos among their own kind on the outskirts of the city, and humans are the primary inhabitants of the better kept areas that are centrally located with easier access to shops, schools, and employment. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that all individual beings in each of the xenian races are alike, just like it would be a mistake to assume that all people who are Black or identify as Queer fit into neatly designed, uniform boxes based upon that single aspect of their identity.

Lin is an outcast among her people because she refuses to bend to the traditional values of co-habitation, allowing the males of the species to procreate with them and participating in conventional methods of communal art creation. Additionally, Lin also defies convention by being in a cross-love relationship with the human, Isaac. Similar to groups in the non-fiction world that have traditional beliefs about people within that group not being allowed to marry someone who does not share their race, religion, ethnicity, or some other aspect of their culture, both Lin and Isaac would be shunned if the true nature of their relationship became widely known outside of their small group of friends. The traditional khepri women form living groups that join together to care for the males of the species and also to create large statues in the community made out of paste they cultivate by chewing and mixing various berries. Lin occasionally visits the khepri ghettos where she used to reside in her younger days, and when she looks at the statues she sees, “bankrupt imaginations falling back on cod-heroic grandiosity” (Miéville 20). Like many non-fictional marginalized people, Lin feels caught between two worlds, but she is drawn to the one that she’s been told is reserved for humans because she refuses to accept the belief that her otherness makes her less than.

There are, however, beings who are almost universally viewed as being the other and below even the lowest of the xenian races in status, the Remade. These beings can originate as human or xenian, but that identity is stripped of them once they are processed through the punishment factories and reborn as Remade. Punishment factories are described as “bastard hybrids of prisons, torture chambers, and workshops” (Miéville 19), and the remaking process was almost always intentionally cruel. Becoming Remade is relatable to modern systems of incarceration in that punishments are often excessive,

those who have the means can usually escape consequences, and the lingering effects of the time spent in the facilities will endure for the duration of the person's life. Examples of what it means to be Remade cover a grotesque and horrifying spectrum. One of the lesser examples given in the novel is Joshua, a human thief who refused to testify against the other people who participated in the crime, so he is Remade by having his mouth, "sealed with a seamless stretch of flesh" (Miéville 24). Joshua refused to accept this punishment and cut himself a new mouth, but he is forever scarred by the procedure. In non-fictional realities, people who live in states with three strikes laws and are convicted of possession of small amounts of marijuana will receive a felony conviction, and that record will follow them for the duration of their lives. In both the fictional and non-fictional examples, the convicted person receives a punishment that far exceeds the crime, and both must carry the scars of the conviction. Remaking in general can be seen as a physical manifestation of what people in our world endure as a result of being processed through the criminal justice system. Especially for marginalized communities, like people of color, a felony criminal record can be seen as the same kind of impediment to gaining future employment as if they were Remade with unsightly octopus tentacles protruding out of their body. The Remade are always seen as the other, even if they try to correct their physical disfigurement, and the majority of their society views them as beyond redemption.

Redemption can be difficult for humans to achieve in fiction or non-fiction, but it is nearly impossible for those defined as the other to do so. Humans are typically privileged above the other, so humans are the ones that create the rules, enforce them, and ultimately have the power to decide if those who break them, knowingly or unknowingly,

are worthy of redemption. "The Streets of Ashkelon" is a tale of a missionary and a trader who are at odds over how to interact with the indigenous race of an alien planet, the Weskers. In the introduction to this story, Professor Gunn notes, "Science fiction cannot be written from an attitude of religious belief. Science fiction questions everything; it accepts nothing on faith" (288). Harry Harrison demonstrates this philosophy through his story about the Weskers, an amphibian race who are attempting to learn what it means to be human from John Garth, a trader who landed his ship on their world a year before the events of the story.

Harrison's tale begins with Garth and one of the Weskers named Itin talking about a loud noise they heard outside Garth's home. We are immediately introduced to the fact that Weskers are only able to process information in a very literal and logical manner. When Itin heard the noise outside, he had to reach the conclusion that another sky-ship was arriving by talking through the logic that the noise they heard was the same as Garth's ship, the noise could not have come from Garth's ship because he was sitting with Garth, and Garth was the only one who knew how to operate his ship. The other is often shunned rather than embraced, but in this story, Garth demonstrates a paternal protectiveness by instructing Itin to leave and warn the other Weskers away from the landing sight so they did not get injured.

Garth is a human, but he also attempts to deny his connection to humanity by pushing down any signs of excitement at the potential arrival of another human, as evidenced by his internal thought that he should, "bury the fragment of herd-spirit [that] chattered for the rest of the monkey-tribe" (Harrison 291). Within moments the passenger who booked the space taxi reveals himself to be Father Mark, a missionary who booked

travel to this planet on behalf of his religious organization for the purposes of converting any local beings to Christianity. Garth reacts immediately and violently, pulling his gun and threatening to shoot if the missionary does not leave. The pilot insists that the new traveler stay on the Wesker's world and departs, leaving his passenger on the alien planet. Not knowing what else to do, Garth slaps the missionary and returns to his home. To Garth, the expressed intention of conversion is abhorrent because it represents elimination of a culture he is trying to nurture and protect. Similarly, in "Grandma's Garden," the heir who took control of Cumberland Chemistry had no regard for the natural order and demanded that the magical plants be exploited for profit. Neither Father Mark nor the corporate chemical company appreciate the value letting the other retain their identity; both are blinded to the plight of the other for recognition and acceptance by their own affiliation with a privileged group.

Itin and many of the other Weskers witnessed this encounter, and Itin immediately showed up on Garth's door to resume his post as the current Knowledge Collector, ready to accept any teachings Garth was willing to offer. Garth asks Itin to take a note to Father Mark, requesting his presence at Garth's house for dinner in an attempt to make amends, which the missionary readily accepted from the Wesker. Father Mark is only able to see the Weskers as the primitive other, and he believes it is his mission to impose his beliefs on the indigenous race to save their souls, even though the Wesker do not believe they have them. Much like colonialists who invaded countless countries over the course of our history, Father Mark believes Christianity is the only true religion, and nothing short of conversion to his faith is acceptable. Harrison skillfully crafts this narrative by having the indigenous people, the Weskers, be so alien to humans that some

readers might not make the connection to his condemnation of colonialism and conversion. Garth does acknowledge that the Wesker are not as technologically advanced as humans, but he also advocates that they are highly intelligent beings who, “By circumstances have evolved on an almost barren world, so they have never had a chance to grow out of a physical stone age culture” (Harrison 296). This is important to note because it is evidence of Garth demonstrating his commitment to the preservation of the natural world of the other even though he is just a visitor among them. Garth tells Father Mark of the incredible speed at which the Weskers learned human language as evidence of their fantastic intelligence, and he pleads with the missionary to teach the Wesker, “history and science, philosophy, law, anything that will help them face the realities of the greater universe that they never knew existed before” (Harrison 297). The missionary cannot be persuaded and elects to interfere with the indigenous people, to his own detriment.

Before long, the literally minded and highly logical Wesker demand proof that God exists because Father Mark has told them he does, Garth has told them he does not, and both facts cannot be true. When Garth was the only human the Wesker knew, they “wanted only books and tools and knowledge” (Harrison 298), all of which Garth made them earn through a gradual process so they could have time to fully comprehend the teachings. In contrast, Father Mark freely gave them the information in the Bible without providing any context or explanation other than a promise that they could learn the secrets of the universe if only they had faith. Harrison is not advocating for a policy of no contact with other cultures; in fact, he is arguing just the opposite. The Wesker were not able to evolve further because they lacked the materials to create tools, and Garth brought

them tools in exchange for pieces of art they created using the tools that he could sell.

The story suggests that when we view people who do not share our religion as the other, we are in danger of forcing our beliefs on them rather than allowing them to come to religion in their own time and manner, if they are going to come to it at all.

Father Mark is representative of the colonizers who forced their religion and ways of worship on indigenous peoples who did not want to abandon their traditional systems, and he ends up paying the ultimate price for his ego. The proof that the Weskers demanded was a miracle, and the miracle they specifically chose was the resurrection because it is the one that supposedly convinced the people of Earth to convert. When Garth realized what the Wesker were about to do, he unsuccessfully tried to help the missionary escape, and he accidentally ended up killing one Wesker and gravely injuring another. Garth was knocked unconscious by some of the crowd as others were nailing Father Mark to the cross, and Garth was awakened in his home as Itin cut the bindings off of his arms and legs so he could escape. In a final conversation between the two, Itin reveals that he is convinced Father Mark will rise up from the grave they buried him in, and the Wesker will be saved and purified by God because of their actions. Garth tells Itin that will not happen and indicates they are now murderers. This final scene of unintended colonial consequences cements the notion that the Wesker are in fact representative of indigenous people across the world who had their culture, religion, and languages taken from them because they were the other.

Science fiction interrogates all aspects of humanity, but it is especially adept at examining how humans view and treat those they see as the other. Janelle Marie Evans writes about the other in science fiction and comes to the conclusion that, "Every

problem that exists can be cured by creativity. Science Fiction, a form of creativity that leaves scholars baffled in their quest to categorize it and artists stymied by trying to find a formula to replicate its highest form of artistic expression, is the ideal medium, by virtue of this all-encompassing identity, for transcending and solving the social injustices that plague our world” (144). All of the works discussed and/or contained in this manuscript fit into the genre of science fiction, and they all interrogate the other by either investigating the difference between literal and figurative interpretations, examining cultural or religious differences between humans and aliens, or exploring differences in physical form, language, and communication styles. This manuscript serves as a testament to the value science fiction provides as a means of investigating the other, and in doing so, interrogating what it means to be human and part of humanity.

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Broken World, Broken Hearts

Rosie surveyed Rocky's Saloon from the vantage point of her usual barstool in the corner under the old yet still glowing neon that told everyone it was 5 o'clock somewhere. It was an early autumn day, and it was also the first of the season to bring a chill in the air along for the ride with the sunrise. Rosie had been working on perfecting a coin trick since about noon that day, and it was taking her far longer to master the trick than she liked. The joints in her hands were beginning to feel stiff and tight. She would need to do something about that soon. A slight breeze playfully tossed a few of the first fallen leaves from the ancient ash tree outside into the open doorway of the bar, and the long afternoon shadow of a man seeped into the space behind them. The man grabbed at the doorframe to steady himself. He took off his hat before crossing the threshold and tapped it against the outer doorframe to shake loose the dust from the road. The bags under his eyes were as deep as canyons and as dark as the moonless night sky. The floor length leather coat he wore was covered in the same dust he'd tried to leave outside, and his clothes underneath were so filthy it was impossible to distinguish their original color. The stranger's hands trembled, possibly from lack of sleep, possibly from coming off a bad trip. He looked like a man that might have lost something worth mourning. It was rare to find anything good left in this world, so it was all the more painful when it was ripped away from you. Rosie's heart broke for the somber newcomer; or it would have if she still had one.

Rarely one to approach strangers without payment up front, her eyes tracked his every movement. He shuffled from table to table, and she heard him ask if anyone had seen a woman who had been missing for four days. Tears welled up in his bloodshot eyes, and the word "wife" caught in his throat when tried to describe her to those who were sympathetic enough to listen. Few people still had the ability or inclination to take and develop photographs, and from what Rosie overheard, he struggled with providing

solid descriptive details--“dark hair, dark eyes, just over five feet tall, was wearing a set of blue and grey plaid pajamas when I saw her last”. He could have been describing any number of women in the area, including the strangely well-endowed scarecrow old man McElroy planted in the center of his cornfield. After the man questioned everyone at the tables who didn't immediately turn their back to him, the man cautiously sidled over to Rosie's corner.

“Excuse me, ma'am. I'm lookin' for my... my wife, and I was wonderin' if you could help.”

He had a stutter that only seemed to appear when talking to women. Or maybe it was only Rosie that had that effect on him; she was the only female in the bar just then, so she didn't have enough data to determine what factor caused the sudden speech impediment. After a long silence between them, Rosie replied, “I might be able to help, for the right price. Tell me more.”

“You're Rosie then? I'm Jack Lawson. The cook from the Bravo outpost up the road a ways, Slate, said you might be willing to help.”

So he had heard of her. Rosie looked deep into his bloodshot cerulean eyes until he lowered his head, intently focused on the crimson brim of his faded black hat, which he kept nervously turning round and round. “Rosie, that's me. Pretty hard to confuse me with any of the other folks around here. Do they not have Mechs where you're from?”

“Not really, ma'am,” he mumbled, eyes slowly lifting to make contact with Rosie's. “Slate only just told me that *he* was one when he sent me to find you. Got real angry. I must'a looked at him wrong when he let it slip. I didn't mean nothin' by it. Just surprised was all since he don't... well, he don't *look* mechanical. He went off about how he was sick of the damn Mech-haters. Said they might think different if they knew a Mech served them their precious moonshine every damn day.” His stutter decreased with each sentence. It was most likely her race then, not her gender, that caused it.

From a distance, Rosie's ashen skin could easily be mistaken for someone with radiation sickness, but up close the seams where her joints met, the two small holes just below the left edge of her jaw that allowed a glimpse of the red and yellow wires inside her neck, and her luminous viridian eyes betrayed her mechanical nature. She had dealt with Mech-racists for the last two hundred or so years since the war, but Elmwood was an unexpected oasis of acceptance for her kind. At the very least, her skills as a detective, bounty hunter, and/or general gun for hire bought her enough tolerance for the locals to overlook their bias and keep most comments to themselves. A Mech-Mercenary was an uncommon and handy tool to have at your disposal.

"I see. Don't take it too hard. Slate must have trusted you enough to tell you that, even if he didn't show it and lost his temper. His model isn't perfect, but the Gen 5's are damn close to human, right down to the emotional instability. Have a seat, and tell me more about your wife."

Jack pulled the bar stool next to Rosie out and sat on the edge of it. He kept his hat in his hands, but at least he'd stopped spinning it. Rosie pulled a screwdriver out of an inside pocket in her trench coat, rolled up the right arm of her trench coat, popped open a small compartment in her wrist, and made a series of small adjustments so she could gauge his level of discomfort with her as he told his story.

"My wife's name is June. She's been missing for four days. We went to bed the night she went missing, just like every other night."

"What does a normal night look like for you two?"

"I come home from cookin' dinner for the soldiers. If there was extra left over, which there usually was, I'd bring it home with me for our dinner."

"Do you remember what you had the night she went missing?"

"Chicken and potatoes."

"So are you a butcher too?"

“No ma’am. I never... I can’t.”

Jack’s face reddened with what Rosie assumed was embarrassment at not being able to take a life, not even that of a chicken that would keep him and his wife from starvation. Perhaps he would think differently if he didn’t live in one of the stations, but likely not. Rosie was fairly certain Jack was one of those gentle old-world souls, the ones she thought had gone extinct with the collapse of global civilization. Maybe Jack was a sign that kinder times could return. Again, Rosie was skeptical though. Rosie closed the compartment in her wrist and gently patted his shoulder with one hand while stowing the screwdriver away with the other.

“It’s okay to not be cruel. Some folks just aren’t built that way, Jack.”

Rosie heard a noise that sounded like half a sneeze, and she realized Jack was trying to choke down tears. He wiped at his eyes as casually as he could, but the stream of liquid cut a river into the thin layer of dust that was still on his face.

“Assuming you have the coin,” Rosie said, “I will try to find your wife. Normally this type of job would run about 500 to start, not including any expenses for ammo or travel, but I’ll do it for a flat 300.”

“That’s awfully kind of you, ma’am, but I’ve got the 500. It wouldn’t sit right with me to take charity. June is my world, and I’d give everythin’ I got to get her back.”

Jack pulled a handkerchief that was white in another lifetime out of a pocket inside his coat and attempted to wipe away the traces of vulnerability his eyes spilled onto his face. This was a man on a mission, and it had been a long time since anyone had truly *needed* her.

Rosie stood up and motioned toward the door. “All right then,” she said, “Supplies first. We’ll need to visit Daisy over at her General Store, and then we can run over to my place to stock up on ammunition. We can either hit the road tonight or first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you, Rosie. This... it just. It means a lot. I'd like to get started tonight. If we can.”

The pair walked toward the door. Rocky had been polishing the same three glasses from the end of the bar that was near the door ever since the stranger came into his establishment. “Heading out on a case, Rosie?”

“I sure am, Rocky. Sounds like I might be out for a while. Don't let Frankie or Dean get drunk and break my stool again. I just got the legs adjusted so they don't wobble anymore.”

“Anything for you, Rose. Be careful now.”

Outside the sun began its decent toward the horizon, and the wind kicked up, causing small clusters of crimson and burnt orange leaves to drift in and out of their path.

“I'm guessing June went south,” Rosie mused on their walk down the block. The river to the east would be too difficult for a single woman to ford on her own, the terrain to the north of Bravo quickly escalated into forests and mountains only the most experienced travelers would chance, and the west was heavily contaminated with fallout.

Jack kept his eyes on his boots, even as they entered Daisy's store.

“Rosie! How the heck you been?” Daisy exclaimed. She darted out from behind her small counter and sprinted up to throw her arms around Rosie's neck. Rosie would have blushed if she'd been able. Daisy was a sweet kid who, as far as Rosie knew, never met someone she didn't want to immediately befriend. That could be dangerous if she ever left the safety of Elmwood's walls.

“Oh, you know Dais, just getting by. About to head out on the road.”

Daisy stepped back from Rosie and thrust her hand out toward the stranger, “I'm Daisy! How do you know you know our Rosie?”

Jack shook the woman's hand and told her he'd actually just met Rosie.

“My traveling companion here needs to get some supplies from you, Dais” Rosie said.

“You’re in luck then! The caravans just stopped through to resupply me on canned goods, and I just finished dehydratin’ my best batch of jerky yet. How long you plan to be on the road?”

“Probably a week or two at least. Jack, go ahead and stock up here for at least three weeks. Dais, put it on my tab, please. And throw in that large pack in the corner by the window too.”

Jack tried to pay for his goods, or at least the bag, but Rosie insisted that the first supply run was always included in her fees. Daisy tallied up the goods to be added to Rosie’s tab, and Jack diligently packed everything away while Daisy and Rosie chatted about the current events of the town. Once the dried meat, canned vegetables, matches, and various other necessities were neatly stowed away, Rosie and Jack left Daisy to mind her store and ventured toward a small faded blue house that stood all alone at the end of the block, almost hidden by towering blood-red burning bushes.

Rosie pulled a set of keys out of her pocket, opened the door, returned the keys to the safety of her coat, and went inside, followed by Jack. She had little need or desire for much furniture since she seldom had visitors, but Rosie did collect relics of the old world. In one corner of the living room was a display of plastic pumpkins, black cat statues, and a human sized skeleton among other macabre artifacts. These were remnants of a long-forgotten holiday that Rosie thought sounded charming and hoped might be revived if civilization could pull itself back together enough to celebrate more than just surviving another day. One entire wall was lined with book shelves that were about three feet tall and packed with books of every shape, size, and color. Hanging on the wall above the books was an array of art that included a poster of a kitten clinging onto a tree branch, a framed photograph of a sun setting over a body of water, and

massive painting of something that looked like a colorful ball of tentacles blending together to make a shape that suspiciously looks like it might shift into something new the moment you took your eyes off it.

“This trip isn’t going to be easy, Jack. I need you to know that up front. We’re going to be heading into Firefly, Scar, and maybe even King’s territories.”

Jack turned his attention to Rosie who was pulling boxes of ammunition out of cabinets that were designed to hold plates, glasses, and boxes of baking powder in another lifetime and placing them into her own bag she’d taken down from its hook on the wall by the back door. Rosie’s house was small, and she had no real need of food storage space since she didn’t need to eat, so the kitchen had become her arsenal. A pegboard on the furthest wall that previously held coffee mugs now displayed guns, and the corner pantry now contained an array of knives where bags of flour and sugar had once been stored.

“I’ve heard stories about those groups from the patrols who make it back to Bravo.”

“The stories don’t come close to the reality,” Rosie said. She put her arms through the straps of her backpack and started walking toward the front door.

“What do you mean by that?” Jack’s muscles tensed. He had heard some pretty horrific things, but Rosie’s tone indicated the stories he knew were only scraping the surface.

Rosie knew the truth. She’d seen discarded bodies of folks the Scars had flayed, piles of smoldering corpses disposed of by the Fireflies, and found piles of offal that could have been left behind by any of the hedonistic gangs that littered the land outside the small pockets of recovering communities. Rosie regretted saying anything about them to Jack. She knew he was already picturing his wife dismembered and thrown away like trash or perhaps something even worse.

“They do terrible things, Jack. I’m not going to lie to you. We’ll do everything we can to find June before any of them get ahold of her. Let’s hit the road. We can get a few miles in before the sun goes down.”

Rosie and Jack exited her house, and she locked it up tight. Jack handed her the hefty bag of coin he’d promised, and Rosie slyly slid it into the empty cavity in the left side of her chest. Turns out, losing her heart in Rocky’s last card game had at least one advantage after all, and Rosie knew she could always win it back from the old man when she returned to town. No one wanted a broken heart. The Company only installed it in her model to make them appear more human, though anyone close enough to hear or feel the beat of it would have recognized one as a Mech long before.

The pair crossed town, got the guards to let them out of the gate, and began their journey following the road south away from the relative safety of Elmwood. Before the war, there was a federal penitentiary about 10 miles south of the town, but sometime in the last few decades, the building transitioned into of the biggest slave trading posts in this part of the country, maybe the world. The Scars had held the prison for the past few years, and anyone venturing too far into their territory was likely to be captured and sold to the highest bidder during one of the monthly auctions which always took place under a full moon. Most women were aware of this danger so they avoided the area, but when the Scars captured one, they always went quickly and for tens of times more coin than any of the male slaves. Rosie knew a full moon was coming, and she feared June would be the big ticket item on their block if she was as beautiful, young, and innocent as Jack described.

The Scars made the mistake of attempting to capture Rosie, assuming a Mech would net them an even higher bag of coin, but they, like many others before and after them, only made that mistake once. A Gen 1 or 2 would always submit to humans, that was just part of their primary logic, and a Gen 3 would generally be happy to give up any

freedom for the structure provided by serving humans. Rosie was a Gen 4; she was the first model to be given full access to free will programming, and she refused to let anyone take that from her. She slaughtered a dozen of the Scar guards before they finally agreed to a truce and to never attempt to enslave her, or any Mech Gen 4 or higher, again. They occasionally sought her help capturing the few slaves clever enough to run away, but that was one job Rosie would never take. No matter the coin.

Jack dragged his feet, kicking up rocks and dust as they went. "Are we really going to try to talk to the Scars? June knows well enough not to go anywhere near them. I can't be no good to her if they slap a slave collar on me."

"Relax. They won't try to enslave you as long as you're with me. That's one mistake even those monsters only made once. We don't have a dog that can track June's scent, and the dust has a short memory, so even if she left tracks, they were gone within a day. The Scars are close, so they're the easiest to eliminate first." She was sure his imagination was running wild with thoughts of what might be happening to June right now if the Scars did have her. Most of the gangs knew they needed women to keep filling their ranks with fresh recruits they could indoctrinate from infancy, so occasionally a woman that caught the fancy of the leader would be held back for a fate far worse than being sold into slavery. Women destined for the auction block were chained in the solitary wing to prevent them from being raped. This was not a kindness--they would get a higher price if they weren't bruised, bleeding, or bawling too much. The few kept as property of the Scars were subjected to the same initiation ritual as any of the volunteer members of the ranks; they had to survive a thousand tiny cuts into their flesh.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. The road degraded more with each step they took away from Elmwood. It was easy to convince yourself civilization was making a comeback in towns full of people who didn't try to murder each other daily and who lived in homes that were heated, cooled, and lit by solar power. Out here though,

there were reminders in every direction of how much further humanity still had to go to regain what it lost in just a few moments at the push of a few buttons.

“So you’re the cook at Bravo. What does your wife do?” Rosie asked.

“A little bit of everything. Sometimes she helps me cook, sometimes she does the dishes. She taught a few of the patrollers how to read. June was a real good teacher.”

“June IS a good teacher, I’m sure,” Rosie corrected. It was important that Jack still think she was alive, no matter how much Rosie might have doubted it. “So I’m guessing you never do the patrols. Does June? Last I knew Bravo only let folks live there that were willing to take patrol shifts.”

“She did a few when we first showed up. She knew I didn’t have the stomach for it, and she loved me anyway. Something happened on her last patrol that she would never talk about. None of the people who went out with her ever had to go out again, so it must have been bad.”

“How long ago was her last patrol?”

“Oh, probably a year ago. Why?”

“Just curious if that might give us a clue about where she went or why.”

“She was actin’ a little strange a few days before. It was like she wanted to check all her projects off her list. She mended my boots, organized all the pots in the kitchen, and about a dozen other things. I thought maybe she was just getting’ ready in case we got an early winter. Now it feels like she... like she was sayin’ ‘good bye’.”

“I bet she just felt productive for the first time in a while. That summer heat took a long time to let go of its grip this year. Everyone in Elmwood hardly got anything done all summer. What do you two do for fun?”

Jack knew Rosie was just trying to distract him from the pit in his stomach and the ache in his heart, but he was glad for her effort.

“June always wanted to play board games, but lots of the old-world ones we found stashed in the outpost game room were missing the rules or pieces. Sometimes we’d pull three or four boxes off the shelves, dump out all the parts onto a table, and make up our own games. If there was enough energy to spare, we were able to play electronic games too. There’s one we found where you play as a large white bird who steals stuff from people.”

“That’s it? That’s the whole point of the game? You’re a bird, and you steal things?”

“Yep. June loved it. She loves all animals though. I kept tellin’ her we’d get a puppy if we were settled in one place for long enough and could find one. Bravo felt like it was gonna be that place.”

“What would you name a puppy?”

“If it was a girl, I’d get to name it, and June would name it if it was a boy. I liked Bridget for a girl, and June wanted Dante for a boy. That was the name of an author she read. She tried to get me to read it, but I don’t much like it. June read everything, even the old-world operations manuals we’d find around the outpost.”

Rosie and Jack reached the top of a hill and could see the prison in the valley below, surrounded on all sides by an encroaching forest. Rosie took her pack off her back, pulled out a revolver, loaded it, placed it in a holster, and extended it toward Jack in one hand and the box of bullets in the other.

“I know you don’t think you can kill anything, but I need you to take this, even if you never end up using it. Do you know how to use it?”

Jack hesitated but took the gun and ammunition. “Yeah. My brother showed me when we were kids. It’s been while, but I think I got it.”

Rosie asked him to flip the safety on and off while she put her pack back on and checked her own guns in the holsters on her hips.

“Here we go, Jack. Just stay close, and I should be able to get us inside.”

The two made their way down the hill, and when they were within about 300 yards of the front gate a voice bellowed toward them.

“Stop right there, strangers. You’re either too dumb to realize where you are, or you’ve got a death wish,” yelled one the guards standing in front of the gate through a bullhorn.

Rosie rolled her eyes, told Jack to stay where he was, and sauntered up to the guard. From the looks of the filthy creature before her, Rosie was glad she was not programmed with a sense of smell. “*You* must be too dumb to realize who you’re talking to, runt. Just get on your radio there and tell Pepper that Rosie has business with him.”

“I don’t take orders from no Mech. Though I could come up with a few uses for that mouth of yours.”

“You really don’t want to go there. Get Pepper on the line. Now.” In her peripheral vision Rosie saw a dark figure lurking around the nearest spire of the prison wall. A long, lean object in its hands, pointed down at them.

“I don’t care who you--“ was all the guard got out before a sniper bullet shattered his skull, leaving Rosie to wipe bits of brain matter and fragments of skull off her trench coat.

“I’ll be right out, Rosie,” called a voice over the loud speaker. “The rest of you assholes take note unless you want to check out today too.”

Rosie was still cleaning off the few bits of the guard when Pepper came through the gate. “Jack, come up here and meet Pepper,” she yelled to her companion who had darted behind a bush when the gun shot rang out.

“I don’t bite. Most days,” Pepper yelled at Jack who was cautiously coming toward them, revolver in hand, safety off.

“Put that away, Jack. Pepper won’t hurt you. He and I came to an agreement long ago. He doesn’t harass me, I don’t kill him and every last bit of slaver scum in his employ.”

Pepper scowled but knew better than take the bait. “So Rosie, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

Rosie motioned for Jack to speak after he put his gun back into its holster, “My wife is missing. Hired Rosie to find her. Her idea to come here.”

Rosie pretended to scratch a non-existent itch behind her left ear so she could discretely increase the volume and sensitivity on her hearing, allowing her to detect any changes in Pepper’s heartrate.

“Don’t have any women on the block right now. If I did, I’d bring ‘em all out for ya in a pretty little line. Ain’t no good ever come ‘a pissin’ off Rosie.”

“He’s telling the truth, Jack. We should be on our way. Need to make camp somewhere before it gets dark.”

“Aw, come on Rosie. You know you’re welcome to stay. I put a bullet through a half decent guard for trash talkin’ you. Least you could do is enjoy my hospitality for a night. Give me another chance to pitch my runaway catchin’ deal before you go off. It’d pay better than a dozen of these hopeless lost puppy jobs. Get you outta that shit-hole Elmwood too.”

With a somber look that could chill even the most cold-hearted killer to the core, Rosie simply said, “No” and walked away. Jack seemed nervous about turning his back on the laughing gang leader. He walked backwards, just in front of Rosie, until they got about 200 yards away from the gate. Rosie and Jack rejoined the road that took them up another hill and put the prison behind them.

“Should we have stayed the night, Rosie? I don’t much care for the idea of hangin’ around slavers. ‘Specially that laughin’ one. But are we any safer out here than we would be in there?”

“Do you want to know why he doesn’t risk pissing me off?”

“If you want to tell.”

“It is true that I’ve taken out dozens of his guards over the years, but he doesn’t care about a single one of them. What scares him most is that he knows what I know, and he can’t risk that getting out.” She paused, “There’s an old gas station down the road we can bunk in for the night. It’s too small and isolated to be a good place for any community or gang to set up shop. I’ve used it plenty of times on jobs out this way. Roads aren’t safe for anyone after dark, not even a Mech like me.”

They reached the small building with a pair of long-empty gas pumps out front, surveyed the area, and cautiously entered the gas station. Inside were empty racks that once held gossip magazines, the local newspaper, and road maps. There was a small counter with a cash register still sitting on it, and behind that was an office. The two went into the office of the gas station, locked the door, and settled in for the night. The office still had a small desk, chair, and a lumpy old couch inside along with a few filing cabinets and a safe that had been emptied long before Jack’s grandparents were born. Jack laid his sleeping bag out on top of the couch and opened a bag of jerky he’d bought from Daisy for the trip. “You never did tell me what dirt you have on Pepper. Or why he picked that name. Doesn’t sound tough enough to be a gang leader’s name.”

“What did you expect him to be called? The Mighty Cutter of Men? The Bladed Destroyer? Pepper was his name when he joined the gang because he squirted ghost pepper juice into each of the cuts during his initiation. The thing he didn’t tell them was that he also turned off his pain sensors during the initiation, so he didn’t feel one goddamn slice.”

“Is he a Mech? How could they not know if they were cutting into a Mech?”

“He is indeed a Mech. A Gen 6, to be precise.”

“Gen 6? What generation are you?”

“Four.”

“If it isn’t rude. When were you made?”

“My kind rolled off the assembly line during the war.”

“So, you’re sayin’ the Company didn’t collapse after all?”

“No, they did not. Did you think something like a global apocalypse would stop them? They were making my Generation during the war. Production slowed significantly after the bombs dropped, but it didn’t stop. There have been at least two new generations in the last century or so. I don’t know why they keep working on them, but they do.” She knew exactly why The Company was still around, but it would do no one any good to add fuel to the fire of rumors about The Company or their motivations.

“If you’ve been away from them so long, how you know all this?”

“I have my sources. An escaped Gen 5 found me, and I helped him locate gainful employment outside the watchful eye of The Company in exchange for a steady stream of intel. They would throw all their resources into deactivating me if they had any idea how many of their escapees I’ve helped.” If her source was to be believed, before the war, Merry Mechanical Maids was toying with the idea of a sentient model, presumably for the sexual pleasure of the husbands while the wives were out enjoying the knitting parties they could host now that they were no longer chained to the stove and washing machine. During the war, a few of these higher functioning Mechs decided they didn’t want to be sex slaves, so they took over the facility, slaughtered all the humans, and erased every trace of their creation before covertly putting the factory back into production. The recent rumors were that Mechs were somehow replacing humans, but all the lynched bodies of suspected Mechs up to this point were unable to provide

evidence of any Mech invasion, so the rumors were slowly becoming bogeyman stories to tell children around a campfire.

About half an hour after emptying his bag of jerky, Jack pressed again for details on Pepper and the newer Mechs. "So Pepper is a Mech. Gen 6 you said? How do you know that?"

A grin formed just at the edge of Rosie's mouth. "If you ever want to give up the cook's life, maybe we could start our own detective agency. You'd be a damn good one, I suspect. So I told you I have insider information. Well, a few years ago one of my sources had recently told me about the newest models, the Gen 6s. They appear human in all respects unless you know about the code hidden inside their artificial blood. My programming contains that same code, like all Mechs, so if I can get close enough to get even one drop of blood, I can recognize them for what they are. When the Scars captured me, Pepper made the mistake of getting too close. His scars didn't look quite right. The human eye can't tell the difference between organic and synthetic skin, but I had my suspicion, so I bit into his bottom lip when he tried to get a bit too friendly. I think he could see the recognition in my eyes because he called his men off, threw me into isolation, and the next morning when he came into my cell, we made an arrangement before he sent me on my way. He would leave me and all Gen 4 or higher Mechs alone. I had already killed more of his men than he could really spare, so I agreed to not go after them again unless they attacked first. We never spoke a word about his nature, but there would be no other reason for him to let me go."

Jack furrowed his brow and seemed to be chewing over her story as he picked threads of jerky from his teeth. "I like being a cook. Or at least I did. It felt safe. Like I could actually settle down and do some good for people. Never liked the idea of fightin'." He packed the jerky back into his pack, took his boots off, and crawled into his sleeping bag, staring at the ceiling.

“Why don’t you try to get some sleep?” Rosie said. “I don’t need to. I’ve got a few old world books stashed around here, so I’ll grab one of those and keep watch. Tomorrow morning we can head for Firefly territory. It may take us a couple days to get there, and you’ll need your strength.”

“If you don’t mind, I might stay up for a bit longer.” He sat back up on the couch and pulled a small block of ragged wood and a knife from his bag. “I was workin’ on a wood carvin’ of a flower for June before she--well, it was for our anniversary. Thought if I work on it a bit each night, might be ready when we find her.”

“Sure, do what you have to do.”

Jack eventually drifted off. It was a long night for Rosie. She suspected Jack had not heard the rumors of humans being replaced by Mechs. Only a Gen 5 or 6 would be capable of that, and he didn’t even know The Company was still active. Or perhaps he was choosing not to believe it. They needed to find June as soon as possible. Even if they only discovered a body, it might at least give him closure enough that he might never have to face the reality of what might have happened. Some of her sources had told Rosie the Mechs were replacing people to keep them under control. Humans were able to produce offspring with the correct number of appendages on semi-regular basis again. The planet was a mess now because of them, and it was a mess the Company seemed to be poised to clean up. Humans though, proved to be about as resilient as cockroaches. It would take a significant effort to get rid of them entirely, so if they could sneak Gen 6s in to infiltrate their ranks, they could be managed and prevented from reorganizing. All the while, the replicas could pass information back to The Company. They were learning, and if left alone long enough, they might just be able to exterminate humans once and for all. No matter how horrible humans could be to each other, some of them seemed to retain a sense of empathy. That particular emotion was apparently no

longer desired by The Company. If Rosie had been able, she would have shivered at that thought.

When the sun rose the next morning Rosie and Jack set off on a course for Ashland. A gang that specialized in arson and called themselves the Fireflies had taken up residence there because they liked the old world name reference to the ash they sought to create from everything they touched. Their leader, Ember, was smart enough to keep a tight leash on his raiders, and he let them off it often enough to sate their appetite for total destruction. They made Rosie nervous because even she could not get a read on them, but she had to be sure to not let Jack see her fear. She felt he was probably closer to cracking every hour, and she had grown fond of him. She wouldn't let something she did be the final straw that broke him.

The trip took about two days to complete because Rosie insisted they go at a reasonable pace. She had to convince Jack he would be no good to June if he was too tired to fight or run when they found her. She had to keep June alive, at least in his mind. Near the end of the second day, they saw the tell-tale smoke rising that indicated they were near Firefly territory. Rosie was inclined to camp at a safe distance, but Jack pushed for going ahead. Rumor had it they didn't keep captives for long, so if June had fallen into their clutches, they would need to get to her soon. Rosie found another abandoned gas station to hide them for the night, and they were close enough that Jack could smell whatever animal flesh the Fireflies were roasting on the fire.

The next morning the pair carefully inched towards the abandoned fire pit which had been the center of the previous night's blaze. The Fireflies had left a path of burned trees and buildings in their wake. Though it appeared no one was near the main site of the fire for some time, Rosie told Jack she was going to investigate first. She was scared he might suspect her real reason for wanting to do so--the Fireflies were not known to be picky about what type of meat they skewered on the spit, and a tiny human woman

would fit fairly well on a roaster meant for deer and hogs. When Rosie reached the pit her fears were realized. There was a pile of bones near the logs that served as seating the night before, at least five or six of which appeared to be human. Jack raced over to Rosie's side. "Is she here? Do you think any of those bones is her?"

Rosie bent down to examine the bones better. There was a femur that was clearly too long to belong to a woman of just over five feet, a pair of tibias that most likely came from the same source as the femur... and a skull that, even with all the skin removed, was obviously masculine in origin. She was confident June's remains were not in this pile, but that did not mean they would also be absent from the next. Rosie wasn't sure how long she could continue down this path with Jack.

They buried the bones they were able to gather and stuck a cross on top of the shallow grave. Neither one was religious, but it seemed the right thing to do. Those bones belonged to a person, and that person deserved to be memorialized as something other than a midnight snack. Rosie secretly hoped whoever he was that he was infected with something incurable and highly contagious that would spread through the Fireflies like wild fire and wipe them out once and for all.

Jack and Rosie went on in silence for the next few hours. They covered less distance than the previous day, slinking between cover because of the obvious evidence of Fireflies in the area. Each fire pit and building they checked for signs that June was near. At this point, they had both opened so many doors with feelings of dread that this might be the one containing June's body, so when Rosie opened the door to the tiny blue tool shed and was met by a corpse curled into a ball in the corner, she blinked a few dozen times, hoping that each new opening of her eyes would make the image go away. From the back all Rosie could see was that the woman had long, dark hair. She crept closer, not wanting to alarm Jack who would be busy for at least a few minutes checking every room in the previous house. Rosie inched close enough to the body to

see the face, and she was speechless. She recognized this woman, not as Jack's "June," though perhaps, she was that too. The face Rosie saw belonged to Mech Number 12, Generation 5 or possibly 6, designation Pearl. The Gen 5s were almost indistinguishable on the outside from the Gen 6s, so they too could typically pass for human; on the inside though, the Gen 5s still retained their wiring and metal components, being prototypes for the Gen 6s.

Rosie's head was still spinning as a shadow fell over the doorway. Some part of Rosie hoped it was a Firefly because she knew how to deal with them, but when she turned around, Jack's tearful eyes met her gaze. He cautiously stepped toward the body as Rosie backed away to give him space. When he was within a few inches of the corpse he collapsed onto the floor and cradled the head in his lap. Rosie went outside and paced, keeping watch for any stray Fireflies or other dangers while she listened to Jack's sorrowful wails. He emerged from the shed after what seemed like an eternity, carrying the limp body of the woman he believed to be his wife.

"I'm so sorry, Jack. What would you like to do? I'll help however I can."

"We can't bury her here. Those damn bug people might dig her up and make a meal of out her. I won't stand for that."

Rosie could have easily thrown the lifeless body over one shoulder to take it back to town, but she had learned Jack was the type of man who wanted to do that kind of thing himself. "I understand. Let's make a stretcher to carry her on and get her back to town."

That seemed to appease him. He laid the body just to the side of the door, out of plain sight, and helped Rosie gather the needed materials. They found string inside one house, an ax in the shed of another, and enough small trees nearby to assemble a decent quality stretcher before the sun got too low. Together they carried the body and stretcher inside the house to spend the night. Jack looked physically and mentally

exhausted, and even though Rosie was technically not capable of being tired, she felt compelled to just sit and stare at the wall, counting every knot in the fake pine paneling. She could have flipped an internal control to turn off all higher-level functions, but it didn't seem right to leave Jack alone with his despair. Jack sat next to June's body, slowly stroking her hair. If Rosie didn't know better, she would think June or Pearl or whatever she was called was happily dreaming.

"Rosie? Maybe I don't want to know, but I feel like I gotta. Can you tell how she-- what happened to her?"

"Smoke inhalation, most likely. The forest fire wasn't close enough to burn the buildings, but it was close enough to fill them with smoke. If she heard the Fireflies outside, I doubt she would have risked running."

"So..."

"It would be like she went in her sleep, no pain," Rosie lied. She had never needed to lie before now, but it was good to find out her programming made it possible.

"I suppose that's all I can ask at this point. Not many of us get to go out peaceful like."

"No, no we don't. You should try to eat something and rest. We've got a long couple of days ahead of us."

Even if Rosie were capable of sleep, the thoughts spinning around in her head would have made it impossible for her that night. It seemed likely to Rosie that "June" was a Gen 6 version of the Gen 5 Pearl prototype, running away in the middle of the night to report her findings on humanity back to The Company. She knew she could easily run the test from one pinprick of the finger, and then at least she would know for sure. But what if he put those pieces together and asked her--was she capable of lying again? He had no way to know about Pearl, but he was smart and tenacious, a

potentially deadly combination in these times. Rosie spent the next several hours deeply meditating on her next move.

Jack and Rosie spent the next few days discreetly shuffling between shadows with June's body between them, avoiding all contact with anyone else on the road. It was nearly nightfall when they heard the slow rumble of the river.

"Let's make camp. Small fire. Bury her here. She always loved the water, and she will be close enough that I can visit."

"If you're sure, that's what we'll do," Rosie said, thankful that June had picked a much cooler time of year to run off. If it were the middle of summer, they would have needed to bury the body much sooner. This way at least Jack got to pick her final resting place.

The two made a small fire, Rosie forced Jack to eat and drink some water, and then they took turns digging the grave with the lone shovel between them. As the first of the stars came out, they laid the body inside the hole, and Jack pulled out the wooden flower he'd made for her, placing it gently between her folded hands. They slowly filled the grave with dirt until every last bit was returned to its original location. Jack placed a wooden cross on the grave to mark the spot, but he said he would have an actual stone marker made for her when he got back to Bravo. Within moments of completing the grim task, Jack collapsed on his bedroll in a fitful sleep.

Rosie knew she couldn't go back to Elmwood, at least not for a while. Not until Jack gave up looking for her. He would come up with new questions now that he finally had time to think about something other than his immediate need to find June. There were plenty of other trading posts nearby that would appreciate a Mech Mercenary, especially one of her reputation. Perhaps eventually she would return to Elmwood to win back her heart from Rocky, but that could wait. She stayed until just before dawn to ensure nothing molested Jack in his sleep, and then she slipped away, but not before

pulling the bag of coin from her chest and leaving it inside his pack. He would need answers to the questions he did not yet know he had to ask, and she would *not* be the one to break his heart.

Grandma's Garden

One of my earliest and fondest memories is roaming the wooded acres just beyond the edge of my grandma's vast garden, collecting various berries, mushrooms, or herbs with her depending on the season. I'm sure we never strayed more than a mile or so from the house, but to a young child, it felt as if we were on a wilderness adventure far from civilization. I insisted on dragging along my sketchbook and an old recorder that belonged to my mother when she was a child. I wanted to learn all the secrets my grandma was willing to share, especially about the purple plants, and I'm glad I did because those recordings will soon be among the last remaining pieces of her.

We learned about the cancer the Tuesday after Mother's day, and the oncologist did not expect her to make it beyond Father's day. Grandma, as defiant as ever, is still kicking, more than a year beyond her expected "expiration date," as she liked to say, but the cancer is even more tenacious than she. Death comes for us all in the end. As the days grow shorter and the autumn chill creeps in, I worry my time with her is short.

I pull into her driveway which is now more grass than white rock, climb out of the front seat, and collect my bags from the bed of the truck. The early morning dew from the grass dampens the bottoms of my jeans as I walk across her front lawn. The wind is ripping the burnt orange and crimson leaves off the trees and tossing them in every direction. I make a mental note to rake them up later. Maybe I'll rummage around in the garage and see if she has any of those Halloween leaf bags with pumpkins and black cat faces printed on the outside. Those always made her smile. The key sticks a bit in the front door's lock, and I have to jiggle it until it clicks. I make another note to bring over my WD-40 spray tomorrow.

Stepping inside I hear the faint hum of the kitchen radio, as always set to the local jazz station, and breathe in the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

“Good morning, Grandma,” I shout, closing and locking the door behind me.

“Good morning, Nadiya,” she replies.

I round the corner into the kitchen and find her seated in the breakfast nook. A smile emerges when she sees my face. I place my bags and jacket on one of the hooks next to the refrigerator and slide onto the bench beside her for a hug. Her perfume fills my nostrils, and I can almost taste the rose and gardenia essential oils used to make it. Her hands feel cold on my back, even through my cotton t-shirt. I scoot off of the bench and grab my coffee mug out of the dish drainer.

“Do you want another cup of coffee, Grandma?” I ask.

“Oh no, dear, I’m okay. That whole pot is for you.”

“You know you don’t need to take care of me anymore, right? I’m supposed to be the one taking care of you now.”

“And you do a fine job of it too. Say, are we going to do more recordings today?”

“If you feel up to it. I’ve got the recorder in one of my bags.”

The cuckoo clock on the dining room wall called out to announce that the time was eight in the morning.

“Get your coffee, and let’s get started,” Grandma said.

I take the glass bottle of milk out of my bag, splash some into my coffee, and place the bottle on the top shelf of the refrigerator. I worry about Grandma being able to handle the heavy bottle when I’m not around, but she insists on buying local. I set my coffee on the table and then pull my ancient recorder from one of my other bags. I get my cellphone out as well. Grandma prefers the familiar recorder, but I insist on using the phone too, so I have a backup copy, just in case.

“Are you comfortable?” I ask. “I can get you breakfast, a pillow, whatever you want before we get started.”

“No need. I’m as okay as I can be. I have all I need right here,” she says, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand.

When she pulls her hand back to wrap it around her coffee cup, I notice the purple bruise from the other day when she bumped into the bathroom sink has not faded. I pop a new tape into the recorder to begin recording with it and my phone.

“Today is October 13th. Interview number twenty-four with Luna Willow.”

“Where did we leave off?”

“Yesterday’s recording was all about your college years.”

“Right. Did I get to the part where I met your grandpa?”

“That was right where we stopped. I love this part of the story. Don’t skip any of the details.”

“Well, this is right around the time my dad decided to start selling our jazzy grapes at the farmer’s market in the campus commons instead of just letting me hand them out. Your grandpa had been comin’ to me for samples for a whole semester, and he finally confessed that he’d been giving ‘em away because he didn’t even like grapes. They were just an excuse for him to talk to me. We started dating at the beginning of our third year, and we were married not too long after graduation.”

“On October 13th, right? Today would have been your anniversary?”

“Fifty years. Today would have been our golden anniversary if your Grandpa loved me more than he loved meat and potatoes,” she chuckled.

Grandpa passed away five years ago, but he still feels present here, in this house. From the dripping faucet he never found time to fix to the closet lined with jackets, polo shirts, and lab coats with Cumberland Chemistry embroidered on the left breast pocket.

“Tell me about that first year, Grandma.”

“Things were so much different then. Everything had to be done with your hands. Well, I guess maybe it didn’t have to be, but that’s how we preferred to do it. Our old mule tilled straighter rows than any machine, and she was better company too. We specialized in the purple plants. Our family always had. The jazzy grapes were our favorite, but we grew other stuff too. Creativity cucumbers, poetic pears, inspirational lettuce--you name it, we grew it.”

“And the love story lilacs too, right? Aren’t those the ones Grandpa took to work?”

“For a time he did. Your Grandpa was a wise man. He was among the first to know something was wrong. The jazz music coming out of the college was less inspired. We used to attend as many concerts as we could when your Grandpa wasn’t working late. The decline was gradual, but it hit ev... everyone,” she sputtered.

I notice the splatter of blood on the arm of her blue jean shirt and hit pause on both recording devices. The old cuckoo clock chimes eleven.

“Let’s take a break for now. I’ll make us both some lunch. How does a BLT sound?”

“That would be lovely, dear. I’ll just go change out of this shirt.”

#

The dining room fills with sounds of cuckoo clock chimes letting us know it is noon. There’s a picture on the wall next to the clock of Grandma holding it in her arms and paying the man behind the counter for its purchase, a memento of their honeymoon in Germany.

My favorite picture though is one from her wedding day that hangs over the fireplace in the living room. She’s sitting on the ground, surrounded by baskets of fruit

she picked the day before, extending a purple apple with one bite missing to my grandpa as though she's Eve tempting him with the forbidden fruits of creativity and inspiration rather than knowledge.

We remain in the dining room so Grandma can watch the birds and squirrels play through the window as we continue our recordings. She looks tired. I try to get her to agree to a nap, but she insists we persist.

"Ready to go, Grandma?"

"Ready. Now where were we?"

"The demise of the purple plants. We were talking about the love story lilacs."

"Of course. Lots of crops that were supposed to be purple started comin' up their normal color. Those plants had no special properties at all. Mundanes we called 'em. Even the fruits, vegetables, and flowers that were purple didn't have the same potency. A couple recipe raspberries weren't enough to win the blue ribbon at the county fair anymore. The love story lilacs lasted longer than most of the others. Your Grandpa's company was after him somethin' fierce for a few years to bring in more and more of the blooms. Cumberland wanted to be the first to market candles, oils, and perfumes that could help people write romance novels."

"Wouldn't that be a really small market? Especially in a farming community like Rockville?"

"Cumberland wanted to do more. When the son took over the company, all he cared about was the bottom line. He wanted to see Cumberland Chemistry products in stores across the country. Your Grandpa did what he could, but even the lilacs finally stopped producing anything but mundane flowers. No matter what Cumberland's botanists did, they couldn't force the purple flowers to grow again either."

The cuckoo clock interrupts us with one solitary chime. The sun is slipping toward the horizon.

“Grandpa didn’t get in trouble did he?”

“Well, he never got promoted to head of R&D like he should have, but Mr. Cumberland couldn’t hold the disappearance of the plants against him personally. By the time your mom was in high school, there wasn’t a single purple plant to be found in all of Clay County. Even the wild things like mystery morels and horror horseradish vanished.”

“Do you remember when I was in third grade and got points taken off my family portrait for drawing a tree with purple apples? Too unrealistic, Mrs. Brown said.”

Grandma laughs so much that it sets off another coughing fit. I pause the recordings again and make us both some afternoon coffee.

#

The cuckoo sounds again to announce the hour is five o’clock. My phone indicates it is actually ten after; I’ll take the clock home tonight and have someone in town look at it on Monday. I flip the tape over in the old machine and re-start both recording devices.

“So things really are much different now, huh, Grandma?”

“Yes, very much so. The world is so much duller now. Oh, I know people say I just think that because I’m old, and old people always think things were better in the good ol’ days when they were young and spry. It is different now though. People go to the same jobs every day from the time they graduate high school, and the factories where they work make the same bobbles they made a decade ago. Colleges aren’t even as full as they were when I went, and more people are getting sick. Book learning isn’t enough to keep us going. We’re creative animals, and we need more to thrive.”

I didn't believe her the first time she told me this story, many years ago. Then I started really studying history, and I couldn't ignore how much things changed in just a few decades. I hope it's not too late to fix that.

Grandma curls her hands around her now empty mug.

"Do you remember your old sketchbook?" she asks?

"Of course I do! Is it still around here?"

"It's on my bedside table. I found it in the closet a while ago, and that nice librarian who lives next door, Ms. Tschetter, fixed it up for us. Go get it for me, would you?"

The house is starting to darken now as the sun winds its way down. I turn on the living room lights and head toward her bedroom, just down the hall. I turn on the light just inside the door and take a moment to look around. Her walls are covered in photographs from every stage of my life: the first is her holding me in the hospital where I was born, one from a second grade trip to the zoo she chaperoned, dozens from the summer vacations I spent with her over the years, and one from each of my graduations. The final one that made it onto the wall is from the county fair last year. I'm proudly holding up my blue ribbon for my apple pie, and she's hugging me, kissing my cheek. There on her table is a newly bound book with an emerald green cover. I open to the first page, the drawing I did of my family when I was in third grade. Purple apples fill an entire tree in the background. Grandma never could let a book die. I go back to the dining room and find Grandma dozing off.

"Do you want to go to bed? I can help get you tucked in before I go."

"Actually, I want to go out to the garden. The back of the garden, near the woods."

"Right now? There's always tomorrow. We can get an early – "

"No. We have to go now."

“Of course. Whatever you want, Grandma. Just give me a minute to warm some cider and grab a blanket. It must be getting chilly out there.”

I warm the cider, dump it into the green thermos, and pack it into one of my bags along with a mug and blanket. I throw the bag over one shoulder, grab a chair off the hook by the back porch door, and give Grandma my other arm to help steady her as we walk across the lawn.

Only mundane plants will grow in her garden now, only mundane grapes drape themselves over the vast arbors on the property, and only mundane raspberry bushes line the edge of the property. We reach the back of the garden, and I get her situated in the chair as best I can. She finally tells me why we're here.

“I need you to find the purple apple tree,” she whispers in my ear. Her grip on my arm is stronger now than it's been in years, and her eyes light up with a determination I recognize from my childhood.

“Grandma...”

“Humor an old woman. I think you charted every inch of the woods in your notebook. If anyone can find it, you can.”

“How do you know it is still there? All the other purple plants have been gone for ages.”

She knows I would never deny her anything, especially when that thing might be one of her final wishes. Grandma doesn't say a word. She pats my hand and gazes into my eyes.

“Fine. I'll go. If I don't find it in twenty minutes, I'm coming back. The sun will go down soon, and I don't want you out in the cold.”

She pulls the blanket tighter around her shoulders, sips on her cider, and reassures me she will be fine until I get back. I hate leaving her alone, but I head into the familiar woods anyway, allowing myself only one backwards glance.

I flip through the yellowed pages of the book to find my section on the apple trees. This small forest has hardly changed since my first trip into it, and my aged notes are thankfully relatively easy to follow.

“Small fish pond on the left (remember to bring food, don’t tell Grandpa there are fish there or he will eat them!), walk 300 paces past large oak tree. Old well should be in sight (do NOT climb on well, there is no Lassie to save you), from old well, go 500 paces to the west. Apple trees will be just beyond the downed oak.” I now realize Grandpa must have always known about the fish, but Grandma made it seem like just another one of our special little secrets.

The fallen oak tree crumbled long ago, but the small grove of apple trees from my grandparent’s wedding photo is still just as vibrant and recognizable as ever. I don’t expect to find anything, but I owe it to her to look. The tree in the middle is the only one not abundant with fruit. I step closer, and on one of the lowest branches is a single, purple apple, much smaller than its cousins on the neighboring trees. I gently pluck the fruit from the tree, tuck my sketchbook under an arm, and dash through the woods with no regards to the branches and thorns scraping my arms and legs as I run.

Grandma is still seated in her chair when I burst out of the trees, but her cup is on the ground, hands hanging loosely, and her head drooped. Still carefully clutching the apple, I fall to her side. My sketchbook tumbles to the ground when I reach for her hand. Her eyes flutter open one final time.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I ask, tears streaming down my face.

“Eat it, of course, dear. Then you’ll know how to bring them back. Keep asking the next question,” she whispers, using all of her remaining strength to caress my face and wipe away the tears just like she used to do when I would scrape my knees or come to her crying about my latest broken heart.

She trusted me, and I will not disappoint her. I will find a way to bring back creativity and inspiration to this dull, gray world.

Death's Queue

Frank zipped around the country roads in his Chrysler Cordoba, both windows down, spinning the wheels on every curve, and kicking up a dust trail as far as he could see in the rearview mirror. The previously sparking navy blue exterior now wearing a coat of dust, and the previously white leather interior now a smoky gray. He would give the old girl a thorough cleaning later that afternoon--now was a time for celebrating his return home after a year away at college.

So many things had changed in the last year. It was comforting to know these grimy, unpaved roads would not let him down by allowing themselves to be tamed. Gravel still gave way to his tires, the slight lifting of one side or the other of the car around each bend of the familiar roads still sent a surge of adrenaline through his body, and even the smell of manure wafting into the car from the McKenna's farm was a reassuring reminder that some things stay the same.

The Cordoba crested the hill on Lincoln Drive, the only road leading into town where he could pick up a cold six-pack, and Frank nearly put his foot through the floorboard to bring the car to a dead stop. At the bottom of the hill was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen--a slender young woman, raven hair pulled tight, on the back of a horse as black as the heart of the devil. He only saw her for a second as the pair galloped along the trail running parallel to the road, but in that moment he became a believer in love at first sight...

If Frank had stopped his car just a few feet over the crest of the hill, if the conductor had been late to work because he spilled coffee on himself that day rather than the previous one, if Caroline had taken Jet down a different trail outside of Frank's line of sight, or any number of other possibilities, Frank would not have ended up in my queue. That's one way to start a new journal! It isn't fate, destiny, or anything like that

putting people in my queue, at least as far as I can tell. Maybe one day I'll figure out how the whole system works, but that can wait for another century or two – I've got a long line forming.

Akiko slogged through the early morning humidity toward her stall at the downtown market. She almost always had all her pots, plants, and various other trinkets in place by 8:00AM, but even monkeys fall from trees sometimes. Peddling along, it felt as though her legs got heavier with each rotation. All the others on the street moved at the same, sluggish pace.

She finally turned onto the main road. Her stall would be just a little further now. The rows of round, white lights overhead still glowed in the early morning haze. Customers were starting to arrive and browse the various stalls, though fewer came to the market each day. Each day a vendor or two would disappear as well. Akiko wondered how long it would take before she was the only one left.

Akiko heard the faint hum of an airplane, nothing unusual these days. She pulled up in front of her stall and began unloading her wares. She turned around to be confronted by a light as bright as the sun rising from just on the other side of the street, and then nothing.

She was one of the lucky ones, in my estimation. Akiko didn't smell the burning flesh, hear the horrific screams, or endure years of physical therapy to walk again only to then learn about the cancer that crept into her bones the same day the bomb tore at her flesh. She didn't see a far off mushroom cloud and have to wonder if this was the end of the world. She didn't wander the streets, tears streaming down her face, trying to make sense of this new world and the new evil unleashed upon it. All she left behind was a bicycle shaped shadow, forever emblazoned upon the sidewalk where it fell when the sky lit up. Some of my counterparts worked overtime that day. I just came for Akiko, she

was the only one in my queue, but that was enough. If I had known what was coming, I might have pulled her out sooner.

Seventy-seven years, four months, six days, ten hours, and 14 minutes – that’s how long he had been alive. Mathematicians tend to keep track of strange kinds of things, and Martin is no different. He sat in room 102 of Prairie Village watching the robins dive bomb the squirrels who nimbly avoided them. He gently stroked Sampson’s ears with the hand that wasn’t cupped in a perpetually painful curl. The arthritic hand had been of no use to him for the last five years, and it set on the arm of the emerald green William and Mary chair almost mocking him; a cold, nearly dead reminder of a different time, another life it seemed, golden wedding band loosely hanging on his ring finger between the gnarled knuckles.

Rose had been gone three years. Well, three years, two days, five hours... but he tried to not think of that day. It was a disgrace to the fifty years she spent as his partner if he only focused on the day he lost her. His thoughts drifted back to the day they bought the chair he sat in now. It was an uncommonly cool day at the end of May, classes were out, and final grades submitted for the semester. The two decided to take a day-trip to the country for a picnic in celebration. The picnic basket was in the back seat of the convertible, bottle of wine chilling in the cooler, and their Jack Russel, Fred, sitting calmly on the floorboard between Rose’s feet. Martin hoped Rose was too distracted by the beauty of the day to notice the handwritten auction sign on the corner of Baker and McCullen, but no such luck. By the time they left the auction the food in the picnic basket was spoiled, the wine was warm, and they were the owners of two new chairs, matching end tables, and an entire dining room set with room for eight they would never use.

Sampson bumped Martin’s hand with his head, a gentle reminder that cats were to be petted as long as they desired, not as long as the human desired to continue the

petting. Martin smiled down at the orange and white furball. It was Rose's idea to get a kitten, so she couldn't complain when Sampson tore into the fabric on the arms of the antique chairs from that picnic so long ago. They'd always planned on getting the chairs reupholstered anyway, and they both lied to themselves and each other that there would be plenty more tomorrows left for that project.

Martin's eyelids felt heavier with each moment. He had known for some time that Death would come for him soon. Seventy-seven years, four months, six days, eleven hours...

Animals rarely end up in my queue, and for that I'm thankful. They always seem to know I'm coming long before I arrive, and unlike most humans, they can see me, which makes the transition more awkward. Sampson was no different. From the moment I appeared in the doorway, he knew I was there for Martin. It wasn't actually Sampson's time, he was supposed to live about another two years, but he begged to go with Martin. When a cat begs, you give them what they want--the consequences are too dire to risk angering them. I hope there is a heaven. I hope Rose and Fred are waiting there for Martin and Sampson. I hope there is something after...

All four engines of the B-17 whirred to life and launched the plane into the air. Kurt was crouched in the navigator's seat, watching trees and buildings shrink below them as they ascended toward the heavens. Within moments they were in the clouds. The large, fluffy clusters of water molecules parted before the plane, rolling out of the way to either side of the nose. Further in the distance, he almost thought he could make out shapes like cows or fire hydrants, but by the time he came up with the word for the shape, that particular cloud was far behind them. He did not know anything about navigating, why he knew he was in a B-17, why he knew himself to be in the navigator's seat, or who was flying the aircraft. Perhaps some of it was knowledge he picked up

along the way during the war, but that still didn't answer the question of who was in the pilot's chair.

The plane continued to climb until it burst into a place so high even the clouds didn't dare come this far. The only visible shape below, other than the constantly shapeshifting blue-gray clouds, was instantly recognizable to Kurt: the Kibo summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. The almost perfectly round crater at the center beckoned him to come toward it, and if he had been able to communicate with the pilot, he would have charted an immediate flight plan for that spot. For what seemed like days, the plane circled Kibo's peak. Sometimes they darted back down among the clouds, and other times they came dangerously close to the mountain's rim, always circling. They never touched the ground again, and after a while, it was no longer important to Kurt to know why they didn't need fuel, who was in charge of this whole operation, or how he came to be here in the first place. He no longer pondered the shapes of the clouds. He'd been losing words for a while, so even if he bothered to pay attention, the names wouldn't come to him anymore. His only thought was getting to the summit.

After what could only have been weeks or months, Kurt felt a shift in mood of the plane. It no longer felt like it was aimlessly floating around--it had a purpose now, and the flight was near its end. Once again the craft took off at full speed, straight up into the air above the reach of the clouds. Once again, Kibo was the only visible object below. This time, he knew he was going to answer the crater siren's call. This time he would dive, at full speed into the heart of that mountain. He was done, and that was okay with him.

Sometimes I feel terrible for taking people, even when it's their time and they come to the front of my queue. The world is a much darker, duller place without them, and Kurt was one of the brightest lights of them all. Some of the best humans live on through their writing, and I guess I hope I will live on through my writing as well. We all

owe a death, even me. Two of my kind have ended up in my queue over the millennia, and they both seemed relieved. I wonder how much longer I have to wait before I'm first in someone else's queue...

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