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Kirkus Discoveries

OUT OF THE BLACK

LEE DOTY

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FINISHING TOUCHES

DOWN TO ONE

Dedication

Prologue: Out of Time

The impact spread slowly across his back, straining his tightly set muscles and driving the air from his lungs in a long, slow groan. Then, the sound of success- the sound of the end- came like a large boot in deep, wet snow, the crunch of parting glass broke out all around him and he kicked out hard one last time. The window crumbled away around him and he flew backwards, away from the death in the hallway and into the night air high above Chicago's deserted streets.

Then his world was a tumbling storm of rain, glass and the wind of increasing velocity. The gathering roar of the air around him promised that this would end badly eighty-two floors down. He'd made his choices, fought hard, and would now die on his own terms. Small consolation, considering that he was only about a second and a half into the fall and he already had enough time to count to infinity twice and take a nap. It would be a few more seconds before he stopped accelerating, then a few more before the final splat. He wished passing he'd brought a good book. He was all for the idea of having time to meditate and ponder the eternities or whatever people were supposed to do in their final moments, but he'd only need the time a bullet took from barrel to brain for that kind of thing.

He watched the light from the building's windows bend and refract through the rain and the shards of the broken window tumbling around him and tried to Zen out for a bit. It was really a beautiful scene, now that he took the time to look. From time to time, the glass would tick off his clothes or skin, pressing then fading like tentative teeth in the chill of the embracing rain. He was going out in style.

Going out in style maybe, but he was the last one off the stage. Everyone he'd cared about was dead or worse, and when he finally hit the concrete in a handful of seconds at his own personal terminal velocity, the stage would go dark. Then the world around it would go dark too- apocalyptically dark. He'd failed his family and they'd died. Now, because he'd failed again, it was going to be everyone else's turn.

He fell through the hollow air, remorse and inadequacy burning through his ancient heart.

And then a dull radiance below drew his eye. As he watched, a few random points of light pierced the mist, then grew and elaborated into the familiar lattice of the city's streets. Then he tumbled from the low clouds and the city erupted around him. There, feeling small and naked before the blazing urban panorama that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon, he had his epiphany. The black would always be there, hesitating at the edges of the light, but it would never win. Without the light, the black wasn't anything at all. The storm would rage and bluster, but it would eventually pass from the city, and then from memory.

Sure, it was over for him. Sure, his was a brutal, bad end, but these desperate moments were only the last page of his long and satisfying biography. Death stung only because he'd lived so bright. Loss hurt only because he'd loved deep and true. In some insane way, the sheer unstoppable momentum of his unfolding tragedy suddenly made him feel grateful.

Work to do. With a mental shrug and a mood swing that would make any psychiatrist react

eagerly for the prescription pad, he got back to work. Precious time had passed in reverie and more passed as his limbs slid into position. Air flowed and tugged at him, and his legs finally extended below him, his arms stretched wide. He wasn't going to survive this matter what he did, but he was going to get a 9.5 from the East German judge if it killed him.

He passed the twenty-ninth floor positioned like an Olympic gymnast and grinning like a idiot. He cocked his head slightly and scanned the ground, not knowing exactly what he was looking for, maybe a flatbed truck loaded with mattresses or a large bucket of water. Three people were on the rain-swept street below, but none of them looked burly or quick enough to catch him. A heavy woman in a blue sweater walked almost directly below him, head raised and eyes squinting into the downpour. Being a human of a more normal variety, she couldn't yet see him, but he could see her just fine. Her mouth was partially open, lips stretched, her teeth slightly exposed- though there was sadness in her eyes and frustration pinching her brow, she was laughing. He wondered in passing what was so funny, but he knew that whatever it was, neither of them would remember it in a few more seconds.

Not too far off, two men in improbably white clothes stood, looking expectant, like they were waiting for a very white bus. Though he couldn't see their faces from this angle, the men in white were apparently engaged in an energetic conversation. One was gesturing in the direction of the dark car parked at the edge of the street just ahead of the laughing woman.

Looking at the woman again, he realized that without further adjustments, he'd land directly in front of her. "Blood linkage" echoed from his recent memory and a desperate plan began to pull at his mind. Then he decided- he was going to go out fighting, right on through the final second. He might have saved the world when he went out that window a few seconds back, but he really didn't think so. He was pretty sure his enemies could get their precious key from his corpse.

Eighteenth floor: Geometry and aerodynamics blazed through his diamond-hard mind, his sluggish limbs moved, and he rode the altered slipstream into the air over the car just ahead of the woman. With luck, the car's roof would deform enough to allow him to live for at least a few seconds after the splat. Luck, he thought with the first tightness of a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, the way things were going tonight, that car was probably packed with dynamite and rusty nails.

Sixth floor: His legs were bent slightly, his muscles tensed for the landing. He was as ready as he was going to get. Below him, the woman had taken another step toward the car, her weight slowly shifting from left to right foot as she slogged through the rain at what looked like her best speed. With a start, the falling man realized that now she was alone on the street. His eyes flicked around quickly- the two men in white had disappeared.

Impossible. It had only been about three quarters of a second since he'd seen them last, and they hadn't looked like they were in a hurry. If he had time, he would have shrugged. He'd seen so many impossible things in his ninety-one years that a couple of disappearing strangers didn't even rate an exclamation point in his diary, especially not on a night like tonight.

Second floor: nothing to do now but wait... and think about the shape of the stain he'd make

Hanging in the air a meter above the car, he wondered if he shouldn't just give up and let the

ground have its way with him quickly. At the speed of his focused thought, he knew the next second would draw out before and behind him forever. He'd already lost everything, so why should he force himself to experience every crunching, bursting instant of his death? Why strain and compensate as bone shattered and muscle and tendon were torn apart? Why experience every nanosecond of the coming impact, just for a chance at a few seconds consciousness afterward?

And then he saw them again, the two men in white, maybe only four meters away now, they were staring directly at him. Their familiar faces were filled with something between joy and sorrow, between grief and pride. Their eyes burned with an intensity that reached past the pain and loss, finally piercing his heart. They knew he could do this, and so did he.

Right through that last second.

With only centimeters left, he tried to yell, just to relieve the tension. He tried for more of skydiving "woohooo!" than the "aaaaaaaagh!" of final misadventure, but there was no time for sound before the violence of the impact consumed him.

1. DARKNESS

Aftermath

With a sigh of resignation, Ping Bannon opened the sedan's door and stepped out into the night air. The sandy-fresh smell of the newly departed rain on the concrete pushed his grim agenda aside and brought a small, unexpected smile to his face. Sometimes in the conditioned air of the car, in the heart of the city, it was easy to forget the simple pleasures of nature. He breathed it in, gazing up at the dim stars resolving out of the clearing sky.

Clarity. His job demanded it, and sometimes moments like this could bring it. He had never mastered the professional detachment that made some in his line of work seem cold. Though he liked to think of himself as a tough guy, his mom liked to remind him that he was too sweet to be a cop.

Mothers, he thought, shaking his head.

Shorter than average and slight of build, Ping wasn't an imposing figure. Kind eyes and thoughtful manner didn't add to his intimidation factor. Though he excelled at most aspects of his job, and sheer intensity could, on occasion, bring a sort of hardness to his face, he never played a successful "bad cop" role in an interrogation. He winced as he thought about his last attempt- he'd been the last to start laughing. His partner and the murder suspect had laughed harder though. Perhaps it was a holdover from his first career, but he was much better at putting people at ease than trying to frighten them. He had to admit that he preferred it that way.

His on-the-job suit was a crisp featureless black and though clean and comfortable, wouldn't get him any dates. His clunky black shoes looked like grandpa-wear, but were built for support, agility, and traction. They were the preferred footwear of beat cops, but most other detectives had moved on to more stylish shoes. His only jewelry was a platinum hoop watch on his left thumb and matching titanium lock rings on his index fingers. Hidden beneath the suit he wore the tools of his trade: detective's badge in his left lapel pocket, a secure tablet collapsed in a minimal holster at the small of his back, and matching 2mm issue needle guns in shoulder holsters. The lock rings on his fingers unlocked the guns when he held them, which was mostly on the shooting range these days.

Finally admitting that the time for reasonable stalling was long past, he closed the car door and heard the lock tone as he stepped away. Moving around the back of the car, he saw the red-blue corona of flickering light over the guardrail at the edge of the road. A few reluctant steps brought him to the edge of the downward slope behind the rail, and to his first view of the crime scene.

The police cruiser waited about forty meters away, silently spilling red and blue strobes across the damp street. It was parked near the ruins of a dark luxury car, which had apparently crashed into the wall at the edge of the highway underpass. Ping stopped and spent a few seconds examining what was left of the luxury car- though the frame looked largely intact; the top of the car was completely gone. Twisted fingers of metal and glass jutted from the points where the roof had once been attached. Around the car, the pavement

glittered with broken glass and was littered with larger debris. Maybe someone in the back seat hadn't listened to mom about playing with the pin in the family grenade.

Curious, he moved nimbly down the embankment through the shin-high Otu weeds. The O smelled greener and fresher than plants should. They had been engineered to create oxygen and eat carbon dioxide at phenomenal rates, but he wasn't sure if the fresh smell was intended, or just a pleasant side effect.

About halfway down the embankment, one of the two officers on the scene spotted Ping. The officer was huge, perhaps two meters tall and a hundred twenty kilos, with a florid face and bright red hair beneath his patrol cap. The redhead spoke quickly to his partner without taking his eyes off of the new arrival. Ping was acutely aware that the officer was probably wondering what an Asian kid in a suit was doing skipping down from the freeway at this time of night. This gave him a nearly imperceptible flash of annoyance, followed by a much larger sense of amusement. He looked far younger than his thirty-nine years, and he loved to whip out the badge for officers he didn't know. Without slowing down, he fished the badge out of his lapel pocket.

As he approached the edge of the sidewalk, still about ten meters away from the police tape that enclosed the crime scene, he noticed the redhead's hand on his weapon. Ping couldn't tell from this distance if the holster was still locked to the weapon, but from the cop's body language, he guessed not... in fact the guy seemed tense enough to draw on him with little provocation. The other cop was also giving Ping his full attention from a position just behind the patrol car. Ping couldn't see his hands, but he could read his face- these guys were spooked and ready to get decisive about resolving their fear.

"Not a good sign." Ping muttered, putting on his smile. He crossed the street and approached the redhead at an easy pace.

"Lieutenant Bannon, homicide. What've we got here?" he said smoothly, attaching his badge to his jacket's exterior pocket. The officer's apprehension didn't dissipate immediately. Instead of the embarrassed relief Ping expected, the redhead raised his tablet and entered a few commands. The cop continued his hard appraisal of Ping until the tablet chirped, verifying his credentials. Then the officer's face softened into a mix of poorly concealed relief and more than a little professional embarrassment. Though the big cop's delayed reaction was both expected and somewhat satisfying, Ping could tell that this guy was not used to letting his game face slip, certainly not to reveal fear.

The cop's game face now portrayed amusement: "Bannon eh? And a solid Irish cop too."

As a social ritual, Ping had always been intrigued by the relationship between fear and banter. "I prefer the term 'Chirish American'." he said affably.

"Why'd you drop the 'O' Mr. O'Bannon?" The officer continued with an easy, likable smile, crossing his weathered face. "Y'know, ya can't hide the Irish... it's written all over your face."

Ping had heard all this before. Though he looked entirely Chinese, he was one quarter Irish. His Irish granddad had met grandma in Hong Kong while attending school. The school had grown into a way of life for him and he'd stayed. Dad met mom at another school in Beijing. Ping had heard all the Irish cop jokes.

"My parents Americanized the name when we immigrated from China... didn't want to sound

too ethnic, I guess." he said with his most serious face.

The officer's smile widened, "Sergeant Malloy O'Flannahan at your service..."

"You're kidding."

The sergeant raised an eyebrow and hooked a thumb at his nametag. Still smiling, he turned toward the destroyed car. "Come on, let's get the unpleasant part over with and we can get back to discussin' the green isle of our heritage."

Ping followed. "Is that music?"

The sergeant nodded without turning. They moved closer and the rhythms of Bob Marley began to shift and flow around them through the cool night air. "You like reggae, Detective Bannon?"

"I prefer the modern stuff... better produced."

"Uh-huh. What we've got here are two extremely dead bodies in the car, eight to twelve more on the street under the bridge, and..."

"Eight to twelve?"

"How many potatoes go into a bowl of stew?"

Ping was still chewing on that when he saw the first potato. It was part of an arm, lying at the end of a bloody radius that emanated from the car. It looked as if it had been burnt black.

Suppressing a "What the...", he bent to examine it. He noticed that the arm looked more than burnt; it was the color of a deep pond on a moonless midnight- shiny and wet.

When he was fifteen, he'd gone to camp with his brother somewhere in Virginia. After they'd gone canoeing, the camp counselors had surprised them by checking their feet for leeches. The real shock was the black, oily flesh they discovered between Ping's toes. The counselor had used a smoldering punk to burn the leech off. It didn't hurt, but it was unbearably gross to his 15-year-old mind: sharing a bloodstream with that *thing*. Now, 24 years later he stared down at the same oily flesh in the shape of an arm. "What the..."

"Yep," said Malloy, interrupting from above. "Come on. The fun's just begun."

As Ping stood to follow, he couldn't completely shake free of his walk down memory lane. He found himself thinking about how the world had shivered and lost focus as all his thoughts compressed to the glistening dark spot between his toes. He'd woken later to the teasing laughter of his brother. "You okay kid?" the camp counselor had asked through the fog of returning reality.

Malloy was staring expectantly at him. "You okay?" he repeated.

"Sorry. Just thinking."

Malloy gave him a resolute nod "We've done a lot of that, too."

"All the bodies like that?" Ping asked, glancing back over his shoulder.

"No two alike."

"Any ID?"

"We haven't touched anything," Malloy checked his tablet, "forensics should be here in fifteen."

The other officer joined them as they reached the front of the destroyed car. He was a efficient looking black man in his twenties. An ugly pale scar crawled from the bottom of his left ear to his collarbone- Ping wondered how he'd survived whatever had caused that and why he hadn't had the scar removed. The patrolman's arms were so corded with muscle that he looked like he could crush the black maglite he held. Black points and curves mostly hidden by collar and short sleeves suggested a hidden mosaic of tattoo beneath his skin. "Rodriguez" was on his nametag.

Like his partner, he didn't look like he was used to being afraid. He glanced at Ping's badge and gave a nod of recognition. "Welcome to the twilight zone," he said with a tight grin.

"I hear it's a dimension of mind," Ping said, glancing at the strings of interlacing automatic weapon craters in the concrete wall behind the car. Bob Marley continued to wail from the damaged car's powerful speakers. The music seemed to resonate in every molecule of the chilled night air. It filled any pause in the conversation, slid around each word. "Let's go together and feel all right."

"You notice this?" Rodriguez used the maglite to illuminate a spot on the overpass above the car.

What Ping could make out looked like pieces of the car's roof, mangled and fused to the infrastructure of the bridge. Dark viscous liquid dripped from several protrusions.

"That's not..." He stopped as he made out the shape of a twisted leg protruding from the wreckage above him. Its black shoe was untouched by the destruction.

They moved through the minefield of physical evidence, skirting piles of biology and destroyed metal. At last, they reached the car, approaching the driver's door from the front. The roof had been blown off from the back, but about ten centimeters of damaged metal clung to the windshield's upper frame. The windshield was spider-webbed with cracks, most of which emanated from the roughly horizontal cigar shaped hole directly in front of the driver. Jagged shards at the bottom of the frame were all that remained of the car's side and rear windows.

At the driver's door, the interior of the car appeared for the first time. The first glance revealed two bodies: the driver and a passenger in the back seat. The driver was buckled in but the passenger was on the floor of the back seat, mostly hidden from view.

"What's wrong with this picture?" Malloy asked with a sideways glance.

"What isn't?" Ping answered, but then he noticed: "This wasn't an explosion."

"Something blew off the top without destroying the interior of the car," Rodriguez said.

There were several slashes in the seats and blood everywhere, but no burn or shrapnel damage. The passenger side airbag had deployed and now lay spent over the empty passenger seat. The driver's airbag hadn't deployed, but that was likely because the steering wheel was gone.

The driver was indeed "extremely dead"- slumped forward and to the right in his harness, his head was mostly missing. From the pattern of... tissue... on the passenger's door but not the deployed airbag, it appeared that he had died before the car hit the wall. In his left hand, the driver clutched the detached steering wheel. Upon closer inspection, the wheel was deformed as if it had been wrenched off.

Ping blinked and shook his head, "Looks like the driver died before the car hit the bridge."

Malloy nodded, "The shot probably came through the window. What do you make of the steering wheel?"

"Souvenir?" Rodriguez said around abbreviated breaths. The air was tinged with the smell of the butcher shop.

Ping blunted his visceral reaction to the carnage by pulling his tablet from its holster and getting to work. He expanded it to notepad size and switched it out of standby. He detached the stylus and brought up a new incident report. He used the tablet's three-dimensional scanners to record the contents of the car. He paused occasionally to scratch notes and diagrams, linking them with the images. "I'll need a download of your raw reports."

The two officers entered the necessary commands on their tablets. Ping's tablet chirped twice in acknowledgment of the inbound data feeds. He would review and incorporate the data into his report later.

"We already did the full survey," Rodriguez said.

Ping nodded absently from behind the shelter of his tablet as he finished surveying the front seat and moved on to the rear.

When looking from the front, he hadn't noticed the damage to the back seat- four holes in a tight configuration at about chest level- definitely bullet holes. They were probably fired from outside the driver's door, from about where he was now standing. On a hunch Ping turned around and looked down. He stood at one end of another bloody skid mark radiating away from the car. At the far end was what might have once been a body- so much for the shooter.

He snapped some images and turned his attention to the car's second occupant. Not much to see there; at least not much to want to see. Patterns of blood on the seats implied that the victim had probably been standing when he was killed, but whoever had done it had stopped to make very, very sure that he was dead. Ping gritted his teeth and documented. He hoped that he would never get used to stuff like this.

When his tablet contained all the information he could get about the car, he turned toward the bullet-pocked wall. He was documenting the placement of the shots when Malloy spoke. "We got here 'bout twenty minutes ago. Traffic dispatched us to check out the intersection of Big Brother. It went offline about an hour before and wouldn't respond to remote diagnostics.

Ping nodded, "Just coincidence, I'm sure."

"Yeah... Someone didn't want to show up in the background of a traffic violation video. The Bro' took a round powerful enough to scrap it. You'll find a link to its logs and a scan of the scrap in the feed I gave you."

"Witnesses?" Ping asked, knowing the answer.

Malloy bit his lip, shook his head.

"We saw something..." Rodriguez said, eyes lingering on the car's interior, "something fast." Ping looked up from his work, giving Rodriguez his full attention; he left the question unasked.

After a pause, Rodriguez continued, "I didn't get a good look..."

"Just a good scare, hey?" Malloy interrupted, looking amused, his game face nearly impenetrable.

With an effort, Rodriguez looked away from the car and faced his partner. "You know, your terror squeak was quite... distracting." His game face was back too.

"I got a touch of the asthma, Junior!" Malloy came back.

"Children..." Ping eased into the friendly sparring with the patient-but-firm voice he perfected while counseling troubled families. His gaze settled on Rodriguez.

"Yeah... well, we'd found the bodies there," Rodriguez said, pointing to a ragged crater in the concrete behind the patrol car.

"Mortar round?" Ping said, staring at the raised lip around the destroyed concrete.

Rodriguez shrugged, but his eyes better conveyed the extent of his confusion.

"Not unless the mortar fired people," Malloy said, shaking his head.

Ping was about to ask him what he meant, but Rodriguez continued, "So we were already concerned, you know? I had the flashlight and pistol out- sort of easing up on the back of the car. Then there's this sound... and like a blur of motion, and something explodes out from behind the car."

"Explodes?" Ping stopped scribbling on his tablet in mid-note, "What exploded?"

"Not like 'boom'," Malloy said, "but moving like it'd been shot out of a cannon... It really freaked him out." He pointed to the overpass, "Rod here took a shot at it- see the hole way up there in the bridge?"

"What freaked me out was that 'asthma' of yours." Rodriguez said as if re-explaining a medical problem to an eight-year-old, "I thought maybe you were dyin'. You sure that wasn't the terror squeak?"

"Asthma." Malloy droned.

"Terror squeak." Rodriguez's smile broadened.

"So this guy flew up to the bridge?" Ping asked, unimpressed.

"Nah," Malloy smirked, "he went off south. Rod here just shot up."

Rodriguez shook his head, "It was between the car and the wall. It bolted out just as I looked down into the car. I'm seeing all this blood, and there's this blast of sound like a flag in high wind, and I see something jet out from behind the car, out of the corner of my eye. I bring my gun up quick, but then there's this really unsettling 'asthma' coming from the chief here. He gave Malloy a mischievous glance, "Anyway, I lost my footing on some kind of stuff I really don't want to think about..."

"...and the bridge gets what's coming to it." Malloy gave a knowing nod.

"You keep saying 'it' and 'something'," Ping said, "do you mean 'he' or 'she'?"

"All I saw was a blur." Rodriguez shook his head.

"I just saw a blink," Malloy said, "dark and fast. It coulda' been a man..."

"Except men don't move like that." Rodriguez finished.

Untouched, Unknown

The storm was coming.

Face turned down against the light rain, Anne plodded homeward under a black canopy of lowering clouds. The tops of the surrounding buildings were already lost in the lowering sky and light showers had darkened the pavement. Nature's latest prank at Anne's expense was all set up and it was almost time for the big, wet punch line.

When she woke late in the afternoon, the day had been cool and bright, but deep clouds had moved in with the night. By the time she arrived at work, the sky was filled with the promise of rain. Now, walking home in the fulfillment of that promise, Anne trudged through the thousand small aches that any exertion cost her. Her blue sweater, though perfect for the early evening chill, was completely ineffective against the early morning rain. Socks were feet itching, she felt just a little sorry for herself. Usually she tried to be positive, but sometimes the funk crept in and ruined her day.

Normally she didn't waste a lot of time focusing on her long-term issues: like being single at thirty-nine, like having a face only a mother could love- not her mother, but maybe someone else's mother- like tipping the scales at two hundred forty pounds with her lungs full of helium. Thank heaven for metrics! A hundred and ten kilos sounded positively slim compared to her imperial weight.

Ok, so maybe she thought about the big issues a bit, but right now her most pressing problems were the five blocks between her and the train station, and the sky full of water above her. On the bright side, she didn't have to worry about the rain smearing her makeup- she just didn't wear the stuff. One time in college she'd made an abortive try, but the sight of her round face staring back at her from the mirror with the first hint of blush inexpertly applied made her feel like an inexpertly polished turd. Makeup and designer clothes were for some jet set, days-of-wine-and-roses, dating, frolicking-in-front-of-the-cameras subphylum of humanity to which she did not belong. Hospital scrubs and a clean face- this was her lot in life.

She grinned, part humor, part exasperation. She was big enough to admit her life sucked, but tonight had been something truly special. It had started out as usual with an over-snooze alarm. She'd missed her train and been late to work, but the most unpleasant part of the commute was the grizzled eastern European cabby that had hurled a stream of poorly assembled insults at her for crossing the street legally in his presence. The part that stuck with her was something like, "box be on your family"- box? She'd probably be dreaming about "the box" tonight.

She rolled her eyes and let the smile spread across her face as she considered the hundred small frustrations in the workday of a professional vampire. Seriously, she couldn't see how Count Chocula had done it all these years without getting fed up and taking a stroll in the sun- that cartoon bloodsucker had the heart of a champion. Despite her most bubbly bedside manner, every patient at the hospital was not happy to see Anne and her little tray of needles.

and tubes. She had it worse than most phlebotomists since she worked the graveyard shift. ~~No one liked to be in the hospital, no one liked to have blood drawn, but it really got personal when they had to wake up for their bloodletting.~~

Then there was her main occupational hazard: the plague of Harms that started showing up around eleven every night. The ER got between five and ten a night. They were restrained before the time they reached the hospital, but their incoherent verbal assault was always a treat. Eyes dilated before an incomprehensible hallucinoscape, they shrieked and cursed and wept. They were unpredictable, moving from pathetic sobs to merciless violence seamlessly. The police and paramedics who brought them in required first aid as often as not.

The ironic part was that Harmony was sold as a mood-elevator with mild hallucinogenic effects. It was the first and most effective connectivity drug on the illicit market. Though there was still debate on the subject, the prevailing wisdom was that connectivity drugs affected the areas of the brain that governed empathy and the sense of community. Many starry-eyed psychedelic types believed Harmony was the first scientific step toward telepathy, but Anne knew that speech, writing, and television had already blazed the telepathy trail.

Harmony had been hot among the party crowd for maybe a decade now, gaining widespread popularity with the post-psychedelic subculture. The psychotic incidents hadn't started until a few months ago in New York, but within three weeks, Harms had made their Chicago debut. In another two weeks, there were Harms in every major city in the world.

Anne understood the desire to escape, to feel like you belonged in a group of strangers, but she was completely mystified why anyone would continue to take a drug once it started leaving people in a state that came in second only to demonic possession in the creepy Olympics. From the number of Harms she saw at the hospital, she didn't need to see any disturbing statistics to know Harmony was a serious problem.

Drawing the blood of these nuts was the most unsettling part of her job. She usually got to wait until they were sedated, but even pumped full of sedatives powerful enough to tranquilize a carload of game show hosts, a Harm might still wake up cranky. A properly motivated Harm could even break the "unbreakable" plastic cuffs cops used. A month ago the hospital had received new restraints just for the Harms, but she still didn't feel safe.

The crown jewel in her work night came at three this morning. She'd been relieved to take a break from the ER and its swarm of Harms to draw blood from a slightly disoriented 80-year-old inpatient on anticoagulants. Carol was the archetypal granny: thin and fragile, with an easy disposition and plenty of stories of kids and grandkids. When Anne woke her up, she had been sweet, "You just do whatever you need, Dearie."

As Anne applied the tourniquet and sterilized Carol's arm, they'd had a pleasant conversation about Carol's grandkids. As Anne prepared the needle, she was smiling and laughing. She never saw it coming.

When the needle went into Carol's arm, she made a small surprised sound. Anne's next clue that something was amiss was the clutch purse that smashed into the top of her head. The old hag was screaming incoherently and repeatedly bludgeoning Anne cross-body with the purse. Anne got the blood sample, but it cost her both bruises and pride.

Expect the unexpected- this should be the phlebotomist's credo.

It made her want to start a support group for the vocationally unloved. She could picture now: listening supportively in the company of depressed IRS agents and dentists. "Hi, I'm Anne, and people hate my job," she mumbled as she trudged through the threatening sprinkling of rain. Humor had always been her shield. When things got tough, she'd go for the cheap laughs. She was starting to feel better when the rain came down like a tidal wave.

"Aw... crap...ola." was all the disappointment she could muster before the uncontrollable laughter started. She was still splashing and waddling, laughing and crying when she noticed the music- first like the tinkle of an elaborate crystal wind chime, but getting louder with the urgency of an approaching freight train. She didn't have time to process this information before the world exploded.

Her startled scream came out in a rather embarrassing squeak when the car parked to her left had a Wile E. Coyote moment. It seemed as if an anvil had dropped from some hidden mechanism high above. The car's roof crumpled and the windows closest to Anne exploded outwards. A storm of broken glass showered down from above, exploding on the ground around her, tugging at her left arm and back, stinging her right cheek.

Not an anvil! Her mind locked, hitched, locked- stuttered between knowledge and denial. The body rebounded sideways off the car and continued its impact on the sidewalk with a horrifying prolonged bursting sound. It seemed as if the impact went on and on as time lengthened, or perhaps replayed, with the onset of shock. Then the body was a lifeless rag doll on the sidewalk before her, shattered legs twisted at impossible angles, face partially covered by one arm.

Numb, she stared for a few seconds before becoming aware that she was standing on one foot with her arms crossed above her head, hands on elbows. The arm-head-cover she got but what was the one-leg-stand for? She would never understand her reflexes. She was a Darwinian counterexample of the first order- but then she wouldn't be reproducing anything soon, so maybe not exactly a counterexample. "Weeded out of the gene pool", or maybe "She died that we all might have better children", would mark her tombstone someday.

She put her foot down and rushed forward with a hopeless desire to help. She knelt and actually said, "Are you okay?" Yeah, she was sure he was probably fine! A quick glance above showed her buildings with more stories of unblemished glass than she could count ascending up into the clouds high above. "No." she mumbled, realizing this wasn't a workman fallen from a ladder or a low balcony.

She knew that she shouldn't move the body, so she sat helpless, her strained mirror completely oblivious to her tablet and its emergency links. After a few more seconds, she looked about for help- nothing. The rain was her only companion on the dark street. The sound of it was static in her ears; its caress was a wet, tingling static on her skin; the sight of it was gray static in her eyes. The world was a fuzzy place getting darker and slower.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed something dark and serpentine slithering on the ground around her. She looked down and saw dark tendrils washing around her hands and knees- blood! She tore her right hand out of a puddle of bloody water and watched in horror as the falling rain did its best to rinse it clean.

Her eyes lost focus on her red-tinged hand as she noticed that, behind it, the dead man's arm had fallen aside, exposing his face. Her first impression was of a child, broken and lost. Fringed by short dark hair, his face was round and gentle. His closed eyes were small and

narrowly spaced. The bridge of the nose was broad and slipped down into a small round nose. The upper lip was pronounced and looked even more so because the mouth hung slack. The chin and jaw were delicate.

Her throat constricted with pity. She didn't know this poor guy, but she could tell he'd been kind. She knew he didn't deserve to die like this. She reached out her hand to touch his shoulder, muttering inane apologies. The rain's static drone crackled all around, setting them apart from the rest of the world. They were together on the only remaining channel of a damaged television satellite floating through empty space. The blood continued to pool. As it continued to dissipate, she touched his cheek, her tears lost in the rain.

His eyes opened.

Unformed, powerful emotion covered her skin like a shorting electric blanket and every hair seemed to strain away from her skin. Her mouth dropped open as his closed. His eyes were incredibly blue; they held her like gentle hands, shutting out everything else, no more blood, no more rain- no more reason. This was not real.

His lips stirred. "Woohoo." he gurgled from partially collapsed lungs.

Not real. "What?" she sputtered as he struggled for breath. "It's going to be all right. Don't move." She stammered. "Help is on the..." realizing her oversight, she clawed in her pocket for her tablet.

"No. Got to tell..." he whispered, quieter than before. As his mind reasserted control over his face, the softness became less obvious. Though the innocence didn't disappear, it was surrounded by strength. Even broken, he was beautiful.

Something stirred within her. It was built on pity, formed of hope, but she wasn't sure at all what it was. Mesmerized, she leaned closer, straining to hear him above the sizzle of the rain.

"Sorry... sorry," he said so softly she craned closer to hear. His eyes never left hers. As she drew close to his face, it occurred to her that he was actually going to kiss her. Of course this was nuts- she wasn't the kind of girl that dying folks kissed impulsively. With an effort she turned her face from him and brought her ear close to his mouth.

"Sorry." his lip touched her ear causing the most unexpected shock. With a gasp, she realized that his left arm was over her shoulder, across her back, and holding her close with surprising strength. No thoughts came through her confusion until she felt his lips on her neck, and even then they weren't really thoughts: shock, fear of moving, distaste at being joined to someone so horribly hurt- but the weirdest and most prevalent feeling was the most embarrassing kind of excitement.

"Uhhh?" she got out before the pain blew through her. It shot from her neck inward to the center of her chest, where it seemed to ricochet around unchecked. Her throat closed, allowing no air or sound passage. Hot oily lightning filled her, deep-frying nerves, knotting every muscle.

The inner lightning pulsed, its rhythm filling every cell, blossoming and fading with her heart's beating. It slipped and pulsed like blood through her, synchronizing with the pulsing sparks that filled her vision, with the muted gong that filled her ears.

Her legs kicked out, but his arm held her tight, leaving her prostrate on top of him. The

muscles around her lungs overcame the muscles around her throat and the air groaned out her. Through the sparkling haze, she could now see her face reflected in a pool of water blood behind his shoulder. She wondered what percentage of the blood was hers as she examined her contorted reflection. She hoped she didn't still look like this when the coroner arrived or he'd guess 'death by constipation' for sure.

The fog thickened behind her reflected image. Burning and fading, she seemed to slip away from him, from the pain, from herself. She drifted through thickening white fog until she was at last alone.

Thunderstruck and hazy, she stood in white mists, rubbing her neck absently, and wondering if Angels or Devils were next. She grinned, thinking it funny that twice in one day her carelessness had opened her to the cruel klunk of life's clutch purse.

"Hi!" a cheerful voice sounded behind her, startling her so badly she was glad her ghost didn't have a bladder. The mists seemed to quiver in response to the voice. She jumped and spun around. Where was she anyway?

Against an unbroken backdrop of brightness, he stood smiling. Not hurt, not helpless, not weak- not innocent.

He shrugged, "I did say I was sorry, right?" He gave a self-conscious chuckle with an apologetic smile and a twinkle in his eye.

And then he started talking. She saw his hands gesturing for her patience, saw the urgent look in his eyes- but mostly she saw his lips move. She could hear the buzz of his words, but she wouldn't understand. She wasn't listening because she was too busy watching the teeth behind his moving lips. They were fierce, sharp, and curved like shark's teeth. They were red with her blood.

She turned to run, but the foggy brightness went black.

Rules of Evidence

The team of two forensic techs had arrived about twenty minutes ago in a van packed with impressive looking equipment. Another uniformed patrol team had arrived while the techs were still unpacking. The forensics guys poured over the car with their equipment while Ping went over the general area of the car, scanning and scratching notes. Malloy and Rodriguez had joined the other two uniforms in broadening the search/scan to the surrounding area.

Finally, one of the techs at the car waved Ping over. As Ping approached him, the tech held up a pair of clear plastic evidence bags the size of dinner plates. "We're done with the car, touch what you like."

The tech held out the first bag. "It's been through the scanner, so it's all yours." The tech continued, "His Uni says the guy in the front was Peter Sieberg, field tests agree, but I won't have a DNA match until the judge signs off on the test." Ping took the bag and gave the contents a quick glance: the smallest piece of equipment was the card-sized flexible plastic Universal ID. The Uni was nestled against a sleek looking glasses case or flashlight and a tablet. These objects were surrounded by some simple jewelry.

"Who was the passenger?" Ping asked, glancing at the other bag.

The tech handed it over, "Dr. Ivo Lutine... professor over at Rosemont."

"Professor of what?" Ping looked up from his examination of the professor's personal effects.

"Yeah, I know," the tech said leaning in slightly, "I was expecting some kind of foreign dictator or organized crime boss with a hit like this."

"What makes you think it was a hit?" Ping asked with a perfectly straight face.

"Oh, you mean like the high velocity shell through the driver's ear, or the fourteen holes and two slashes in the professor there? And I've got three things to say about those slashes..." He held up his hand and counted off on three fingers, "what...the...hell?" He waved the three extended fingers for emphasis as he continued. "From cross sections, we know the weapon blade was at least twenty-five centimeters long, but my guess is it was probably closer to a meter. And sharp! It sliced the bones... didn't crack them- actually left them smooth. One of those hacks cut through the clavicle, the scapula, four ribs in back, five in front and bisected the heart!"

"So you think we're looking for ninja hit men?" Ping held desperately to his straight face- he thought it was still working.

"Ninja hit..." The tech broke off, exasperated, "At this point I can't rule out psychotronics, cartoons, imaginary friends, or little green men. Am I not impressing you with this stuff?"

Yep, the straight face had held. Ping let it go and laughed, "Sorry, it's just been a very 'impressive' day."

"Now *that* I understand." The tech turned back toward his partner.

"One more thing." Ping called after him.

"Yeah?" the tech said over his shoulder.

"What's the likely origin on the shot that hit the driver?"

"That one's hard. He was definitely hit while the car was still moving, but I can't be sure where the car was, so I can't trace the shot back- not until we finish the area scan anyway. My best guess says you've got the uniforms looking in the right area."

"Thanks." he turned away to check on the uniformed officers' progress.

Half an hour later, Ping climbed the hill and approached his car. He'd left the forensics team to finish their tedious work- now he had his own tedious work to do. His tablet was full of data to slog through. He had the raw reports from Malloy and Rodriguez, as well as the area scans. Then there was his raw report, and the data held in the tablets of the victims.

None of the bodies outside the car had a Uni or other easily recognizable equipment, though it would take the lab some time to assemble the list of their possessions from the remaining bits of metal, ceramic and plastic mixed in with all the meat.

Without a working Uni or DNA tests, the bodies would not be identifiable. He had the forensics team's incident key, which he used to program his tablet to notify him when the test results became available.

He swiped his finger over the lock plate on the driver's side door and heard the click as the lock disengaged. He pulled the door open and dropped into the seat. He closed the door and was dropped like a smooth stone into a pool of absolute silence. Outside, the nighttime city hadn't been noisy, even with the nearby hiss of highway's traffic, but the difference between that quiet and the car's insulated silence was still striking. He paused to let it soak into him. As the seconds passed, new sounds emerged from the quiet: first his regular and slowing breathing, then the calm beating of his heart. Of all the things that Ping had learned from his father, by far the most frequently used was effective meditation.

He leaned forward, reached behind him and unholstered his tablet. He extended it to full size and propped it against the steering wheel. Where to start? Sometimes there were too many questions to approach systematically. He had poked at mysteries long enough to know that it mattered where he started poking. Each line of inquiry had its own set of built-in assumptions that could color the investigation. At times like this, he liked to start purely from inspiration- let fate, chance, intuition, or God guide his first steps. If evidence (or further inspiration) led him in another direction later, it would be easier to let go of his initial assumptions since he hadn't invested heavily in them.

Eyes closed, he let his mind wander back through his experiences at the underpass, hoping something would jump out at him. He saw the Otu weeds, Malloy's strained face, the leech's flesh arm, blood and glass. He remembered scanning into the bridge wall to get holos of the shells buried inside, the plastic bags filled with the victims' possessions, almost going down when he slipped on a small patch of eviscerata near the car- not a proud moment.

Concentration broken by the memory of his brush with blood and gravity, he resolved to start with the victims' personal effects. He grabbed his tablet's stylus and brought the machine out of standby. With a few taps, he forged the data-link to the professor's tablet through

still lay in the unopened evidence bag on the passenger seat. The data in its solid-state drive was encrypted of course. He'd have to request a warrant key from a judge to gain access. He quickly opened the roster of on-duty judges and winced as he saw 'Hatch, Jenna' highlighted. Jenna 'the hatchet' Hatch had an unhealthy love of her own voice, and a general intolerance for the voice of others. A call to her yielded a warrant sometimes, but without fail, it yielded a little soapbox speech on something she termed 'freedom to privacy'- like no one else understood the delicate balance between the public and private good. Sheesh.

He steeled himself for the patronizing he was about to take and touched the messaging line with his stylus. Nearly a minute passed and he became impatient. He opened the tablet calculator and started to enter numbers with the stylus: 5 + 5, 10 + 10... after another 10 seconds, a window opened on his screen bearing the Hatchet's sleep-puffy countenance. She didn't say a word, preferring to stare at him, radiating sleepy annoyance.

He could play this game. He continued to poke away at the calculator with a grave and determined look on his face. He was working on multiplying the powers of ten now.

Fifteen more seconds passed... twenty. Ping had plenty of numbers left.

"What is it, detective?" she finally gave up.

Victory! "Oh! Hi!" Ping said with real enthusiasm. Counter-annoyance was a blast. "I didn't hear you pick up! I was just preparing a report on a particularly grim case."

She grunted.

He continued, "I've got ten to thirteen corpses and only two working tablets between the 10 of them..."

"Ten to thirteen?" the judge interrupted.

"How many potatoes in a bowl of stew?" Ping asked with a conspiratorial look.

"What does that mean, detective?" Her voice was a drone encumbered with scorn.

"Lots of pieces. Not sure how many they add up to yet- forensics will be able to give a more accurate number after DNA-typing the remains. I need warrant keys for the two tablets so we can continue..."

"And you think these tablets' owners are dead? I wouldn't want to inadvertently violate his or her freedom to..."

"Definitely." he attempted to knock her from the soapbox before she got settled in.

"Are you really so sure?" she looked more annoyed. She was quicker in her next attempt.

"Without evidence of death or compelling public interest, I can't authorize such an invasion of their fundamental freedom to privacy..." there it was. "I mean, you don't even have a clear account of who's dead yet."

"Sure we do... all of them." He attached a photo of the corpse in the back seat to the outbound data stream and saw her flinch. He used his stylus to indicate the area of the corpse where the tablet was found. "It was here." He said, tapping on the image and transmitting the marker.

The judge's eyes moved to her tablet with its replica of the image and annotations, then retreated back toward the camera.

"What if it's not his tablet?" she said, voice weary.

He pretended to think about that carefully while he reinforced his outer appearance of calm helpfulness. Pretending to carefully check, as if he hadn't already, he tried multiplying a few numbers on the calculator application. "Hmm... The tablet's registry says the owner is a Dr. Ivo Lutine. The Uni found on the body was Dr. Lutine's..." dramatic pause while he multiplied some more numbers, then he put on a face of excited discovery. "Yep, the Uni's vascular scan matches the hand on the seat over there- ", he touched the image again, indicating a spot on the seat maybe 40 centimeters from the rest of the body. "...it was Dr. Lutine's! And since the hand looks like it fits on the arm over here..." He cut an image of the arm and used his stylus to try to fit it together with the picture of the hand, sharing the process through the link.

"And *now* you need a warrant key." She interrupted, as satisfied as the petulant ever get.

Ping nodded. "I think time is of the essence here."

"And why is that?" she said in the attitude of infinite patience.

"We've got a cross between a mob hit, a military operation, and ritual killing," he said in the attitude of infinite helpfulness. "Two risks: these guys are crazy enough to strike again quickly, or they are professional enough to vanish into the ether. Either way, we need to move quickly."

"And the warrant key is crucial to this 'quick' movement?" She said with a thoughtful finger on her chin.

One, two, three, four, slow inhale, five, six, seven, keep smiling, eight, nine, ten. Exhale and... "Yes, absolutely crucial."

She paused again. He thought it was more an assertion of conversational control than time for her to weigh facts. Finally, she spoke. "Okay, I'll authorize one key for Mr. Lushion's tablet..."

"Two keys, Judge." he cut in ever so reasonably- he would definitely need to hit the gym for a good long while before he would be able to sleep tonight. "We've got two bodies in the same car." He attached an image of the driver's remains to the data stream. Again, her eyes flinched away from her tablet. He continued, "This was Mr. Peter Sieberg. There is the same tablet-Universal ID-vascular scan-corpse chain of identification evidence. I think it's safe to say that the tablet's owner is dead."

"I'll be the judge of that." She snapped.

Wow. It was like trying to tread water in a pool of stupid. Stupid, of course, has the consistency of hot tar. This wasn't a Labrea tar-pit kind of naturally occurring stupid either- this was a swimming pool of smoking hot stupid purposefully created to service the swimming needs of the judge's ego. Maybe he could try another tactic.

"Oh, hold on! I forgot to mention these guys- " he said in mock inspiration as he sent high resolution images of the piles and pieces of the other bodies over the connection. "At least we don't need any warrant keys for these folks- if they had tablets, we weren't able to tell which pieces might have come from them." He continued in the attitude of someone excited by the challenges of his work: "I mean, even if we could find all the pieces and get them together, the blood and other...fluids... would be enough to mess up the electronics. Here"

look at this one," he marked a nearly indistinguishable piece of smooth metal protruding from an unidentifiable piece of ravaged flesh, "what do you think that stain on the metal is? My guess is gastro-intestinal, but the forensics guy, well he was pretty sure..."

"Two warrant keys for Mr. Lootan and Mr. Sieger." She said with a drawn face and eyes that never approached her tablet's screen.

Ping sent the globally unique IDs of the two tablets over the connection, and seconds later received the two warrant keys tuned for them. "Thanks again judge Hatch!" Ping said to the broken connection.

Union

Deep, hazy waters seemed to surround Anne and the child in her arms. At some level she knew this wasn't exactly real- probably because the cute little guy she clung to so desperately had told her no less than ten times that she was dreaming- but somehow that didn't make the situation any less tragic in her mind. The little boy was perhaps eight years old, his legs were somehow malformed and she remembered seeing him with crutches earlier. He looked up at her through cracked coke-bottle glasses with intensity and intelligence that was beyond his years and should have been beyond his ability. Despite her best efforts, he was slipping away from her.

"Let go!" he shouted again, still clinging to her waist, "You've got to wake up and get away!" His voice was urgent, but his grip on her was desperate. They hung in a dark void, clinging to each other as the depths tugged at him and the shimmering light above beckoned to her.

"You aren't listening to me!" he shouted, exasperated. But she could see the darkness below and she wasn't letting go. Somehow, if she could hold on long enough, they might both reach the surface together. If she could just hold on, she could save him- she could make a difference. The unfamiliar warmth of purpose tugged at her heart and tightened her grip.

"Neither are you!" she yelled back, already reflecting on her confusing retort.

"Right!" he laughed, "Well, I guess it's time." Then, with a smile twisted by the war between courage and fear, he let go.

"No!" she shrieked as his small body slipped from her embrace.

His fall was slower than she'd expected, as if through thick water. A few meters away, he shouted again, "Run, Anne! Run!" Despite his frail body, his voice held a deep power. It was the pressure of deep water, pressing inward, forcing her upward like a bubble.

"Don't go!" she shouted, feeling the emptiness around them both.

Lower, slower- almost out of sight, the boy noticed something below and turned to look. When he turned back to her, his face was alive with excitement. His crutches were nowhere to be seen now and he'd lost the thick glasses. He looked somehow bigger, stronger, older, more familiar. He cupped his hands and shouted to her, but she could only hear the sound of rushing water. He gestured with enthusiasm toward something in the darkness beneath him.

Then a strange inversion happened. Her perspective shifted and he was ascending as she fell upside down toward an uncertain end. The darkness he approached was now the bright morning sky; the murk that engulfed him became a bright enfolding haze. The light of the surface that Anne approached was now harsh, like a distant shiver of lightning and fire. As the boy moved further into the light, she thought she glimpsed two men in white clothing reaching out to embrace him. Then all she saw was the blackness around her as she broke through the surface and into the rain.

"Don't... go." She croaked, aloud this time, mouth full of rainwater. She lifted her head and

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