

TIZITA
The Fleur Trilogy, Book 2

A Novel
by
Sharon Heath



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For Eve, who pulled me through.

Tizita (pronounced tizz-i-tah): an Amharic word for the interplay of memory, loss and longing, sometimes conveyed in an Ethiopian or Eritrean style of music or song of the same name.

*The tears of the world are a constant quantity.
For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops.
(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)*

Part I

*Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the rugged hills.*

(Song of Songs 2:17)

Chapter One

Fleur



NOTHING LASTS FOREVER. I hate to say it, but someday our dependable sun will kiss goodbye its penchant for fiery display to become first a red giant and then a white dwarf, finally shrinking into a cold clump of carbon floating through the ether. Even black holes evaporate, though a really big one can take a trillion years to die. Here on planet earth, where an organ roughly the size and shape of a clenched fist serves as gatekeeper between life and death, species as diverse as white-cheeked gibbons and black-footed ferrets manage about a billion and a half heartbeats in a lifetime. We humans do only slightly better, the healthiest of habits winning us no more than three billion beats before we succumb to the void once and for all.

Which is only one of the reasons I was having trouble with the *foie gras*. It was Adam's girlfriend, the enviably beautiful Stephanie Seidenfeld, who first introduced me to the dish not long after Adam had transformed from being my childhood tutor to, well, so many other things. I'd been sitting across from Stephanie and Adam in a red-leather booth at a bustling restaurant not too far from Caltech, nervously prattling on about my Reed Middle School classmates, who seemed to despise me for everything from my sorry social skills to my alacrity at algebraic equations and my ever-burgeoning breasts. Our waiter, who asked for our orders with one of those fake grins I associated with Little Red Riding Hood's pretend-granny, interrupted my litany of grievances. Eager to get that toothsome smile away from our table, I leapt in with a request for my standard Angel Hair Diavolo. Stephanie ordered the goose liver pâté and a small dinner salad, and Adam hemmed and hawed until Phony Granny began to show his true colors, snappishly demanding, "It's a busy night, man. Do you need another minute?"

Adam forestalled his departure with a hasty, "No, wait. I'll have the Pizza Vegetariana." I gave myself over to pure hatred toward the waiter for making Adam turn crimson with embarrassment.

Once our food arrived, I couldn't help but notice the zeal with which Stephanie dispatched her glutinous loaf, pausing a few times to dot her coral lips with her napkin while the busboy refilled our water glasses. It was only when Adam described the force-feeding of the goose killed for her pleasure that I emptied the contents of my stomach onto the white tablecloth. Not exactly what Mother would call *comme il faut*, but I suppose I might be excused, being at the time only a green girl—alas, in more ways than one—of thirteen.

Now, here I was—eight years, six months, two hours, and fifteen minutes later and twenty miles west of that Pasadena pizzeria—merely a shade less green than I'd been then and faced with the same abominable dish, this time presented with considerably more panache at a onetime drug

rehabilitation center turned pricey hotel and restaurant, just a stone's throw from the Santa Monica beach pier. The occasion: an intimate celebration of my turning twenty-one on a birthday shared with Josef Stalin, Jane Fonda, Benjamin Disraeli, and Frank Zappa. And if the astrologers out there would care to explain what we five have in common, I'm listening.

My dinner companions this time were my best friend for nearly ever Sammie, her boyfriend Jacob, and my fiancé Assefa. Assefa was due to set off for Ethiopia the following day in search of his father, who'd gone missing with his childhood friend and co-researcher Zalelew Mekonin, presumably somewhere on the dusty road between Gondar and Aksum. Under the circumstances, none of us felt much like celebrating, but Assefa—nothing if not a respecter of ritual—had insisted that we had to mark my coming of age. Knowing how much anxiety he was pushing aside on my behalf, how could I say no?

The Casa del Mar's dining room was fragrant with the scent of fresh pine. We were four days away from Christmas, and the staff had gone all-out, decorating the imposing fir tree in the corner with so many colored lights and shiny ornaments that I couldn't help but secretly pinch my thigh every time I thought of the homeless veterans and sunburnt psychotics I knew were encamped on the beach only a few blocks away. There'd been a time when I hadn't understood why ample spaces like my father's old Main Line Philadelphia estate couldn't be made to accommodate those without homes of their own, but that was before I'd discovered the sacred status assigned to private property. The things people did to fend off the void were quite irrational and never failed to amaze me.

Assefa's words were slightly slurred, his capacity to hold his liquor in some kind of inverse ratio to his years spent in a tiny village near Gondar. He might have been raised by a couple of lapsed Christians, but he'd absorbed the ethos of his predominately Muslim community and was generally sparing in his alcohol consumption. Over the past several months I'd been suffused with gratitude more than a few times that he'd been brought to America before succumbing to the temptation to belong to the local majority, the price of admission a mere utterance of the words, "There is no god apart from God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

In that respect, Muslims had a lot in common with my deceased Father, whose insistence that there was no god apart from God, with Jesus as his son, seemed to ignore the fact that heaven has been rather overpopulated with gods and goddesses ever since primates began walking upright. It wasn't exactly out of character that Father hadn't even begun to consider that the Egyptian baboon-headed god Thoth, the Bushman dreaming-god Mantis, the many-armed Hindu goddess of destruction Kali, or even Jesus himself, for that matter, might actually feel less passionately one-sided about abortion than he and his Cackler followers.

But Father's crusade against abortion, let alone his attempts to discredit my own small efforts to advance our knowledge of the physical world, was far from my mind as Assefa urged me on, quite unfairly I thought, with a breathtaking batting of his thick lashes, "Tayshte ... taste it. Look

at *our* dishes.” He gestured toward his own empty plate, which looked as if it had been licked clean. “You’ve got to at least try. It’ll be an insult to Antoine if you don’t.”

Sammie, the traitor, joined in. Predictably, her original British accent was back in full swing after just one glass of Deutz Brut. She waved an expansive hand, the olive cheeks she’d inherited from her Jewish father and Indian mother glowing a rich burnt sienna. “C’mon, Fleur Beurre, Assefa’s right. How’s Antoine going to be motivated to keep delivering more goodies if we send your *foie gras* back untouched? You can do this, girl.” She licked her lips in search of any last little bits. “Your heart’ll forgive the cholesterol just this once. Antoine’s *foie gras* is brilliant.”

Silently cursing Antoine, I managed a weak grin.

Antoine was the reason we were dining at the Casa del Mar in the first place. Assefa’s next-door neighbor in their side-by-side duplex in Carthay Circle, he’d recently graduated from L.A.’s campus of Le Cordon Bleu with an offer of a job as sous-chef at the Casa. He’d promised Assefa he’d sneak us an assortment of yummy freebies for my coming of age party, and the *pâté* was evidently the first on his list.

I’d met Assefa himself only six months before and had been bedazzled by him from the start. We were an odd, but complementary match—he a brilliant intern with an interest in cardiology and a background in literature as sophisticated as Sammie’s; me a whiz at physics, list-making, and cat quirks, and pretty hopeless at everything else.

Despite the fact that Assefa was living at that time with his parents, a mere half mile away from Caltech, we didn’t cross paths until his mother Abeba came to work for my own overcommitted mother, babysitting and tutoring the orphaned Cesar Jesus de Maria Santo Domingo Marisco after the tragic death of my old nanny, who’d adopted the child when he was barely out of diapers. Mother taking on Cesar was just one instance of God’s taste for irony. When I was little, my mother hadn’t been able to get away fast enough from the unwanted children my father kept saving from the devil abortionists, yet here she was, on a fast jog toward forty, landed with full custodianship of one of them.

Mother had found Abeba through an employment referral list offered by Caltech. As she put it at the time, “I have to assume that anyone who advertises her services to professors at the top science university in the country has to have more on the ball than your average undereducated nanny.” Looking forward with some curiosity to meeting a woman who could balance anything on a ball beyond a matchstick or a piece of lint, I felt an immediate affinity with Abeba when we were introduced, she warmly clasping my outreached hand in hers, which were surprisingly small and sealskin smooth.

In a voice like wind chimes, she’d effused, “Ah, Fleur, I’ve been so eager to meet you. We two share a kinship in name, you know. I am a flower in Amharic; you are a flower in French.” As I saw myself bursting forth with petals somewhere in the French countryside, Abeba beckoned me toward Mother’s capacious kitchen. Pouring me a cup of the best coffee I’d ever tasted, she went

on to share the name of her husband Achamyalesh, which she informed me translated as *You Are Everything*, as well as that of their only son Assefa, whose name, she told me, meant *He Has Increased Our Family By Coming Into the World*. You certainly couldn't accuse the Ethiopians of minimalism.

Abeba's eyes positively glowed when she spoke of Achamyalesh. I learned soon enough that, like intelligent women the world over whose access to advanced education has been culturally constrained, she took particular pride in her husband's achievements. She seemed oblivious to her own well-developed attributes, particularly her generosity and what Mother liked to call her "pull-out-all-the-stops enthusiasm."

While I'd never regretted moving away from Mother's New York penthouse to the far humbler Pasadena cottage of my physics mentor Stanley H. Fiske and his sister Gwen halfway between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays, I'd been touched when Mother had elected to forgo the joys of MoMA, the Met, and Mile End Deli to pack up the massive contents of her apartment and the remains of Father's estate to move to nearby San Marino to comfort me after my Nobel debacle.

Mother being Mother, always depending on one kind of group or another, it hadn't been surprising that she'd brought with her to SoCal the retinue of angels with whom I'd grown up in Father's Main Line mansion—Nana, Sister Flatulencia, Fayga, Dhani, Ignacio, as well as a decidedly seraphic No-Longer-a-Baby-Angelina and the rather devilish young Cesar.

And me being me, it had been pretty predictable that I'd found a way to continue to sleep at the Fiskes' once she arrived. The fact that Mother took it in good stride—filling her void with her Bill W. friends and her studies to become a librarian—wasn't all that surprising. Neither one of us was in the habit of much mother-daughter intimacy. I'd bet money on her feeling a bit relieved when I made my excuse that Caltech was more convenient to the Fiskes' bungalow than to her 12,000 square-foot Tudor-style home, just a hop and a skip from the Huntington Gardens. What I didn't tell her was that her new digs bore more than a passing resemblance to Father's sweeping Main Line grounds, and it would take more than a few angels to make it tolerable to live somewhere like that again.

But once she'd introduced me to Abeba, I found myself detouring almost every afternoon to Mother's on my way home from Caltech. Dispatching a noisily reluctant Cesar to his room to do his homework, Abeba would proceed to ply me with Ethiopian versions of after-school treats, regaling me all the while with stories about the remarkable Achamyalesh. Those visits were a godsend, especially on the days when my team and I had butted our heads for hours against some unyielding mathematical problem. Shoveling in handfuls of *dabo kolo*, crunchy nuggets of spice heaven that I learned to wash down with little sips of *bunna*—Ethiopia's far superior antecedent to Starbucks' finest—I couldn't help but grow *curiouser* and *curiouser* about Abeba's other half.

Who wouldn't want to meet someone named *You Are Everything*? Especially when said all-inclusive soul was an African anthropologist who, according to his wife, avidly kept up his research despite being reduced to driving a cab in the U.S.? My curiosity was rewarded soon enough, heralded on one of those typical SoCal June-gloom days that left you despairing that summer would ever come. I was mounting the Malibu-tiled steps leading up to Mother's front porch, appreciating their vibrant design as only someone who'd never lived in the house could, when Abeba dramatically flung open the front door. She clasped my elbow and excitedly tugged me so impatiently into Mother's vaulted-ceilinged living room that I almost tripped on the Persian rug in the foyer. "Oh, Fleur, it is such good news I have. The Anthropology Dean at Pasadena City College has read Achamyalesh's VITA. She is going to give him a chance in their evening public lecture series." Abeba's mood was contagious. I skipped after her into the kitchen, where she automatically reached for a pot and poured me a cup of *bunna*, nearly spilling it in her enthusiasm. "He will be speaking in just two weeks on the work he has been doing on the cultural folklore surrounding the Ark of the Covenant."

Thanks to Adam's thoroughness as a tutor, I already knew about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's claims that the cask containing God's covenant with the Jewish people had been in their possession near the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion at Aksum ever since the Ethiopian Menelik, son of the Queen of Sheba and the Biblical Solomon, brought the Ark back home after a visit to his wise father.

I tended to greet stories of wise fathers with a certain skepticism. Personally, I'd never met one. As for the Ark itself, I'd been fascinated by its storied contents ever since I'd learned that, according to Biblical historians, the Ten Commandments were preceded by another set of ten precepts called the Ritual Decalogue, which included such pithy prescriptions for a righteous life as "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk."

The controversy surrounding the whereabouts of the Ark spoke to who owned the truth, who owned a special connection with God. But I hadn't yet met a soul who actually lived by God's Commandments. Oh sure, I didn't know many murderers. (None, to be honest.) But even the smaller taboo against coveting seemed to put our species on the spot. I couldn't possibly enumerate all the physics colleagues I'd met who'd told me they envied my brilliance (read Nobel). And every time Apple released a new iPhone, the amount of coveting that went on would certainly have driven Moses to despair.

I set Mother's zebra-festooned, Hermes "Africa" espresso cup onto its saucer and asked excitedly, "Oh, Abeba, do you think Achamyalesh would mind if I attended his talk?" Little did I know I'd played right into her hands. I learned later that it was Abeba who'd persuaded Assefa to accompany his father to the lecture. The rest, as they say, was history.

Fast-forward six months, five days, and six hours and twenty-nine minutes. A champagne glass in one hand and my own pale paw in the other, Assefa nodded encouragingly toward the twin

meaty mounds on my plate. But it was no use. Every time I looked down at those liverwurstian circles, I saw a doleful set of goose eyes staring back at me. Feeling myself slide toward the pit of everlasting nothingness, I had to pinch the palm Assefa wasn't holding to control the impulse to flap.

Assefa realized he was pushing me too far. "Okay, but only for you would I do this." Throwing me a conspiratorial look, he leaned in toward the center of the table and, skewing his elbow forward at an awkward angle, "accidentally" spilled his glass of Deutz into my plate while simultaneously crying out, "Oh, what a clumsy sod I am." His eyes twinkling, he pulled me toward him, his sharp collarbone pushing comfortingly against my temple. When distressed, I am always a sucker for a little pain.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere to expertly whisk away the sodden dish and rearrange the silver. I craned my neck to look up at Assefa's copper-colored face. I still hadn't gotten over my good fortune in finding a man whose heart was pure, but whose high forehead, leonine cheekbones, cushiony lips, and chin-sweeping goatee lit a host of impure flares across my belly. My only other sexual partner had been dark-skinned, too, but with Hector Hernandez it had been one brief moment of unexpected (and unwanted) penetration, subsidized by cheap beer, naiveté, and the synchronicity of multiple "Linda palomas" whispered in my ear just after I'd washed my hands with Dove soap. Carl Jung and Wolfgang Pauli would probably have turned over in their graves to learn that their notion of a-causal but meaningfully connected events (aka synchronicity) would play a role in a thirteen-year-old girl losing her virginity. But with Assefa, it was what Stanley H. Fiske liked to call "the real deal" and what Adam rather wistfully (and, as it happens, inaccurately) pronounced as "first love."

Not that concupiscence hadn't made its contribution to the mix. Just that morning, the fact of my birthday a poor competitor to the dread stirred by his father's disappearance two weeks earlier, Assefa had momentarily roused himself from his funk, convincing me to pose naked with him, hip to hip, in front of his full-length bathroom mirror. "Come, *dukula*," he'd whispered, his tongue a serpent in my ear, "let us look at one another." I hadn't needed much persuading. I liked to see the two of us together as much as he did. The contrast never failed to stir my tweeter.

I'm not a short woman, my father having bested six feet by several inches, and Assefa wasn't exactly the tallest man, so our noses were at about the same level. But the resemblance ended right there. Everything about me shouted, *American girl!* My nose was just a bit upturned, my blue eyes studded with silvery gray flecks, my eyebrows a mere shade or two darker than the sun-bleached hair concealing my slightly pointy-shaped head—a leftover of my entrance into the world from a teenaged mother's clenching tweeter. I'd been profoundly relieved a few years back when my thighs finally flared out to balance the bulbousness of my breasts, and I was extra glad of them these days, given Assefa's penchant for grasping my hips like guiderails as he drove deeper and deeper into my dark mystery, crying, "*Awon, awon!*"

“Yes, yes!” I’d moan back, trying not to pinch his skinny butt too hard as a mini-explosion sent waves of pleasure from my tweeter across every inch of my body. Assefa was as lean as a Watta hunter, his face hauntingly narrow, his hair a fine pattern of springy coils.

In the mirror, I watched my hands cup his purplish-brown balls, his member rising to a breathtaking angle. For a brief moment, I thought I saw a coffee-colored woman with wild black curls staring back at me—*who was that?*—but when I closed my eyes and reopened them the apparition was gone. I attended to the matter at hand. Assefa and I were compelled to have a nice long go at each other, with me seated on the edge of the bathroom counter, watching his glorious backside contract rhythmically in the mirror. But this time, something unusual happened. I felt a fullness inside me as Assefa came. “Oh, no!” I cried, as I heard him shout with unencumbered pleasure.

The condom had clearly not been up to its job. I felt a slow trickle of semen down my inner thigh. To my embarrassment, I began to cry until Assefa whispered, “Don’t worry, *dukula*. Didn’t you just finish your period last week? It will be all right.” I tended to be lazy about keeping track and wasn’t so sure he was accurate about the timing, but my worry faded as he held me even tighter. I’ve always been a sucker for a strong grip. He began to lick the tears off my cheek like a mother cat, though his tongue was much softer than Jillily’s. It broke the spell. I giggled, and he laughed with me.

It had been almost physically painful to unglue ourselves and get dressed, he to pick up some last minute supplies for his trip, me to take off for Caltech. The burst condom didn’t give me too much disquiet. I’d learned ages ago to shove unwanted thoughts into a seeming endless number of spare cupboards in my mind.

Actually it was precisely because of my lifelong familiarity with emptiness that I was particularly looking forward to discussing with my team certain implications of the Eridanus supervoid in an area of the universe devoid of galaxies. The void was huge: nearly a billion light-years across. It had been pretty much confirmed that supervoids were empty of all matter, including dark matter, and a few of my more imaginative colleagues were even conjecturing that Eridanus was a gateway to a parallel universe. While that sounded pretty sci-fi, serious theories of parallel universes were emerging from research into the phenomenon of quantum entanglement, famously described by Albert Einstein as “spooky action at a distance.”

I was never one to dismiss seemingly outrageous ideas out of hand; if I were, I would never have gotten this far. The phenomenal world was a tantalizing gem whose facets outleapt anything the mind might conceive. Quantum entanglement was just such a phenomenon. On a quantum level, once objects have interacted with each other or come into being in a similar way, they become linked or entangled. The fact that particles of energy and matter could interact with each other and retain a predictable connection in balancing pairs despite considerable distance between

them had fascinated me ever since Adam had first described it, both of us wolfing down Krispy Kremes in a combination of excitement and awe.

I'd been haunted by the void as a child. Not the common, garden variety childhood terror of disappearing down the bathtub drain, but a lurking pit of eternal emptiness that threatened me long before I taught myself to read Sister Flatulencia's *World English Bible* and Mother's *Elle* magazines when I was nearly four. It was only when Adam introduced me to Nobel physicist Stanley H. Fiske that I found a way to put that preoccupation to good use, ultimately coming up with the discovery of dark matter within all living organisms in the form of cellular black holes (I called them C-Voids), along with the potential to harness the exchange of light and dark matter to move people around with a zero carbon footprint via the Principle of Dematerialization. Those two discoveries, emerging during a feverishly insomniac contemplation of the heartache of abortion, the abominable human consumption of chimpanzees (euphemistically called "bush meat"), the self-replication of fractals, and the suspended jewels of the Hindu god Indra's web, each one of them mirroring every other jewel in the web, won me the Prize, but not even a pro-science president had been able to budge a Congress determined to outlaw any grant that would fund our application of P.D.

But now another angle on the topic was beckoning. Inspired by David Bohm's vision of entanglement as a guiding wave connecting individual interacting particles, Laura Mersini-Houghton had come up with her own model of entangled universes that was just begging to be verified. We toyed with becoming the ones to do it as we waited for my father's parting gift to me—what Gwennie Fiske called "the congressional dog and pony show to sabotage scientific progress"—to play itself out.

I'd tried out my thoughts about the Many Worlds Theory on Assefa the first time we met, explaining how one of the myriad debates in quantum physics concerns what happens to the unused possibilities when a choice is made to pursue one course of action over another. Many Worlds theorists contend that those other options actually play out in parallel worlds.

Assefa was fascinated with the idea, which proved to be a greater stimulant than the Brazilian blend I was drinking at the time. My rhapsodizing over science had been the ultimate repellent for every man Sammie had tried fixing me up with, to the point that I'd decided to forego blind dates forever. Poor Sammie had tried her hardest sell with the last one. "He looks fab, Fleur, you'll see—and super smart. Phi Beta Kappa, Law Review, the whole enchilada." She'd been at least partly right. Russell Glick had the look of a young George Clooney, but as we dined together at the fashionable Border Grill, he'd seemed more concerned about demonstrating how many Margaritas he could throw back and enumerating which T.V. shows he liked best than registering my increasing restlessness. When, finally, he seemed to recall that women tended to like it if you at least asked a few questions about them and I described to him the thrill of discovering C-Voids, he'd responded, "Yeah, but what do you do for fun?"

Delivering me to my doorstep, Russell had looked shocked that I'd averted my face as he aimed his lips at mine. I'd phoned Sammie as soon as his shiny black Mercedes sped away. "I appreciate you looking out for me, Sam, I really do, but if one more idiot tells me I need to lighten up, I'm going to spit ... or something worse." Sammie snorted, and in an instant we were giggling over how we'd repaired a major clash in our teens by shooting rice pudding out of our noses.

Russell Glick turned out to be the perfect opening act for Assefa, not that he needed one. Yacking away as we huddled together at the Coffee Club, I explained to *him* how black holes and voids had been a major part of my life since my earliest days as Mother's unwanted only child in a household full of eccentric women and cast-off children. Assefa's eyes stayed locked onto my face the whole time. One sure sign you're being listened to is that your companion actually asks relevant questions, though Assefa would have to have been more than a little crazy if he hadn't *needed* to ask questions after my meandering description of how the unpredictable variability of the Butterfly Effect had led an eleven-year-old girl to attempt to resurrect her beloved Grandfather by plumping his withering testicles with water, the failure of which had energized her then-alcoholic mother to finally wrest the two of them away from her abusive husband's Main Line estate.

"Which," I'd confessed, "was followed by my arrest for skinny dipping in someone's private New York garden, moving in with my physics mentor Stanley H. Fiske and his sister Gwennie here in Pasadena, and getting pregnant by a boy who had matching Jesus and Mary tattoos on the backs of his hands. My abortion was the last straw, as far as Father was concerned." Assefa winced, and I hastily appended, "I know, I know—it was horrifying. Even though I was just thirteen, I'll never be at peace with what I did." I felt my eyes moisten, but even the lump in my throat couldn't seem to stop my verbal Vesuvius. "I call her Baby X," I said, hastily brushing tears from my cheek. I daren't look Assefa in the eye or I'd simply implode, so I stared at his coffee cup, which had a slight nick in its Styrofoam rim in the shape of a probability distribution sign. "You'd think killing your child would ruin your life forever, but I'd tucked her into the hole in my heart, and not too long afterward I had my epiphany about C-Voids and the next thing I knew I got the call telling me I was being awarded the Nobel Prize. Really, it was a team effort. But now we're at a standstill on P.D.'s application, thanks to this lousy economy and too many members of Congress convinced my project has something to do with human cloning. Which it doesn't. You'd think they might believe me about it."

That one still irritated me. I was imperfect in more ways than I could possibly calculate, Baby X a case in point, but I wasn't a liar. At least not about anything so consequential. Contrary to the beliefs of the flat-earthers wanting to drive us back to the Stone Age, scientists generally tell the truth. The fact that I'd been the youngest scientist ever to receive a Nobel Prize seemed to be as irrelevant to certain members of Congress as had the jailed Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Peace Prize to the Burmese government while she still languished under house arrest.

As Assefa burst in with a series of penetrating questions, it dawned on me that I had to be either pretty nervous or something I couldn't quite put my finger on to natter on like that—especially the abortion part, which might have been in the public record after my catastrophic Nobel speech, but not something I typically talked about with anyone, let alone an attractive stranger. Looking back now, I don't think it was nerves at all, but Assefa's gift for absolute acceptance.

Once he finally managed to get some sense of what I'd been talking about, he pronounced gravely, "Enat—my mother—was right. You are quite brilliant. I do believe you've just managed to compress your whole life story into three minutes." He shook his head wonderingly. "And what a life it has been!" Without warning, he stood up, and I was afraid he was going to walk out on me, but instead he leaned forward, whispering, "Tell you what. I'll get us another couple of coffees and you can fill in the holes"—he flashed me a knowing grin—"and give me the expanded version." I watched him walk toward the busy counter, his body displaying a kind of feline grace in a tangled loop of fluidity and tension.

He came back to the table carrying two steaming cups, which he carefully set down before going back for a couple of napkins, taking the time to fold them into perfect little triangles. He pulled his chair closer to mine. I caught the faintest whiff of something—a mixture of cinnamon and Roquefort cheese?—and took a long, relaxed breath. Who wouldn't feel reassured by such interesting smells?

Unconsciously stroking his goatee, Assefa shot me a teasing look. "Now, let's start with that grandfather of yours. You didn't really think you could resurrect him, did you? By pouring water on his ... body?"

I felt myself flush. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but it made perfect sense to me at the time. The thing is, I was raised in an extremely religious household. Mother's companion was actually an ex-nun. My father was the foremost crusader against abortion in the Senate, and the house was drenched in stories about Jesus. My mother hadn't gotten sober yet, my nanny was busy most of the time taking care of a revolving door of foster children, and my grandfather, who was mute from his stroke, was the only one who actually had any time for me." Nervously pressing the pleat in my napkin, I paused. "Well, no way around it, he was everything to me. I felt I had to bring him back to life. Somehow—well, not somehow, but that's a whole other story—I got it into my head that his balls, which went from swollen to shrunken with congestive heart failure, were somehow the key to bringing him back again, so I poured a bunch of water on him—actually, onto the crotch of his best blue suit—while he lay in his casket."

I waited for the inevitable derisive laughter, but Assefa seemed preoccupied. "Your grandfather," he said slowly, "he was a good man?"

I nodded.

"Ah." How can one word—less of a word, really, than a sound—convey so much?

That was when I sensed that there might be a connection between Assefa and me far stronger than pheromones.

He grunted, and in that moment his narrow face seemed to fold in on itself. “My grandfather Medr, my father’s father, hasn’t had a stroke, but the result is the same. He hasn’t uttered a word since his wife—my grandmother—was raped and murdered by Eritreans when they invaded our homeland.”

My mind reeled, but my mouth assumed an idiotic life of its own. “Medr. What an interesting sounding name. Does it have a particular meaning?” As soon as the words came out, I wanted to scoop them back again.

Assefa looked understandably taken aback, but responded politely, “Earth and Fertility,” at which point I burst into tears. “Oh, God,” I cried, “what a beautiful name!” He looked both alarmed and confused. I wanted to run out of the coffee house, but was paralyzed. “Forgive me. I’ve always been socially backward. What you’ve just told me is horrible. I am so sorry. Please forget what I just said. Believe me, it’s no accident my nickname used to be Odd Duck.”

God bless him, Assefa actually laughed. “Odd Duck? As in ‘quack, quack?’” He put his thumbs side by side with his fingers splayed flat on the table, and, wriggling his wrists, waddled his hands toward me. But now a shadow overtook his smiling eyes. “There is nothing right to say when there is too much pain. Perhaps that is why Medr has chosen not to speak at all.”

I know it goes against the grain, but I’ve decided that shared suffering can actually be an aphrodisiac. That night, in the back seat of his father’s yellow cab, Assefa kissed my forehead, brought his soft lips to mine, and, reaching into my organic white cotton bra, fondled my breasts, which seemed to have developed a rather pushy life of their own.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry with how much my tweeter was aching for him, but Assefa turned out to be old school. We managed to hold off moving into the mini-explosion phase until we got engaged. It was a different story as soon as a simple silver band with its hard-purchased zirconia and sapphire ring encircled my fourth finger. In his brand new double bed in his brand new duplex apartment, Assefa made up for lost time, establishing what would soon become a ritual of commenting enthusiastically on various electrified parts of my body as he nibbled at them. Surrounding my lips with his own fuller ones, he traced their shape with the tuft at his chin, pulling back to proclaim, “My little Nobelista, whose mouth is a fount of wisdom.” Moving down, he licked every inch of my breasts, coming up for air to pronounce like a connoisseur, “Abundant! Delicious! Fit for a king!” As if he weren’t already sending spears of fire across my belly, he tantalized me with little chicken peck kisses, inching his way down to my tweeter. Coming up once for air, he murmured, “Mmm, could this pussy be the source of all that genius?” before diving back in again.

I ended up spending every weekend I could at his apartment. Even when he dragged himself off to study all day at UCLA’s Biomedical Library, I preferred curling up in his bed with a pile of

physics papers to venturing out. The bed smelled of him. I brought Jillily with me most times in her dented old cage of a cat carrier, sliding her traveling litter box out from under Assefa's bathroom sink and pouring in just enough Jonny Cat to do the job. At eighteen, Jillily was a lot skinnier than she'd once been, but just as likely to stretch across the bed in her Charlotte the Harlot pose, flat on her back with her white apron exposed, giving me the look that said, "Well, don't you want to stroke my silky belly and sniff my perfect fish breath?"

But on the morning of my birthday, it wasn't UCLA that Assefa left our bed for but a series of last-minute errands to prepare for his trip. Asking myself for the hundredth time where in the world Achamyalesh and Zalelew could have disappeared to and not getting any reassuring answers, I drove Jillily back home to the Fiskes' before my planned day at Caltech. As I launched myself up the path on Rose Villa Street, I saw Gwennie look out the kitchen window and wave. But before I could wave back, I was accosted by our next-door neighbor Fidel Marquetti. I'd always assumed Fidel to be a harmless sort of man until this past summer, when he'd taken a fierce dislike to the Korean family who'd just moved in at his other side. Well, to be fair, it wasn't the Kangs who'd offended Fidel's tender sensibilities, but their Jindo named Chin-Hwa, whose name, as Mrs. Kang had proudly informed me the first time the dog exuberantly sniffed my crotch, meant, "The Most Wealthy." Which made a kind of sense, given the fact that the success of the Kang's liquor store in South Pasadena was undoubtedly due less to the sweet potato vodka they prided themselves on purveying than the fact that they'd actually sold two winning SuperLotto Plus tickets over the past year and a half.

It was probably because of the mysterious skin condition that had Fidel feeling in flames most of the time that he developed an inordinate irritability toward Chin-Hwa. From the beginning, I couldn't help but notice that Fidel demonstrated less than an average Pasadena neighbor's tolerance for the dog's frequent escapes from the leash in Mr. Kang's frantic hand to howl at the borders of Fidel's unusual variant of a SoCal front lawn.

There was a story behind Chin-Hwa's antagonism toward Fidel's garden. In defiance of Southern California's current drought, Fidel had planted rows of tall, exotic grasses separated by neat squares of annuals, which he liked to water with one of those revolving lawn sprinklers. The thing was, the generally impeccable Jindo breed of dog had one (in this case fatal) flaw: an aversion to water and a desperate desire to avoid getting wet. Mr. Kang had attempted to resolve the situation by taking Chin-Hwa out for his walks only when Fidel's sprinkler wasn't running, but it turned out that Chin-Hwa had a second character flaw less endemic to his breed. He held a grudge. Anytime he could slip his handsome white head under the backyard fence that a desperate Mr. Kang kept unsuccessfully reinforcing, he'd make a beeline for some tidy gathering of multicolored pansies, planting a crushing dump over as many of Fidel's flowers as he could before slinking back to his own yard.

After three months of Fidel banging on the Kang door, Mr. Kang bowing his head and muttering apologies, and Mrs. Kang standing in the background wringing her hands, Fidel had finally gone over the edge, festooning his front yard with printed signs with admonitions ranging from “I Know What You’re Doing” to “Curb your Dog.” Though the former was the most provocative of the bunch, it was the latter that had gotten to me, only because I misread it the first time I passed by as “Curb Your God.”

Which had taken me on no end of void-vanquishing mental excursions. How many world crises would simply dry up if the world’s zealots would only curb their gods? Lord knew, I might have been able to make peace with my own father had he gotten past the certainty of possessing the one and only spiritual truth before he died.

But this morning it was Fidel himself, and not one of his signs, that had me nearly bursting into untimely laughter. His brown face was mottled with patches of undoubtedly painful crimson as he pointed wordlessly to what I had to admit was a pretty exuberant splash of doggie diarrhea over a plot of pink impatiens. But he found his voice in no time. “Those damn Chinks. I thought those people *ate* their dogs. These ones’ve gotta be spending too much time praying to that Buddha-head in their living room to even notice what that frickin’ animal of theirs is doing. If I were them, I’d be spending half my days in confession. You’d think they were the ones who won the war.”

I stopped myself from trying to correct him. Where would I even begin? I shrugged with what I hoped at least looked like sympathy and ran toward Gwennie, who was thankfully beckoning now from our front door. As I submitted to a giant hug, I couldn’t help but think about poor Fidel, and I must have muttered out loud, “Well, *somebody’s* God certainly needs a little curbing,” because Gwen pushed me away and said defensively, “Huh?”

I quickly reassured Gwennie that I didn’t mean *her*, but she was already walking away from me, throwing over her shoulder, “Listen, I’ve got some news for you. C’mon into the kitchen.” I nearly laughed at how my thrifty metabolism led middle-aged women—well, middle-aged women except for my mother—to want to feed me first and talk later. Gwennie set down a plate and gestured for me to sit at the kitchen table while she sliced off a slab of banana bread, but I just stared at her. Sensing my unease, she relented. “Okay, kiddo. I got a call from your mother a few minutes ago. Abeba showed up and told her that Zalelew’s daughter phoned this morning. She got a postcard from her father, postmarked Gondar.” Dropping into my chair, I anxiously shoved a hunk of banana bread into my mouth. Gwennie continued, “Zalelew wrote that he and Achamyalesh bumped into a young woman from their old village when they arrived at the airport. She was accompanying three small children and the Spanish parents who were adopting them. Zalelew said she was a girl Assefa had gone to school with.” I stopped chewing, but Gwennie seemed not to notice. She added, “They were going to visit the orphanage where she worked on their way to Aksum.” She cocked her head hopefully. “So maybe Assefa won’t have to go now?”

Reaching for my cell, I realized I hadn't turned it on yet this morning. As soon as I did, the haunting melody of the ringtone I'd assigned to Assefa, Teddy Afro's "Aydenegetim Lebie," filled the room.

Assefa's voice was trembling. "Fleur? Thank God you finally picked up. Have you heard the news?"

I began to burble about how we'd celebrate, when Assefa broke in, clearly thinking aloud, "The thing is, though, why didn't they call? Abat promised us he'd call when he landed in Gondar. Don't you think it's odd that all anyone got was a postcard? My family always phones when we arrive at our destination. It's what we do. And why haven't they called since?"

"Gondar's a pretty small city. Maybe the phone service has been down," I ventured hopefully. "Maybe the cellphone he rented was a dud. Maybe he figured a postcard would do the trick."

"And make us wait for two weeks? The postcard wasn't even from him."

"Maybe you'll get one tomorrow. Sometimes mail travels at different rates. It is Ethiopia, after all."

He snapped, "What's that supposed to mean?"

I got a little short myself. "Oh, come on, it's an underdeveloped country. For God's sake, even the U.S. Postal Service screws up half the time."

Assefa paused, then conceded grudgingly, "Yes, of course, of course, you're right."

Gwennie shot me a look and crossed the room to load the dishwasher, flinging in plates and cups a bit more forcefully than usual.

I knew my argument made sense, but Assefa's voice, though calmer now, was no less determined. "Nothing has changed, really. Something's not right."

"So ...?"

Assefa asked defensively, "What can I do? What if it were *your* father?"

I felt like I'd been struck. I could hear the stiffness in my voice as I reminded him, "If it were my father, things like phone calls wouldn't have been an issue."

Gwennie twisted around to frown meaningfully at me, anxiously stroking her *Physicists are Spacier* apron, the one with the "a" in *Spacier* x-ed out and replaced by an "i."

Assefa was contrite now. "Ah, *dukula*. I have been insensitive. And on your birthday, too. But you do see, don't you, that I must go? My mother is still very worried."

"I suppose," I muttered ungraciously.

But just as I ventured the question that was niggling at me, "Oh, by the way, who's the girl they bumped into," Assefa said, "Damn. My cell's breaking up. I'll see you tonight at—"

That was it. We'd lost the connection.

I tried talking it over with Gwennie, she sitting on my left so she could hear me with her good ear. "You're being ridiculous, child. I don't know what I was thinking. Of course, he has to go."

It's not like his father to skip the call. He would have found a pay phone or called from the hotel. Something."

I was too ashamed to share the real source of my disquiet, telling myself not to be an idiot. Besides, Gwennie—ever the political animal—was already taking the conversation in a new direction. Muttering something about orphans, she pulled her eyeglasses down from the top of her head and wandered over to the wicker basket of the week's worth of newspapers she kept at the corner of the kitchen. Pushing aside my plate, she spread a marmalade-stained page across the table.

"Look at this," she said, pointing to a headline that announced, "Ethiopian Ministry of Health Acknowledges More than a Million AIDS Orphans."

She flung out her arms for emphasis. "One fucking million!" The last time I'd seen her like this was when Father's Cacklers—otherwise known as Campaign America to Crush C-Voids—had joined with Big Oil to mount their campaign against my research. Pulling up a chair, she began reading aloud. "UNICEF predicts that the number of street children will only increase, with teenage girls ending up as prostitutes. The number of orphans may top two million by 2015." Gwennie pounded the table hard enough for my plate to jump. "Who's going to care for all those children?"

Her face had gone red enough to make me worry about her blood pressure. She wasn't getting any younger, and after Nana's sudden death last year, I couldn't afford losing anyone else I loved. In an attempt at diversion, I broke in with my Fidel story, ticking off on my fingers his multiple feats of historical revisionism.

At first, she looked annoyed. Nobody likes to be interrupted in the middle of a political rant. But when I got to the part about the "Chinks" thinking they'd won the war, she was bending over with laughter. Then the hiccups began. They were the worst kind, climaxing in wet burps that ominously suggested something worse might not be far behind.

Laughing apologetically, she hurriedly grabbed a glass from the cupboard, filled it with filtered water, and drank it upside down over the sink. She wiped the drool from her chin, waited a moment, then pronounced, "There. That's better." Trying to control her tittering this time, she shook her head. "Poor man." Then she proceeded to pack up the rest of the banana bread for me to take to school.

As it turned out, wild bathroom sex wasn't my only overindulgence that morning. In my nervousness, I'd pigged out on more banana bread than I'd realized—there was only half a loaf left to bring to my team at Caltech. Thrusting the tin-foiled care package into my book bag, I squinted out the living room window to make sure Fidel had gone in. Dashing outside, I started up the dented green Prius I'd inherited from Gwennie. As I glided past Fidel's yard, I saw that he'd tacked up one more sign. This one was clearly an impromptu job. You had to give Fidel credit for pride of place; all the others had been made up professionally at the local stationer's. This newest

effort was hand lettered in a downward slant, and despite being brief had a couple of misspellings: “Buda Hades go home.” Given that Fidel’s whole family had taken advantage of one of the surges of amnesty following their emigration from Cuba on an illegal fishing boat, the message packed more than a little irony.

My short drive to school was filled with long thoughts, including the AIDS crisis in Africa, which I generally managed to shove into a dusty storage cupboard at the back of my mind. Normally, any mention that the cradle of our species had two out of every ten people prematurely dying was as unbearable as pictures of polar bears and penguins stranded by melting ice caps. I tried remembering who it was who’d said that the loss of one human being was the loss of a whole universe. If that were the case, how could we even fathom the loss of a million? If it were a question of a million pet dogs or cats being felled by a preventable disease, red states and blue states would come together at last and the whole country would be clamoring to send in the marines.

Still fuming, I pulled into the parking lot, slid out, and slammed the car door. Despite its impact on the world of science, I was thankful Caltech wasn’t a huge campus. I got halfway to Lauritsen before realizing that I might have my purse and laptop with me, but I’d forgotten the banana bread and had to leg it all the way back again.

When I finally entered the lab, the whole team—except, of course, Adam—was there. Stanley stood at the blackboard, while Gunther leaned his tall-glass-of-milk body against the back wall, thoughtfully rubbing his blond-stubbled chin. Amir, Tom, and Katrina were huddled together, doing some computations at a long table. Adam’s replacement, Bob Ballantine, sat at a student’s desk in the middle of the room, turning quickly when I opened the door. Bob was becoming something of a problem. From the moment we’d met, it was clear he was going to have a crush on me, while all I could think of was Uncle Bob, the imaginary shrinking relative who spent half his time in my pocket and the other half skipping by my side during some of my more memorable childhood adventures.

Before I knew it, Bob rose from his chair, struggling to tuck his blue Oxford shirt into khakis that were just this side of being honest-to-God floods. Within seconds he was close enough for me to detect a hint of smoked fish and orange juice. On the whole, not an unpleasant combination. His signature eye tic more pronounced than usual, he thrust a manuscript into my hand with the air of a dog presenting his favorite throw toy to his master. Or a cat triumphantly delivering a dead hummingbird to her mistress’ bed, which Jillily had done just a few weeks before.

“I know we’re supposed to be sticking to the supervoid,” he said, “but look at this paper. By one of my best undergrads. He’s taken an unusual twist, connecting Pribram and Bohm’s holographic models with C-Voids.”

I wanted to push him aside and head straight for Stanley, but everything I’d read so far about the possibility of a holographic universe stopped me dead in my tracks. “Why, thank you, Bob.” He grinned broadly, and I tried not to notice what looked like a sliver of lox fat snagged between

his left front tooth and lateral incisor. Running my eyes down the first page of the manuscript, I commented, “Actually, Jack Ng just published a piece suggesting that quantum foam is holographic. I think your guy might be on to something.”

Passing him Gwennie’s banana loaf, which he eyed with the kind of suspicion one greets an unexploded bomb, I hurried up to the blackboard, waving the paper at Stanley before I was treated to one of his class-A hugs. Though age might have taken a half-inch or so off his height, Stanley was still a lot taller than I. He managed to extract a quarter from the scrunchy atop my head, which gave me as much of a thrill as the first time he’d performed that particular magic trick when I was an eleven-year-old girl. Then he croaked to the rest of the room, as if they couldn’t see for themselves, “Here’s our Fleur,” before sweeping the paper from my hand. I don’t think I’ve mentioned that, despite being a man of great distinction and unquestionably the most brilliant person I’d ever met, Stanley had the face and, well, hop-ability of a frog. His brilliant head was squished rather flatly onto his unusually long neck, and his bottle-cap glasses magnified his already buggish eyes. When excited, he was prone to jump around the room, and in our early days proved to be as skip-happy as Uncle Bob himself. And that’s just what he did: a hop and a skip in front of the blackboard for old times’ sake. I saw Gunther stifle a snort from the corner and gave him a little wave.

I shot a conspiratorial look toward where Amir, Tom, and Katrina had been, but they’d disappeared. How had I missed that?

Just as I was about to ask Stanley where they’d gone, he seemed to realize he was holding the manuscript. Peering down at it, he worked his rather pronounced Adam’s apple and asked, “So, what’s this when it’s at home?”

I laughed. “I don’t know about home, but when it’s here, it’s from Bob.”

As if on cue, up trotted Bob himself, brushing banana bread crumbs from his shirt. A brown triangle of banana bread crust had moved in next door to the lox fat, so I assumed Gwen’s package had been promoted from object of suspicious derivation to the highly valuable item it actually was.

Bob grinned and scratched his head. I noticed that he’d actually styled his chestnut hair in spikes and put some kind of product on it that called attention to its generous dusting of dandruff. “Jaime Gomez,” he offered enthusiastically. “Great paper. ‘The Holographic Argument for C-Voids.’”

Without a word, Stanley nodded, walked to one of the front row desks and, crouching on its chair as if it were a toadstool, lost himself in Jaime Gomez’s paper. Bob and I exchanged an unusually accordant look. With Stanley reading the paper, we knew we were invisible to him, consigned to the black hole into which all human relationships descend when even the kindest of scientists gets grabbed by an idea.

I bore Stanley no hard feelings for this, since I’d once been one of that law’s more egregious examples. I’d had no end of grief as a young adolescent trying to repair my relationship with

Sammie after the call of C-Voids and P.D. temporarily blinded me to the justifiable demands of true friendship. Since then, I'd taken great care to let Sammie know how much she meant to me.

Which is why, when my cellphone went off to the tune of Duffy's "Warwick Avenue"—the ringtone I'd assigned to Sammie—I hastened out of the room to take the call.

As soon as I stepped out, I saw Katrina coming down the hall, Tom and Amir grinning behind her. Her ponytail bobbing, she carried a Petri dish with a large pale-colored muffin on it. A small, lit candle protruded upwards from its center like an erect nipple. Breast on a platter, I thought. That was what I got for having wild sex first thing in the morning.

The phone was still ringing. I took the call. "Sam, love, I think I'm in the middle of a birthday surprise."

I heard that infectious giggle on the other end. "No worries. Just rang to sing you happy birthday." Which she proceeded to do, at least the first six words—terribly out of tune, as usual. Laughing at herself, she gave up. "Oh, hell. What a waste of Mum's genes." Her mother Aadita's voice was exquisitely elastic; it was almost indistinguishable from one of my favorite singers, India's famed fusion artist Nine Virdee, with whom Aadita had familiarized me. "Anyway, call me later. Many happy returns of the day, girl."

I walked beside my birthday muffin back to the lab, letting my kindly colleagues assume that the wide grin on my face was for them alone, and not the girl who, sitting with me on a front porch in the pouring rain, had taught me everything I needed to know about friendship.

Not that Stanley and Amir and Tom and Katrina and Gunther and even Bob Ballantine were chopped liver in that department. Actually, they weren't chopped liver in any department, they had hearts and kidneys and brains and bladders, too, but I've long since learned that most people aren't as intrigued as I that some words have both literal and idiomatic meanings and that chopped liver is as good a metaphor for insignificance as *piss-ant* or *small potatoes*.

Anyway, getting back to my physics pals, I soon discovered they'd chipped in for half a year's worth of yoga classes at Golden Bridge as a birthday gift. Better still, they indulged me while I ran through my ideas about the applicability to P.D. of Gerardus 't Hooft's speculations about holographic theory. My fellow Nobelist had suggested that the whole universe could be understood as two-dimensional, our perception of three dimensions being a function of an information structure "painted" on the cosmological horizon.

"Hang on a mo," I added, my enthusiasm building. I ran over to my laptop and brought up an article in *Scientific American*. "Here it is. Jacob Bekenstein making the argument that the physical world is comprised of matter and energy, yes, but also information. Information tells matter and energy what to do with themselves, like a robot in a factory that needs instructions telling it which bits of metal and plastic to weld."

I flipped my laptop closed and threw a meaningful look at Stanley. "Same with a ribosome in a cell, which can't synthesize proteins and get power without information brought from the DNA

in its nucleus.” I grinned. “Don’t you just love it? That’s where P.D. comes in, just as soon as we perfect getting the information to the cell to trigger the shift from light to dark matter.”

Gunther looked pretty excited himself. His wandering eye added a slight air of lunacy to his demeanor as he broke in, “I like it. Simplifies our job. Makes me think of Wheeler’s insistence that information, not energy and matter, is the basic building block of life.”

I could tell Bob was itching to take part. “Wheeler’s from Princeton, right?” he asked, left eye twitching madly.

I couldn’t help but wonder how many ocular anomalies one physics team could display. “Right,” I said. “You know, don’t you, that he was the first one to publicly refer to black holes?” But my mind was already racing ahead. I went up to the blackboard and tentatively chalked out what I saw as the problem. “I’m not so sure, Gunther, that it’s all that simple. How’re we going to send the message to dematerialize and rematerialize without catastrophically altering the mass and energy of our subject?”

Gunther broke in excitedly, his untethered eye wandering even more wildly. “Well, if the team at Max Planck can actually create an optical cavity with two laser beams for a water bear, they might be able to adjust the frequency of the beams so that the laser photons absorb the vibration energy of the water bear around its mass center, slowing it to a ground state and allowing it to both appear and disappear into a void state.”

Tom frowned. “You’re assuming the void state awaits it somewhere outside the water bear, but Fleur’s idea is to harness the water bear’s cellular voids and create an internal energy exchange between dark and light matter.”

I nodded, wondering whether the application of dematerialization would rest on Gunther’s water bears, science’s more recent superstars, prized for their relative indestructibility. Tiny little creatures—most of them no longer than a millimeter—they’re sometimes called moss piglets, which is my favorite name for them, since they move their chunky little bodies across moss and lichens in slow motion, supported by eight tiny, pudgy feet.

Stanley gave a happy little hop. He liked nothing more than group riffing on a mind-stretching theme. Amir made him even happier by offering, “But maybe that’s where Eridanus comes in. If Mersini-Houghton’s right, we just instruct our object to shift itself into one of its parallel universes.”

“But, wait,” interjected Katrina, nervously tapping her pencil against the arm of her chair. “You’re assuming that the other universe has similar physical properties, which it can’t. At least, I don’t think so. Unless . . .” She scratched her scalp just below her shiny ponytail, in the process pulling pretty little wisps free. “Unless it’s all part of some larger guiding wave.”

Stanley smiled slyly and clapped his magician’s hands. “Looks like we’ve got lots to think about, boys and girls.” He gave a froggish croak. “Fleur, didn’t Gwen tell me she and I were taking you out to Rose Cottage for a birthday lunch?” God, banana bread for breakfast, English

tea for lunch, dinner that night at Casa del Mar. My birthday was guaranteeing my hips would be more grabbable than ever when Assefa returned.

But thoughts of Assefa returning, no matter how deliciously erotic, meant Assefa had to go away first, which sounded like a dangerous stretching of an invisible cord between us. That night, as I struggled to slither my butt into my best black dress, I struggled even harder with a serious case of dread. I had to force myself to muster a cheery grin as a silk-suit-clad Assefa greeted me forty minutes later when I approached his Commodore Sloat Drive door, though fake melted into for-real once he brushed his generous lips against my cheek and nibbled at the diamond stud in my ear.

But the lively spirits that marked the beginning of our dinner began to fade as alcohol coursed through our bloodstreams and our tummies expanded—mine, of course, minus the *foie gras* lumping up inside the other three. The conversation at the table got looser, which is, I suppose, why Sammie spoke aloud the question we'd all been secretly asking ourselves. "How can two men disappear on a road only 217 miles long without anyone noticing anything?"

"Well," I countered, "it's not like some straight throughway. Isn't a lot of it wild mountain land?" I darted a look at Assefa, who I could see retreating into himself.

He responded glumly, "I know so little of my homeland. I hate it. All I remember are little bits of life—isolated scenes—mostly inside our compound. My cousins—they're still there, you know? Bekele and Iskinder. They were older. Iskinder taught me to play Keleleboosh with rocks. It is a little like your jacks." Your, I thought. He's already distancing himself. "A school chum or two would visit sometimes. There was a girl" He caught me staring at him and seemed to shake free from a memory. "For all I know, my father going missing is calling me back to my roots."

Sammie laughed, "Roots? I'm a Jew living in diaspora. Jacob, too. Jews have no roots except for some land we stole from a group of other now-displaced souls."

Jacob lashed out, "Didn't steal. It was all down to you Brits. They raised expectations with the Balfour Declaration. It was only a matter of time until the U.N. passed the Partition Plan." Which got everyone going on one of those impossible arguments about who the true underdogs were, the Palestinians or the Israelis.

I barely kept track of the points my dinner mates were attempting to score. All this talk about roots was making me nervous. I told myself to relax. Sammie had gone back to England several times since we'd made friends when she was twelve and I thirteen, and more recently she'd traveled to India for her grandmother's funeral. Dhani had taken Angelina back with her for a visit to her parents in Delhi. Mother had even accompanied Cesar to Guatemala to visit the town where his *coca*-addicted mother had been born. They'd all returned safe and sound and just as before. But I found myself saying, "Don't go!"

Everyone looked taken aback by the non sequitur. Shifting gears the quickest, Sammie jumped in indignantly. “Fleur, that’s not fair! He’s got to find his dad.” Having lost her own father as a child, she was a sucker for people connecting with their fathers and had cut me off for a while after I refused to attend my own father’s funeral.

“You’re right, you’re right.” I didn’t repeat my request, but I meant it—meant it as our cab took us back to his duplex, meant it when Assefa bent down to kiss my forehead goodbye at the crack of dawn the next morning. It didn’t help my peace of mind that he was adamant about wanting to go to the airport alone.

“I can’t stand teary goodbyes,” he repeated, nuzzling my neck.

As soon as his cab turned the corner from Commodore Sloat to Schumacher Drive, I fled to Stanley and Gwennie’s, where I found my mentor seated at the kitchen table in his pajamas, absent-mindedly petting Jillily while he pored over the paper Bob had given me the previous day. When I flopped down beside him, he immediately proceeded to speculate on its implications until he finally threw up his hands and asked irritably, “Why do you keep looking at your watch? You’re not bored, are you?” He had a salt and pepper beard now, which—combined with a slightly bent frame that resembled an old TV antenna—made it difficult to forget that he wasn’t getting any younger.

I wanted to say, “Bored? Who could be bored by the idea of a holographic universe?”

Instead, I burst into tears.

I hadn’t lived with Stanley and Gwennie for the past decade without Stanley learning how best to comfort me. He scooted over, and his arms encircled me with the kind of confident firmness that only two other humans had ever known how to execute. The second was Adam, but Nana had been the first. She’d been gone for nearly a year, but she’d left her heavy imprint on my heart and across the landscape of my skin, which retained a cellular memory of her chicken peck kisses and Mack truck grip.

I was pleased to get a whiff of Stanley’s sunflower-seed breath while we hugged.

“It’s Assefa,” I sniffed. “What if I never see him again?”

He pulled away and skewed his head at me. “But that’s ridiculous, child. No matter what happens, he’ll surely come back to you.”

Just then, as if we both had a sixth sense, we turned to see a bird crash into one of the kitchen windows. My heart sank. It was a young crow. Corvids were ubiquitous in SoCal. This one balanced on the window apron for a moment, visibly stunned, then gathered itself and took off again, a survivor, joining a cackling trio of others on our next door neighbors’ oak.

“What the hell?” Stanley muttered.

Then we turned to each other and burst out simultaneously, both of us laughing—though mine was definitely more of the nervous variety—“A murder of crows!”