

DAN CONOVER

THE LAST EPIPHANY

Dan wrote this one in the summer of 2005 at the end of his first sustained attempt to crack the high-status science fiction magazine market. It arose from a simple observation: We still just don't know very much about the physics of consciousness.

My latest humiliation with Malika came at the staff Christmas party. I'd been watching her all night, and when you do that long enough a transformation occurs: I enter the party as myself, a grown man with intentions, but as the hours passed I become something less, something smaller. It's like staring through a storefront window at a thing I could never afford. She's right there, on the other side of the glass, and I know I'll never get through.

She is tiny and brown and perfect, an S-shaped torso with the supple spine of a Siamese cat, an indifferent beauty thumping on the impromptu dance floor Reggie from engineering has created by pushing

back the conference room furniture and setting up the videoconference plasma screen to replay the action as if we're on TV at a nightclub. Malika is the star. I am hovering by the coffee maker, under tinsel bunting, pretending not to notice.

When I try to talk to her she smiles broadly, a splash of brilliant white teeth across her mocha face, and she shouts "Come dance with me!" over the bass line. But I can't dance and she knows it. Everyone in the shop knows it. Perhaps in her mind she is trying to tell me it's okay, that it doesn't matter, that I should simply get over it and do whatever I can and hobble around with her while she spins magic with her limbs and hips. But at the critical moment, I doubt her. I shake my head and back away and she segues into the mix of physicists and secretaries and computer programmers and union electricians, all undulating and damp and maybe a little tipsy now.

Watching her move, I think that maybe this is as

connected to the here-and-now as life ever gets for Malika. Music is time and tone and value, and here is her body, still young and tangible and joyfully self-aware. Our other young co-workers look tranced-out, but Malika is wide awake. Our eyes meet for an instant and I think “This is what love could be like. This is what I could do for her. I could put her back in her life.”

But then she is gone again.

It’s always like that.

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Malika is famous, at least around here, because at 26 she imagined the first filter-set that showed time running in the wrong direction. It made all the news wires, and the nets buzzed for a week. People still tell stories about her moment of epiphany, and I get tired of hearing them. “I was there, you know,” I tell them. “I was with her when she first got the idea.”

Then they always look at me funny, as if I’ve offended them. What am I doing in the legendary moment? I’m never in the stories people like tell about her Epiphanies: It’s always Malika, the visionary, the one with the bracelets and the bangles and the jewelry and the picked-over wool sweater, the absent-minded genius with the Eraserhead afro and the affectedly thin black plastic frames perched on her Nubian nose. In their imagination she is the kid from the streets remixing the music of the spheres, and she is always alone when the Eureka! strikes. But it’s not like that. She’s not like that.

Sometimes I find her sobbing in her office, eyes puffed and red, skin slick with tears and snot, and

even if I speak her name softly her eyes will fly open in panic and she’ll scream for a while. I’m quite conflicted about it, because it’s always upsetting to find her like that, but it’s also nice when she lets me hold her and stroke the hair at her temples until she calms down.

Her time-flow epiphany was particularly upsetting. I had left the office at midnight, frustrated and sick of her, ghost leg itching, stomach growling, head pulsing. When I returned at 6 that morning she was still there, practically catatonic, staring slack-jawed out her window at the carefully engineered pastoral beauty of our John’s Island campus. The Newsweek article on her discovery said Malika had already imagined the filter-set breakthrough “by the time a janitor arrived the next morning.” A janitor! I’m a professional computer programmer in addition to being her personal assistant, for crying out loud. Maybe that’s a small distinction around here, but damn. And besides, she hadn’t found the connection by the time I showed up. She was just lost.

So I put a blanket over her shoulders and brought her a mug of nuked noodle soup (Malika never eats noodles, but will drink the broth) and waited silently. Periodically she would blink her eyes and the tears would come again, but she never cried out. She would sniff back the drainage and I would hand her a tissue and then I’d wait for a while longer.

It was probably 6:25 before she really, actively noticed there was another person in the room with her, and 6:30 before she finally spoke. “What is happening to me?” she asked.

I spoke very softly to her, told that I didn’t know. It

was one of those delicate moments – opaque autumn-morning light, a flight of black birds sweeping silently over the fallow sweetgrass on the other side of her picture window. I put my hand on her shoulder, and she reached up and squeezed it.

Malika's problem – and her genius for that matter – was that she had lost her temporal bearings. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I could see its effect on her, and it horrified me. Her hand on mine was like a woman on a ledge clinging to a railing, and I wondered if a woman with her affliction could ever appreciate the exquisitely painful beauty of that moment. She turned it loose as if on cue.

“There's not a person alive who can understand the thoughts I think,” she said, avoiding my eyes. “Not even you, Jimmy. And you want to know something really scary?”

“No,” I said.

“Even I don't understand me.”

I wanted to tell her that maybe I did understand her. Maybe not her ideas, or the uncanny connections she made, but her: the tiny woman raised by good AME parents in a bad neighborhood. The lonely prodigy at MIT. The frightened, unstable little sexpot with the alluring figure and the oft-broken heart. I wanted to tell her that I could understand that wounded part of her, that I could ground it, soothe it, help it put down roots in the world the rest of us inhabited. Maybe then, when her mind went wandering, it would have a nicer place to return.

But I didn't say anything.

An hour or so later, after the broth had warmed her, Malika interrupted her own long story about an

Italian count she had bedded at an international string theory conference in Milan, and how the strangest thing happened: In the midst of their horrendous hotel room breakup, she saw him walking out the door and slamming it, knocking over a vase. Only he hadn't left the room, and was in fact still standing beside the bed, shouting. “What?” he had screamed. “Why are you always flinching at ghosts only you can see?” And then he walked out the door and slammed it, knocking over a vase.

She told the story with a little laugh and a nasal sniff. But the pause after the sniff lasted a beat too long, and that's when I first realized she was connecting something.

“Well of course that's it,” she said, and sat up straighter. I fumbled for my digital recorder: Malika was having one of her epiphanies, the cognitive leaps that were her trademark. It was my job as her assistant to document them, then help her translate them into practical applications later.

“The J-Lab sensory array in the old Z-box wasn't calibrated for it, but the impact would echo along the wave in both directions,” she said. “Duh, I'm so stupid.”

Gibberish. But she kept going, and I kept translating. By mid-morning we had derived a practical filter-set for decades of archived particle accelerator data, much of it collected around the turn of the century during the search for Theta-plus, the original pentaquark. Trillions of bytes. A sea of twenty-year-old information. But the answers were in there if you knew where to look.

And somehow, Malika always seemed to know

where to look. Our filter set would scan thousands of particle collisions in search of an almost imperceptible wobble just a nanosecond before impact. Individually, the tiny deviation meant nothing, but spread across the universe of collisions, the filter set showed that the annihilation of a particle actually reverberated into its past. Einstein proved that time was not a constant, but Malika demonstrated that time could run in two directions.

She soaked up the adulation that followed, though she never once mentioned my role to the press. I wasn't surprised, because I'd been told to expect that long before I volunteered for the job.

I was already in love with her then, even though she was the worst boss in the world.

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“What do you do?” she asked me one day in our second year working together. I was sitting at my desk reading the news. The question was a non-sequitor: Neither one of us had spoken since lunch, when I had said “Wanna go grab a sandwich?” and she had said “No thanks,” and continued contemplating whatever cosmic conundrum worried her that day. And that had been that.

“I assist you. I translate you. I turn your epiphanies into data base filter sets. What do you mean?”

Malika unfolded herself from the elaborate doodle she had been making on her legal pad and stretched. “I mean, when you're not here. What do you do? Do you go home? Do you go to a bar or something?”

“Why?” I asked, all jaunty and flirtatious. I was only beginning to fall in love with her at the time,

and things didn't carry the emotional weight they would later. “You want to go out with me?”

“Me and you?” she said, and then she gave me the once-over and laughed. “You'd break me.” Malika rose from the settee that she preferred for her afternoon musings. “Actually, I was just sitting her looking at you and it dawned on me that I really don't know anything about you. You could be an axe-murderer for all I know, Jimmy.”

That's not true, I thought – I'd told her all sorts of things about myself – but I said nothing. Malika fixed me with probing eyes, as if sizing me up for the first time, and then sighed at my lack of responsiveness.

“Yep. Axe-murderer,” she concluded, strolling past me toward the hall. “I gotta go pee.”

So that was that encounter.

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In Russia, they still celebrate Christmas on January 6. I was alone that night, so I decided to celebrate the forgotten holiday Russian-style – alone, at a bare table, drinking vodka and lemon, straight. The night was dreary, chilled but not cold, damp and thick and not at all like what real winter should feel like. No, here everything was complicated and half-obsured; regretful ghosts wandering amidst the Spanish moss that dripped from the live oaks; cool mists rolling out of marshes. I'd come here for Malika, for one clear thing, and instead I'd found this past-haunted place, this Gullah land where plait-eye hoo-doo pushed up in the corners of rooms like the grave dust from generations not quite forgotten..

The phone serenaded me. I'd been trying so hard not to think of Malika that when I saw her name pop

up my first instinct was to run out of the room. But I slipped the bud into my ear and pressed the green button.

“Why did you look at me like that at the Christmas party?” she asked. Her voice quavered just a bit.

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ve got to. You’ve got to understand. It’s your job to understand me, Jimmy.”

“Malika, are you okay?”

“Of course I’m not okay!” she screeched. “God, listen to me! I’m like a fucking teenager again!”

I tried to quiet her, but she was crying. Outside a fine mist drifted by a streetlamp, and I thought about how if I were back in Germany the mist would be snow and all the sound and all the light and all the emotion would be baffled and muted. It was melancholy and peaceful at the same time. I caught myself wondering exactly what caused those two sensations to morph into one for me, but they were inextricably bound.

“Have you been drinking?” she asked. “You sound like you’ve been drinking.”

“Vodka and lemon,” I said. “In celebration of Orthodox Christmas.”

“I didn’t even know you were a Christian,” she said.

“I’m not,” I said.

“Well then now I’m confused again. And you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Why do you do this, boss?” I blurted. “It’s late. I’m drunk. I’m lonely. And you’re my ... boss.”

“I could feel your eyes on me all night at the party,” she whispered. “I was just lying in bed, just now, and

I could feel it again, all over again. Like you were standing in the room with me. I could feel your eyes – but it’s like they aren’t yours. And it’s creepy, Jimmy.”

“Well excuse me,” I blustered.

Who knows how the mind works? In retrospect her call looked an awful lot like the opportunity I’d dreamed about, the perfect chance to talk about us, to profess my love, to lay it all out in the open. Yet with me in my apartment and her hanging on the phone line, all I wanted to do at that moment was absolve myself of the charge of being somehow “creepy.”

“You don’t have to be so hostile, Jimmy.”

“Really? How come? What special insight into the quantum universe tells you that I don’t have to be so hostile? Maybe I’m only hostile in this particular universe, Malika. Or maybe it’s just your observing me that makes...”

She hung up.

The next morning, she called in sick.

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Sadie Newton, the H.R. Nazi, was one of those avocado women, a dark fruit with an odd composition. Not at all sweet, but atypically erotic. In fact, of all the non-nubile women on the Johns Island research campus, Newton the H.R. Nazi was probably the sexiest, though it was a musky, fattening attraction. She didn’t dress the part of a human relations ball-buster, either, draping her curves in natural fabrics and batiks, wearing wooden beads as jewelry. She was a mature beach goddess with gray in her dirty-blonde mane, and there was unformed provocation in the slightly ample give-and-take of

her body.

Only it was camouflage. Swift and sudden professional death lurked just below her pleasing surface.

“It’s my job to ask, Mr. Palmer,” she was saying. “And I’m afraid it’s your job to answer.”

“It’s my job to be loyal to my boss,” I said. “Surely you can understand that.”

The H.R. Nazi leaned forward, her hands flat before her on a leather-bound paper blotter.

“You both signed contracts, Mr. Palmer. She may be your boss, but you both work for the institute, and your first loyalty is to your employer, not your immediate supervisor.” She said it with a sympathetic lilt, but the words themselves were cast concrete. “Did she give any indication where she might have been going?”

Of course she didn’t. But I had ideas. Not that I was going to share them with this water-carrying bitch.

Newton leaned back, giving up the pretext of being an attractive woman with a simpatico personality.

“Right, Mr. Palmer. Now the first thing you’re going to do is to lose this hostile war-vet attitude you’re taking with me. You’re going to lose it because it’s unprofessional, and loss of professional composure is grounds for immediate termination, without recourse.” She activated the plasma screen wall behind her and the exact wording of the professional conduct clause in my contract appeared in large letters. I got the sense she’d taken this approach before.

“Second, you’re going to tell me what you know. Malika is a valuable asset, and you have been paid

handsomely to keep her secure and productive. It’s your job to tell us where she is. It’s your job to make sure she is safe and sound. It’s my job to make sure that you do that. Are you having any trouble grasping these concepts, Mr. Palmer?”

Now it was my turn to sit back.

“She’s been gone for two days. I happen to know she has more than six weeks of annual leave saved up. For all you know, she could be taking some well-deserved time off. She’s probably just on vacation.”

Newton shook her head, smiling.

“Malika’s entire life is a vacation,” she said. “No one else on this campus is afforded the same luxuries and freedoms, and for what? I should remind you that the company has never profited a penny from her ... what do you call them? Epiphanies? Whatever.”

“The company recognizes that Malika is a special case – a special talent – but she is also a major investment. Millions of dollars, Mr. Palmer. Tens of millions of dollars have been spent to create the perfect working environment for your boss, all on the off-chance that one of her insights will someday lead to a technology we can license. If she’s out there in one of her fugue states, wandering around in the woods or wading through some tidal creek, we have a right to know.”

“You’ve got quite an imagination, Ms. Newton. She probably just went to visit with her aunts. I know she’s eccentric, but that doesn’t mean...”

“Malika didn’t leave through any of the gates,” she said, interrupting. “We checked the video surveillance archives first thing. And you know as well as we do that her psychological profile indicates

suicidal tendencies. So enough with the evasions: You tell me where to find her, and if it pays off, you'll get a nice bonus. You keep sitting there, petulantly unprofessional, and security will escort you to the Maybank gate with the inventoried contents of your desk. Your move."

Well, a person just doesn't talk to me that way. No matter what I'm supposed to be doing, no matter what the historical significance, my love for Malika be damned. I'm a former armored cavalryman, for Christ's sake.

"Fuck you, ma'am," I said.

Newton rose, smiled politely, and extended her hand across the desk as two security guards entered the room.

"Nice to have known you, Mr. Palmer. Don't bother asking for a reference."

So that was the end of my time at PalmettoTech, and the little voice in my head, the one that had led me there in search of Malika, was supremely pissed off about it.

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In the future, where Malika is revered like Newton and Einstein, her short, tragic life is the subject of sonnets and haiku. This is what the hitchhiking second soul inside me says, anyway.

The secretive bastard won't recite them, though, and never gives me any hard facts to ponder. I hate him for a lot of reasons, but this one more than most.

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I picked up my hitchhiker from the future in the VA hospital where I was being fitted for a prosthesis. The usual story: A booby trap by the side of the road.

My left leg. Amputated above the knee.

Technology wasn't the problem, of course. The Defense Department had some of the best prosthetics on the planet. The problem was it just couldn't afford to give everybody the good ones, and you know how it is with defense contractors.

I was there for more than a year, six months of it spent just waiting for a leg. Once mine showed up I realized what the amputees ahead of me had been talking about. Yeah, it looked like the ones in the videos, but then again plastic and aluminum can be made to look an awful lot like high-strength alloys. Same design, cheap materials, mass produced. They called it "customized," but that just made things worse. With all its factory defaults and presets, my "smart leg" had a learning disability. After five months of physical therapy and training, my frustration bubbled over, and the Navy med-tech assigned to my case lost his patience. "It's a piece of junk, Jimmy. Just learn to live with it."

I think my depression had something to do with why my drop-in from the future selected me as his target. You spend a big chunk of your twenties stuck in an overcrowded gimp ward and see how you feel about life. I didn't want to live anymore, and I get the distinct impression that these time travelers, these hitchhikers, whatever you want to call them – consider that an invitation. They're like that kid in school who used to scan the cafeteria for people who didn't look hungry and bug them about whether they were actually planning to eat the rest of their corn dog. "Hey buddy: Mind if I join you in that body? I mean, you're not using it, and I really need a lift to

the 21st century.”

And of course I thought I was crazy. Who wouldn't?

But this guy – my guess is he's a graduate student working on a dissertation – he's really smart. He showed me some neat little tricks at first, just to get me hooked: Super Bowl scores, election winners, foreknowledge of big events. He gave me the Mexico City quake, Hurricane Delbert, the Chicago Bears' upset win over Miami. I tried to look at it scientifically. I'd even write the tips down and snail-mail them to myself, just so I could break the seal after the fact and check the post date.

When I finally said, “Okay, fine, you're from the future. I'll do as you ask – but why me? Why now?” he said that he was a historian and that my participation as the host for his time-traveling excursion would clear up, once and for all, one of the great mysteries of our time: Who was the great Malika?

I'd never heard of her. Nobody in our time had.

Well, he said, you will. Trust me.

So after that, I listened to the things he told me to do, things that would put me close to her. He explained how the remote viewing program worked to transport consciousness back through time, how my help would give future generations deep insights into one of humanity's most profound discoveries and the thinker behind it.

He never told me I'd fall in love with the little fruitcake.

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This is what life is like with a second consciousness sharing your head:

It was about three months after I left the hospital, and with the Western economy stuck in the depths of its prolonged slump, times were tough. And I was lonely, too, convinced that no woman could ever love a maimed freak like me. So I did what any self-respecting ex-soldier would do: I hired one.

It's not like I'd never taken a whore before. What else are you gonna do in a foreign country where the average girl considers it a sin to let a man see her face without a veil? Hell, by the time I got my leg blown off, the USO was flying in Russian girls just to keep up with the demand.

But this time, I'm doing this hooker, and my hitchhiker just sorta ... wakes up. I can feel him experiencing it with me, and he feels ... hungry. Not human. He uses my eyes and my hands, and soon I can hear his voice in my ear, telling me to do things...

So I freaked out, never finished, and everything ended awkwardly.

“Take your fucking government leg and get the fuck out of here, you fucking one-legged freak!” she shouted as I dressed and reattached my gear.

Too weird for hookers. That's what it's like to have a second person in your head.

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Malika. She chose the name at 13 and never again used her birth name, Mercedes Jones. This upset her Southern-born, Brooklyn-bred parents deeply, and they considered returning her full-ride scholarship and pulling her out of the private boarding academy in New Hampshire where she'd spent the previous year. In the end, they decided

it was just a phase.

When she turned 18, she made the change legal.

Malika tried repeatedly to reconnect to her family, but the ties were frayed in every direction. Her mother was a teacher and her father was a mechanic. Both were intelligent, but neither would ever understand the math that consumed their daughter. Try as she might, Malika's attempts to be part of their Brooklyn world ended in heartbreak for everyone involved.

Genius and instability marked her career at MIT, where she won prizes for mathematics and wrote a paper that is generally credited as the basis for the neural-network architecture used in the GelTech class of A.I. servers. But she also got pregnant by a professor, had an abortion, stumbled in and out of alcohol abuse and drug rehab and suffered through a series of self-destructive romances. Malika left Boston without finishing her masters and couldn't hold a job.

Things took a turn for her at 25, when she wrote an e-mail to a college friend who had taken a job at the Department of Energy. His team was studying potential applications of antimatter, but budget cutbacks had left it without research funding. Malika, always helpful, had one of her middle-of-the-night flashes, and in her e-mail proposed a series of cross-referenced data filters from previous high-energy experiments as a substitute for conducting new trials.

The technique worked, and soon Malika had a government job. It took her federal managers about a week to size up her erratic brilliance: On her second day she recognized a fatal flaw in a massive data set

that had taken two years to build. On her fourth day, a coworker caught her having sex with a UPS deliveryman in the break room supply closet.

PalmettoTech outside Charleston, S.C., seemed like the best place for her. A private sector think-tank with close ties to the Department of Defense, PalmettoTech was a good place for a loony visionary: No federal regulations or union rules, a rural campus with on-site apartments and security.

With my hitcher's help I'd been secretly building a file on her for six months by the time I got hired at PalmettoTech. Malika arrived on campus a year later, and I was the only person who applied for the posting as her personal programming assistant. She was odd and beautiful, much more attractive in person than in the two digital photographs I'd found of her on the internet.

And the more unstuck in time she became, the more her beauty grew.

-9-

I found her where I'd often found her, at least by phone: downing Chai teas at the coffee house around the corner from the Charleston County Public Library on Calhoun Street. Her enormous North Face parka seemed about to swallow her, and she sat with her feet tucked under her legs and a muffler wrapped loosely around her throat. She was lost in one book, but a tall stack stood beside her, along with her usual winter detritus: wadded up Kleenex, cough-drop wrappers, loosely folded pages of notes in her distinctive, loopy handwriting.

"Where have you been?" I asked, settling down beside her. Malika looked up, registering my

appearance without reacting to it.

“I have a cold,” she said, as if that explained everything.

“Where have you been sleeping?” I picked up the first book in her stack: “Tao Te Ching.” And the next and the next after it. Three different translations of the Lao Tzu classic. Beneath them lay books by Jung and Joseph Campbell.

“By that you mean, who have I been sleeping with? Right?” She didn’t look up from her book, a neo-pagan text on practical magic by some writer with a witchy-sounding, made-up name.

“I’ve been worried about you.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and wiped her nose with a tissue. “That’s you all over.”

“Management is going nuts. They can’t figure out how you got off campus without them noticing, and Sophie Newton suspects you’re floating around dead in the marsh.”

“She’s a bitch,” Malika said, and she coughed. It turned into a spasm, the coughing wracking her until she doubled-over and finally calmed.

“Are you sure that’s just a cold?” I asked.

“It’s a cold,” she said. “And whatever it is, it’s mine. It’s not yours. It’s not your concern. It’s not the company’s concern. It’s not the government’s concern. And it’s definitely not your friend’s concern.”

“My friend?”

Malika looked up with cold eyes. “You know exactly who I’m talking about, asshole. He’s looking at me right now.”

I felt myself about to panic. How could she know about the hitcher?

“So where’s he from?” she said, leaning forward to whisper. “CIA? The NSA?”

“Who?”

“My guess is the camera lens is hidden somewhere in your clothing. Usually it’s built into a person’s glasses, only you don’t wear them. So is he monitoring from Langley, or is he, like, in a van or something nearby?”

“You think I’m spying on you?”

Malika’s hand shot out and slapped my cheek. The sound roused the sleepy coffee house, and both of us had to move closer to keep our conversation quiet.

“Don’t toy with me, Jimmy. Don’t pretend I’m just crazy. There’s more to you than you let on.”

“Malika,” I said, reaching out with both my hands to take hers gently in mine. It was as good a time as any to take the step. “I’m not spying on you. I’m in love with you.”

“No,” she said, her eyes casting away nervously. “You’re lying.”

“Why would I humiliate myself like that if it wasn’t true?”

“How should I know?” she asked, taking her hand out of mine and pulling another tissue from the box. “But the government has been watching me for years. How they got you mixed up in it, I don’t know, but it’s just terrible. You were such a sweetie, Jimmy. And now you’re just a creepy spy, trailing me around, always watching me, streaming video off to some database somewhere. I’ve seen the way your eyes change. They didn’t implant the lens inside one of your corneas, did they? I mean, that would be just gross.”

“How did you get here?” I asked, trying to change the subject. “Newton said they checked all the video surveillance tapes and...”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know how I got here.”

“How can you not know that?”

“I don’t remember. I was there, and then I wasn’t. I saw a symphony orchestra concert last night. I went to the library. I’ve been reading.” Malika coughed again.

“Sweetie, I think you’ve got pneumonia. I need to take you to a doctor.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head defiantly. “Not until you tell me who you’re spying for.”

NO! the hitcher said. *ABSOLUTELY NOT!*

“It’s not what you think,” I said. “I... I got fired from PalmettoTech today for refusing to help with their search for you. I told them you were on vacation. It’s crazy, I know, but I wanted you to have some privacy.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“I didn’t. It’s just a place I know you like to come.”

“I wish I could believe you, Jimmy,” she said, reaching into her purse and fumbling around inside it. “But how can I? They put you with me to keep tabs on me, and you do it very well. My guess is they know what I’ve been working on, somehow, and they figure they can get you to work it out of me. Christ, you even pretend to love me! Don’t you know what that’s like? To love a man who pretends to love you back, just so he can steal your ideas to turn into weapons?”

SHE DOESN’T LOVE YOU, the hitcher said. It’s *ALL*

A DODGE! FIND OUT ABOUT THE EPIPHANY SHE’S TALKING ABOUT!

“You love me?” I said, almost choking on the words. “How can that be true?”

“Don’t tease me anymore,” she said, and the first tear slid down her face. “I’d rather you killed me than that you tease me anymore.”

“Sweetie,” I said, and leaned so that my forehead touched her own. She smelled of menthol and salt and wool, and I brushed the tears from her cheek. “I’d rather die than hurt you. I’ve dedicated myself to protecting and caring for you, and that’s all I want to do for the rest of my life.”

That’s when I noticed it. She was burning up. The heat pulsed from her head to mine.

“Jesus, baby, you feel like you’re on fire. We need to get you to a doctor right away.”

“If I tell you what they want to know, will they go away?” she asked.

“Tell who?”

“Them,” she said. “The people who watch.”

That’s when she passed out.

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They wouldn’t let me check her in at the emergency room as “Malika” with no last name until I got someone to go back into the treatment area and retrieve her I.D. The admitting clerk grudgingly typed the single name into the computer and accepted the rest of the electronic form I’d punched up. “And you’re the husband?” the woman asked.

“No. Just a coworker.”

The hospital security guards, led by a uniformed

city police officer, were on me before I'd even made it to the sallow row of institutional waiting room chairs. The trio entered in a hurry, while another watched the exterior sliding glass doors. As soon as I saw them I knew I was in trouble.

"Jim Palmer, right?" said the guard, looking up from an e-slate the city cop carried. All three of them looked me up and down, comparing my appearance with the picture they had. I didn't answer.

"You go secure the woman," the city cop said to one of the security guards. "You," he told the other, "take Mr. Palmer back to the office."

The ambulance pulled up not 10 minutes later, and they wheeled her out another door and loaded her up. I watched them drive her off from my seat in the security office, but I kept my poker face.

"She's that time chick, isn't she?" the security guard said as they loaded her up. "The one from TV. How'd you get mixed up with her?"

I didn't say anything.

"Kinda cute, too," he said, as if talking to no one in particular.

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The voice in my head told me she had been taken back to PalmettoTech, and that she would stay there for the rest of her life.

"How long is that?" I asked. He didn't answer.

-12-

A week after they took Malika away, I felt like she came and spoke to me one afternoon as I was drifting off to sleep on the couch.

"I think they've drugged me, Jimmy," she said. "They want to know what I've been working on, only

they couldn't understand it even if I explained it."

Well, that woke me up in a hurry.

My heart pounded from the nearness of the encounter, and I swore I could smell her scent in the air as I woke. The activity attracted my hitcher, who seemed to be elsewhere during my hypnogogic states, and I sensed him prowling my short-term memory.

What is she working on? I asked him. Usually he didn't respond to my questions until later, if at all, but this time he stopped his prowling and sat still in my mind.

THE PHYSICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, he said. *THE DISCOVERY THAT LED TO THE TECHNOLOGY THAT LET'S ME VISIT YOUR TIME AND PLACE. BUT WE STILL CAN'T MOVE PHYSICAL OBJECTS IN TIME. THE COSMOS IS TOO ELASTIC.*

So they finally get it out of her?

YES. THE PENTAGON RUNS THE FIRST TESTS, AND YOU CAN IMAGINE WHAT THE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES DO WITH THE NEW TECHNOLOGY. IT WINDS UP A DISASTER.

And what happens? To her?

SHE DIES, he said. *BUT SURELY YOU'VE FIGURED THAT OUT BY NOW.*

I had, of course.

MY WORK IS DONE HERE, JIMMY. YOU'VE BEEN INVALUABLE. THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR HELP.

And just like that, I was all alone again.

That was a very, very long afternoon.

-13-

Love is a funny thing. With all her quirks and traumas, loving Malika in person was slow torture. In the days after our separation, I moved

into the next phase of my life, the one in which I remembered her. Loving her memory was easier than loving her in person.

Her obituary ran a week after my breakdown, and the little story that inside the paper said something cryptic about a drug overdose. I even went to her funeral, where a bunch of people who knew her stood around and bawled like babies. Apparently I wasn't the only one who loved Malika.

In the years after her death I would see her on the streets, out of the corner of my eye, but it was never her, and on certain days I would remember special anniversaries: the day we met, her epiphanies, the day we so awkwardly professed our love.

I got a job as a network administrator and eventually saved up enough money for a new leg. I get around pretty well these days, but every now and then I'll feel my ghost leg itch.

Love is like that.

-14-

The day after I got the job as her personal assistant at PalmettoTech, Malika looks up from her computer monitor and asks where the company snack bar is located. I tell her it's upstairs, with an outdoor dining area on the roof.

"Do they have noodle soup you can microwave?" she asks.

So I take her upstairs, buy her a cup of nuked noodle soup, and lead her out onto the deck. Despite the bright sunshine, Malika and I are alone. Her demeanor changes completely the instant we sit down under a café umbrella. She is suddenly, desperately intense and serious.

"Jimmy," she says, "the thing you have to understand about me is that I've gone so far down the theoretical-physics rabbit hole that my sense of time flows in two directions now."

"I can see how that would be disorienting," I reply conversationally.

"It is," she says. "And for the longest time I thought I was going crazy, because in my head everything was happening either simultaneously or slightly out of order. Only now I can control it."

"I'm sure you're not cra..." I begin, but she interrupted me.

"Listen," she says, reaching forward to grasp my cheeks between the pink palms of her hands, a swift movement that takes me aback. But I don't flinch.

"I've seen the future, Jimmy. I know what happens, and I think you do, too. We've both been through this moment before."

That's when I look in her eyes and recognize it. Prickly déjà vu crawls cold across my skin, and my hitcher perks up. I can feel him stammering.

UH, HOLD ON A SEC, JIMMY, BUT THIS APPEARS TO BE OUT OF SEQUENCE...

Malika somehow senses his presence. "What is that, some history grad student you've got in your head?" she asks me.

"Something like that," I say, my jaw practically dropping. "He says he's from the future. Here to study you."

SHIT! he shouts. YOU'VE JUST TOTALLY BLOWN MY COVER! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA THE DAMAGE YOU'VE JUST CAUSED TO MY CAREER? DO YOU...

I shut him off.

“Jimmy,” she says, leaning close to me, “there’s just one thing I really need to know.”

“What’s that, boss?”

“Do you think you could ever learn to love a woman like me?”

Malika stares into my eyes and my heart skips a beat. Her eyes are brown and deep and liquid, knowing eyes tinted by knowledge and sorrow.

“Yes,” I say, “I think I could. It’s strange, but all of the sudden I feel like I’ve loved you for years.”

“Because everything depends on it,” she says, whispering now. “If things are ever going to turn out better, we’re going to have to love each other very much. We’re going to have to trust each other and be good to each other. We’re going to have to leave this place behind, start over somewhere these bastards will never find us.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” I say. “Kinda hard to hide a war vet with a cheap VA leg. I stand out in a crowd, you know.”

“I’ll just have to believe in you, then,” she says.

And that was our first kiss, right there outside the PalmettoTech snack bar. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe in you before, Jimmy.”

I snuck her past security in my trunk that evening and never even went back to my apartment, just cleaned out my bank account and pointed the car toward Canada.

Late that night, over eggs at a Waffle House in Virginia, a practical matter crossed my mind, interrupting the smooth, electrified joy of cuddling my new love in a diner booth.

“Malika,” I said, “what are we going to do when the money runs out?”

She squeezed my hand and eased her head softly into my shoulder.

“Don’t you worry, sugar,” she said, “I know the score of every Super Bowl for the next four years. We’ll be fine.”

It’s amazing how much you can earn off of one safe bet, but you know what they say: Time is money.

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