

o n e

Abigail sits with me on South Beach watching waves comb up over the shallows, lose the weight under them, lose their foundation, then curl and splinter into froth. I see the secret in the squint of her eye and the lowering of her eyebrows and again I move a little to let the sun gleam on this place above and a little beside her right eye where the dark eyebrow hairs feather away into nothing, where the skin pocks with an apostrophe-sized scar. Tricycle accident, she told me once. Waves break and swash along this beach that could be anywhere but Nantucket, because it is deserted, because she frightened the public away and she wants privacy.

I hang on, hand folding around her bent knee. She needs hanging on to.

She twists away to free another bottle of ale from the cooler. The ale gives us courage to dive under the breakers to find calm water for peeing it away. We freeze our asses off, even in July, muttering *fuck-all* while squatting in the Atlantic.

-You? She asks, an ale for me. I nod and confess,

-Then a complete rinse and a sandless nap in your lovely bedroom.

As her father Harmon Sipes likes to tell it, he won the beach house outright eight years ago in a poker game from a Texas oilman who was a bit drunk, but Abigail *did something* to distract him at the critical moment when he needed to remember every face-up card he'd seen before drawing, unsuccessfully, to a full house. She doesn't remember what she did; she never has these memories. I doubt the transaction happened exactly as Harmon claimed, but the four bedroom gray-shingled rambler and two hundred feet of pristine Nantucket

beach became Sipes property within the week, and to this day Harmon thanks his daughter for whatever it was that happened.

The words of the oilman, Wayne Logan, are remembered this way:

Abby's standing there and it's just the corner of my eye, but she's there and then she's not and then she is again, and unless my brain cramped up I'd swear she got nipped in the ass by a miracle. Harmon and four other guys at the table were lost in their cards, no one saw. Abby said she hadn't moved a muscle, but Logan couldn't shake it off. Rubbed his eyes, cursed the intercession of angels, folded his cards and lost the house.

So the story goes.

Abigail watches waves. It's water with no verifiable story, no reliable place. The sand could as easily be like water if we all agreed to it. The sand, the island, the hills and swamps of New England, the corn-soybean checkerboard of the Midwest, the deserts and mountains farther west rolling out to the fault lines. Physicists will tell you that all matter is a furious foam of maybes. Location becomes fixed only when noticed. An electron whirls in a mist around its nucleus at the speed of six hundred miles a second, carving maps of pure doubt. The big stuff has certainty only through our consensus.

- Hate to go, she says.

I smirk and think *Hate to see you go* but tell her,

- Two more days still, lots of fun.

Then away from Nantucket and back home to New Mexico, and soon enough we'd either disintegrate or become solid again.

- No, I mean *go go*, pee in the water.

- It's too cold.

- I'd rather freeze than squirm.

She drinks up and drains the bottle. Arched throat, dark skin glossy from the heat of the beach, sand crystals on her cheek snagged from the wind by sweat. The sound of her name Abigail (Abby, Abs) invokes the image of a Colonial matron, high-collared and tightly corseted, the name is hard and dreary with history, but she is all open flesh here on the beach, solid. Firm. Too dense with life to come and go.

She has asked me and I say yes, you need hanging on to.

Waiting is an unexpected seduction.

Waiting is now a central thesis in her presentations, where the corpo-

rate suits flock to conferences to hear battle cries of volume and velocity, the sharpest edges of strategic weaponry, more better faster smarter. She shocks them into a kind of Zen stasis. *Doing nothing can be doing something. Market forces swirl around you, you need to watch, to absorb. The greatest myth of success is that you always control it. Knowing this, that you don't have full control, you will live longer and be richer.*

They say later her speech gives them goosebumps. They come for a pep rally and instead hear Buddhist lullabies. The Sipes cult spreads among the suited masses desperate to be disarmed, deconstructed, provoked, and alarmed. I often go with her, city to city, watch from the backs of auditoriums, the backs of five hundred executive heads spreading out like a sheet of bubblewrap puffed with air. She wanders around the stage with the microphone, sits on its edge with her brown legs dangling as if she were a little girl on porch rocker, hops up to attack the big screen behind her with a giant pointer, grabs a plastic chair spins it backwards sits on it arms folded chin on her hands seducing them. It doesn't hurt that she is beautiful. They are three quarters male, and I can hear them pant, they are her groupies.

I scan the beach, amazed that we're still alone here.

- Where'd everybody go?

She closes her eyes and giggles. I have to tell her,

- Sometimes I can't laugh about it. Even when I do laugh, it scares me.

She's up from the towel, headed into the freezing waves and I'm begging every conceivable source of magic on this planet, *please don't let her go.*

t w o

I'm Hugh. As such (and it won't take you long to get it), I suffer the same affliction of all other Hughs, ever and everywhere, acquired in childhood and stress-tested through life. In playgrounds and streets and parties and anywhere people raise their voices with cries of *You!* or *You?* or *Hey you!* all Hughs hoist up our shields, pull away from the noise and draw safely into ourselves. The pronoun penetrates thousands of times with its sting of disappointment -- it's not us being hailed and loved and celebrated, it's mobs of others. I've spent my life fending off the yous, have come to be seen as both shy and aloof, but I want only the sanctuary of myself. Hughs learn to be purposefully hard of hearing; when my name is truly spoken, the speaker needs to hammer out that H before I turn my head.

But there's the other side, the undercurrent of sharing. I'm called all the time, *by you*, to be part of you and your interruption, your disturbance. I try to shrug off the *Everyman* temptation, that my identity enormously overlaps with strangers, and I frequently fail. Unreasonable as it is, my kinship with humanity tugs at me.

Perhaps that's what tempted me into the mathematics of two-dimensional micro-critters growing and spawning in computer space. It became my worklife back in San Jose. We were harnessing distributed intelligence to create colonies of what we shamelessly call "artificial life" -- things that aren't really things but that still need to civilize themselves, adapt, and self-organize. Known in the trade as ALife. I packed my small company with wild-eyed geeky kids to write millions of lines of code extending my own algorithms into

a kind of mathematical Magna Carta for binary Hughmanity. The stuff worked beautifully, the critters, the bots, began to colonize and socialize. Got ready to sell. The tech bubble was blowing, I needed to catch the tail end of the last wave, sell, move on to something else.

Abigail found me. *Abigail Sipes, 9:30 AM, conf. room.* I knew her only as some independent merger and acquisitions consultant hired by an unknown Oklahoma company to sniff us out. I had my attorney, my head programmer, and my chief financial guy flanking me. She came in solo, no briefcase, no notepad, nothing, we all stood and shook her hand. When we sat, she remained standing.

“I’d like ten minutes one-on-one with Mr. Ogden.”

My attorney drew a breath. “The reason being..”

“It’s HO Software, right? That’s Hugh Ogden. His creativity, his baby. I’d prefer a nice clean download from him, no sales-y stuff, no politics. It’s also about meeting etiquette, guys. There are four of you and one of me.”

Arched brows, a sniff or two from my guys, but they all heaved themselves up and shambled out of the room. This oddly powerful woman with her hypnotic, liquid alto had all of us in her thrall, and I felt a kind of glow of awe. She was thirty-eight then, in November 2000. Strong face, sharp jawline, smooth walnut skin, and gleaming dark-as-the-ocean-depths eyes that wouldn’t let go of me.

“Okay, it’s you and me,” I said. “Where do we start?”

She sat, leaning forward over the table, chin on hand.

“All we know is, your software has little so-called organisms running around in a box and they seem to get smarter, in some way, by themselves. You don’t have to disclose much more, if you’d rather not.”

“Some things are disclosable.”

I felt like emptying my brain.

“How do they get smarter?”

“They learn from the others, from the environment. It’s like –”

“That’s ‘distributed intelligence.’”

“True, several companies use distributed intelligence, but *our* guys develop an aptitude that’s unique to us.”

Her eyes were taking me in. “And that is?”

“In a nutshell, they know place.”

“Place.”

“Better, they understand place. The landscape environment is rich, quan-

tatively, qualitatively. It's rich in information, like how useful a place is, how advantageous it is. But more than that."

"Qualitatively, you said."

"The nuances of place-ness. How an organism senses it, responds to it. The whole not-so-overt epistemology of the location."

"You can help me out with that word."

"Sort of, how we know what we know. The nature of knowledge."

"Okay. And that includes stuff like color? Temperature? Smell?"

"In similar ways. Analogous ways. Think: thousands of distinct properties at a single coordinate, many of them very subtle."

"How stable it is."

I wasn't sure what she meant. "Stable, like, earthquake prone?"

"Sort of. This is a nano-world, right? So these nano-places –"

"Not technically nano, no. It doesn't have those quantum perturbations. It's binary."

"I'm racking my brain for 'perturbations.'"

"Well, nano involves quantum effects. A billionth of a meter, ten hydrogen atoms wide. Crazy things happen." She was nodding, she knew. "That's not us. Ultimately, for our little guys, everything is on-off, yes-no, binary. No quantum maybes."

"No tremors."

Shaking my head. "Memory of place. Adaptation to place. *Anticipation* of how a place will change if it becomes overcrowded, if a drought hits, how the feeling will change, how to share the knowledge and the memory of the place. Almost human in some ways, except lots of people can't articulate sense of place, appreciation for it, love of it, or the reverse – abhorrence, rejection."

Abigail was blinking, trying to get inside the idea.

"It's on-off, yes-no. No room for ambiguity."

"There is, actually. The algorithms simulate different senses specific to the critters. Ambiguity is built in."

"Like: an ambiguous bedroom. Smelling all at once of family, piles of clothing, dirty socks, love-making"

She spoke this to a space past my head.

Then directly to me: "Does it have elevations? Hills, valleys --"

"In an analogous way, yes."

"They can climb?"

"Hike their little hearts out."

“Closed places? Caves, offices, rooms.”

“In a mathematical sense.”

“And they remember.”

“They better,” I said.

“Associations with place. Joy. Sweetness. Horror.”

“If they experience it. Not joy, more like *attraction*. Horror, no. Instead, think rejection of place that’s dangerous, incompatible with survival. Horror – that’s human stuff.”

She stared at me unblinking for several seconds and her eyes glossed.

“You don’t think people understand place?”

Shaking my head, no. “They’re consumed with trying to understand themselves. Our little guys process experience much more efficiently.”

“You call them that – the little guys.”

“Our babies, our little bots.”

“You’re attached to them?”

“Some of my guys are, not me.”

“Okay, Hugh. So you’re a fuckin’ genius.” Straight-faced, narrowed hawk eyes, the strong hawklike nose.

“I worked pretty hard at it.” Glaring right back at her.

“The non-geniuses, the brainstems who hired me don’t have a clue, don’t deserve it, but they’ll hemorrhage cash to get something as cool as you.”

“We’re extremely for sale.”

“I think you’re about to semi-retire.”

I didn’t want to semi-retire, but I was very ready to move on.

“Okay, Ms. Sipes, who you working for?”

“Energy guys in Tulsa, oil and gas, they’re just starting to tinker with a startup in nano-stuff. They’re bored and filthy rich, they need a new toy. They’re brainstems.”

“Hey, I detect some vitriol. Do you ever smile?”

She breathed deeply, smiled, and then let out a small laugh.

“Much better.”

“Place,” she said. “Very cool. And totally proprietary.”

“I own it all.”

“I’m going to Tulsa tomorrow. Do you have commitments here? You should come – I’ve got a window seat for you.”

“Work commitments, always.” Hugh should come.

“Other commitments?”

“Daughter in college back east, that’s it.” She sees I have no ring, wants the skinny on my larger life. “You’re digging.”

She offered what I would come to call the *twitch*, the slightest nudge of the corner of her upper lip. Nano smile.

That night’s email: she was *driving* to Tulsa from San Jose, she hated airplanes, the window seat she’d offered was riding shotgun with her for fifteen hundred miles, three days, and then back again. Great chance to talk. I replied *it’s tempting and the company would be fine, I gather, but I’d have to cancel thirty-seven meetings and I can’t, and are we either too old to be behaving like this or too young? Not this time. Sorry. Damn, I’d love to, tho, and I don’t even know you.*

And a re re: *How old? You look forty.*

Re re re: *46 for the time being. Divorced at 40, maybe my face froze. That can happen when you discover you’re free at last, free at last. You?*

Widow, four years. Didn’t like him much. Your daughter?

Rachel. 20. Middlebury College in Vermont, bleeding me dry. Nose ring, ass tattoo, stoner boyfriend. You?

Gotta pack. Dinner next week? Ciao for niao.

Never saw it coming, the shoulders relaxing and dropping away from my ears, the slow dinners and country drives, beaches, reading, tennis, fucking, loving. *Time.* My marriage sucked time through a straw. HO Software sucked it, pissed it and flushed it. I have time enough to taste, roll around my tongue, lick from Abby’s salty neck. Time and change sprawl out. San Jose and my nothing-special half-million dollar condo are on a short leash; Abigail’s America beckons.

I wonder, how much of me is a refugee?

Years of sticking it out, years of frustrated flight.

I nearly fled my wedding, overhearing Liza’s mother tell her *don’t worry, I suspect he’s educable* followed by Liza’s wistful *I hope so.* Three hundred and fifty people in the church, two hundred of them strangers to me, a spectacular Boston blueblood aggregation who would revel for years in the sordid account of my desertion. I spent so much time in the M.I.T. basement lab writing code I hardly noticed I was about to marry, it was the consensual intelligence of the day to marry young, age twenty-five, snap up a pretty woman, jam a ring onto her, throw a big party and stumble through the vows. I nearly fled but didn’t dare, I nerved my way through it and never learned in what way Liza and her

mother thought I might be educable.

We discussed leaving New England, escaping the insistent trees for a software startup in San Diego and desert skies. Couldn't, Rachel was in sixth grade, too disruptive for her. I felt, *I need something treeless, something high up* where even a fingernail-sized wedge of unobstructed horizon will suffice to distract me from math and remind me I belong to Earth – there's a piece of it now, a sliver of its edge, I can see it out there.

For Liza, my yearnings played out like poetry she couldn't access, verse that wouldn't parse. *Altitude, grounding, identity with place, a single pretty tree, peace.* The squinty-eyed *huh*, she repeated her creed: family, trees and gardens and roots, community, school, Rachel, Mom and Dad, snow and rain, the Yankee stiff upper lip thing, noblesse oblige.

Flight into the land of bots, losing my sight. Math precedes all, was there at the dawn of creation with its limitless horizon. But numbers are cold and I feel their chill lying still with Liza at night.

An ambiguous bedroom, this new woman says, *smelling of family, socks, love.* I am warmed for the first time in years, melting. A mind wired to speak like that! Where does she come from, who made her?

Rachel and I email often, but I'm driven to make a phone call. Abby is trolling for a client in San Francisco, I'm whipped into excitement thinking of her, I have to get it out somehow.

- Rache.

- Dad. Wow, a real call.

And it gushes three thousand miles, burning the wires. Met a woman (*metawoman!*) brilliant, totally original, great athlete, chews life to shreds, astonishing, baffling.

- Is this about drama?

- Drama-free. But I'm flying.

- Kids?

- None she admits to. Widowed at thirty-four, totally outgrew the guy anyway, too busy with her career to meet anyone and she came to the office last month and I swear we both just flipped.

- Hair?

- It's all there.

- Color, dummy.

- India ink. Thick hair. Amazing circumflex-shaped eyebrows that feather into brown skin, little scar by her right eye. I can't talk like this to you. She's

genius masquerading as a jock. She's the one, I didn't tell you, she's the one who sold HO, made me sane again. And wealthy.

- Shit, Dad, you're spewing. Circumflex eyebrows.

- Can't talk to you like this. You know, little arches, the punctuation thingy in French. You took French.

- Boobs like umlauts?

- Great father-daughter talk.

- You said baffling. What's the baffling part?

- Dunno yet. Working on it.

- So is it the Big One? For possible keeps?

Hope so, plan so, want so. She says Jeff is at her door, probably lighting up a jay, she has to go, and soon enough she'll call Mom and tell her to get her ass in gear 'cause Dad's hooked up and you're not. Phone addict. Rache Ogden is Miss Middlebury Mouth, 2000.

three

Mid-afternoon August light thickens with haze through the windows, yellow off the dunes that lump outside. We know California light and Santa Fe light, light that suffuses or stabs like glass, and we know light in the dense gray noise of the urban Northeast. Nantucket is its own separate place, far enough from the jut of mainland to grab pure, morning light from the east and nourish it as the day draws on, warm it, refract it through miles of shoreline mist. How many sand prisms – a quadrillion grains? You can eat the light here, the way it's served. It does things to skin, to the sheen of a smiling eye, we are slightly mad for riling each other up in bed. Post-beach, post-ale, an ostensible nap, we drift in and out. Prone, Abigail is lightward from me, left arm across my chest. A snoozelet, her breathing deepens. I love the back of her hand, how close to my face, the great rope of vein that rises dead-center. Skin that's strong with age and character, it's seen sun, rain, salt, and me. She is clear in my eyes, reading glasses or not. I'm aroused, but too peaceful with her arm draped on my chest, and I drift off.

Sleep-sense, bed-sense, we share it acutely: the experience of how we site ourselves, the pull of the other, the leg-draping, the folding in. Pillow-sense, how the sheet and coverlet tuck together in the hand at night. She'll slip away from me to use the bathroom, two or three in the morning, I'll sense it in my deepest dream. My arm sweeps into the empty space, and my dream absorbs the hurt of her not being there, the loss of her warmth. She slips away many nights, with the barest tremor of mattress. Sometimes she vanishes like vapor. The space cools.

I don't miss HO, the bots, the artificial space. I'm four years free of it, four years with Abby, I feel I'm ascending into the years and higher up in the bright blaze of the future I'm hollering back at myself *it's great here, gets better all the time --*

They can climb?

Hike their little hearts out.

Drifting back from nap, hearing her voice across the table. Damndest thing, those words are lost for four years, and my nap-addled brain grabs them from the ether and spits them out. Damn! Exploring her own connection with place, memory of, repulsion of, place. *They can climb?*

In an analogous way, yes.

My fingertip alights atop the rope vein in her hand, doesn't quite touch, moves along finger-ward where it snakes underground between her knuckles.

We both complained about California, knowing it wasn't the right place. Those who move there bring with them expectations of bliss. Lacking it, they're compelled to act it out and tart it up. Their bliss-rehearsals acquire a stodginess, their disappointment becomes a heavy contagion. In the Bay Area, the bubble was imploding and you could feel disappointment darkening into desperation. I wasn't much help. I told friends, all of them in the internet industry in one way or another, *does it make sense to you Cisco hit a peak market cap of seven hundred billion dollars?* Roughly the same as the federal budget. The company made boxes crammed with wires.

Porsches panicking on the 101, the clean-cut young guy in downtown San Jose with the cardboard sign "dotcommer will work for food," some of the guys at HO whose severance money had run out – I got the message to keep my funds out of the market, away from Suns, Oracles, Ciscos. Abby had cashed out before the peak, smelling it coming. Mostly guys were pumping it up, she said. Share prices bloated with testosterone. Hubris. It's all fake. Worse, it's California-fake.

We play tennis at her club in Berkeley on the morning before she is to speak at a conference of marketing execs across the bay in San Francisco. The sky is dry and sunny, as it almost always is. She dons her usual white shorts and navy tee shirt that blotches black with sweat after the first set, even on a cool February day. Velvety soft clay courts, easy on the joints, long loping rallies baseline to baseline. We're both pretty good, good enough to absorb

the ebb and flow of the game and nurse things along to a close score. The first few times we played, she wanted to beat the living shit out of me. She'd win, and then not be happy. I could have risen to the challenge, fire myself up as if it mattered, but I never did. I was too intrigued watching her, the great tennis legs, hair flying, the lungings and flailings, she killing the ball, me falling in love.

We've come to agree: playing is the thing, and it feels good. Winning, whoever tries so hard to do it, leaves a drip of acid. We enjoy the hitting.

We play today on the clay until we're both at the net swatting the ball racket to racket too fast for any reaction time, pure raw dumb-luck ricochets five or six times till we both erupt in laughter and let the ball dribble away. She collapses in a heap into the dust. I hurdle the net to be with her.

She starts: something like – where the *fuck* have you been all my life?

- You can tell me why you like me, if you've said it before I've forgotten.

- Not sure. Met other guys who are cute and smart.

- My trademark smirk.

Long breath, head drops between her knees.

- Hugh.

- Speaking.

- HUUUUGH.

- Okay, I'll hold.

- Your name rolls into my soul, I swear it.

I wiggle closer, want my arm to touch hers, the damp fuzz grazing her smooth skin. I believe she likes it, this kind of touch. She purrs, lifts her head. I see a wet gleam in her eyes.

- It's so close to You.

- Yeah, it's a lifelong thing, people's names change them.

- You.

- Still here, baby. And I'm not leaving.

- Barry died, I wasn't going to stay married to him, but it killed me. I wanted a long, a lifelong – something. With him. A chance to be friends. His life was valuable. Fucking half-killed me. Couldn't look at men. Barry got it. Barry figured it out. We didn't have fun, but he was a partner, because he got it.

- Got the picture? The worldview thing?

- In a way, but –

I squeeze her hand. Later I'll learn about Barry's death, but now doesn't

feel like the time. Her hand is hot, sweat drying. Stroke her palm with my thumb. Need to know what it is.

- Something...

- How to be loving without really loving.

- Like, I've never seen anyone so beautiful, I can understand. Anyone would eventually figure that out, even without intimacy. Even me, I'm slowly approaching --

- Hugh.

- Abs.

She takes my hand, we arise and dust the clay off, amble over to the fence in the shade where tall hedges hide us from buildings. We come together till we're toe to toe, her boobs touching my chest, we see the sweat drying on our faces. We kiss. Kiss some of the salty sweat from her cheek. Abigail's skin smell is strong, rich and sweet. I think, it's a kind of kitchen smell, something slow-cooking, it can make your stomach growl. I smell it at night lying next to her, smell it in the sheets, smell it now nuzzling her face and hair, her unnamable spice. She's murmuring. If I give myself over to Hugh (you?), if I risk this. You're not perfect, but close.

- Love being close.

- Always kidding. Genius with not enough to do.

- Nothing to do? Hell, I'm discovering *you*. That's not exactly walking and chewing gum.

- Yeah.

- You keep some cards a little close, I think. Which of course just adds to the excitement.

She's purring: Hughie.

- You guys, you and Barry, you decided: no kids?

We're gently hugging but she pulls apart, slips away.

- No. And *yes*. It's complicated. Difficult.

I think: maybe fertility issues.

- Well, you said you had no kids, so it's the first time I've kind of asked why, I didn't want to assume anything. No big deal, though. We can change the subject if you like.

- Um.

Chewing on a nail, her face dark.

- Okay, another time. When you're ready.

- It's a story, it needs to be told. But.

- But fine, later. When you're ready. I wonder, could I have another kid?
Who knows?

It's a dark mutter: *I'm not sure.*

My vasectomy stopped being a secret the first time we had sex. I'm such a potato with her, I yield all ground, it's fine with me to have a reversal and grow new life with her.

- Happy either way, kids or no. No rush, not now or soon, we'll leave it open. Now, I want to see you happy and fill my life up with what I've missed, what I don't know about you that's safe to talk about, like where your smell comes from. Thoreau called it sucking the marrow. From the bones of life and such.

Her face brightens, we start giggling and hugging the shit out of each other. She's cooing my name into my ear. Tells me, the sound flows like cool air sucking down her throat into her lungs, the extended Hugh tumbling deep into her.

And then she asks – could you see yourself leaving California?

- Anytime. I miss thunderstorms.

- Let's drive somewhere, find a place with thunderstorms. Where we can see past houses and trees. Suck the marrow. Go for a drive.

- Sure.

- Travel together, see if we like each other.

- Yeah, it's only been three months, I haven't seen your dark side.

A tongue-click of disapproval. Oh, Hughie.

- That's good news, no dark side!

- Come to the conference, hear me speak, see what I do.

The sheet of bubblewrap heads, the marketing and communication guys, they're men and women packing the auditorium staring at an array of huge plasma screens proclaiming *Abigail Sipes* and the title of her talk *Marketing as Distributed Intelligence*. This is not a brainstem crowd, she concedes, not like the CEOs and CFOs who waste their energy either running scared or spewing their testosterone, the marcom people are much cooler because they *think*, they imagine. But, she believes, they don't go far enough. They see marketing as orderly, sequential, linear. They need to see it the way the erstwhile HO Software saw it.

She's joined on stage by a standing display of life-sized paper doll cutouts, six spooky gray faceless humans stuck shoulder-to-shoulder. She starts:

- It's February 2001. What a difference a year makes.

Boy, are they nodding and murmuring. Dotcoms are busting.

- You think the rules are different now. You think you need to reposition. Shift your messaging, reengineer your strategies. Instead, maybe you need to think what the *hell* is this title all about? What's she been smoking? And who are *these* guys?

Murmurs, and one wag hollers out *Management!*

- They're the marketplace. They're the hive. And they welcome you.

The hive? They buzz, entering it.

- The hive thinks collectively. It feels collectively. No individual member has all the resources to think or feel independently. They rely on messages from the world around them to decide what to do. That world includes others just like them. *These* guys. These – two dimensional hivers. Fractions of the whole, nothing in themselves, meaningful only as part of a larger organism.

- Scientists create artificial life in computers. That life adapts, self-organizes, grows and develops through distributed intelligence. Messages and information dribble into the masses of bots and their environment. A single bot, a single invented creature, is scarcely a thing. Intelligence, motivation, decision-making all accrue to it from the hive.

I watch with a widening smile. Damn, she's going way beyond math.

- Is the marketplace truly like that? I strongly believe it is. The marketplace echoes our culture. Our culture, domestically and worldwide, is a hive. A hundred years ago? No, because we were scattered and separate. Fifty years ago? Not quite, because it was just TV and telephones. Today, the superconnected instantly communicating global village is a vast swarm of human bots who delude themselves into thinking they are free and self-deterministic. As your sons and daughters would say, *not*. We're part of a hive and we don't know it.

- To reach them, we need to know them.

The bubblewrap crowd, three or four hundred, seems stunned. Expecting nostrums of more better bigger faster, hale-fellow-well-met camaraderie with this cute chick and her phenomenal black-stockinged legs and a voice like vintage port, you want to love her but she's dissing the whole damn planet, and that includes *us*. Abigail strolls over to the cutouts as if to strike up a conversation with them, the crowd is murmuring again, she slips her body behind the display. Her head pokes between the cutouts in the dark, then jitters behind a featureless gray head. The great deep voice calls out.

- We want the pieces, not the whole thing. If it's light beer, one of me

wants to hear low carbs, another of me wants to hear taste. Carbs in L.A., taste in New York. Distribute the intelligence. If it's sexy cars, *I* want to learn about horsepower. While *I* -

A pause. I sniff the room. Ozone from the lights, static in the carpet, the guys next to me doing video, light, sound, all leaking electricity. A miasma of overlapping colognes, fragrances. Abs is in mid-sentence. I can't see her. The air thickens, someone coughs.

While *I*. We're waiting. Even cool marcom execs get twitchy when the dramatic hiatus is way overlong, wool slacks squeaking in chairs as bodies shift. Muttering soon follows. Horsepower and what, luxury, safety? Tell us. Where the hell is she?

The sound and light guys next to me are huddling. One sputters out – did she fall?

Another – Saw her face, her hair between two of the cutouts. Then nothing.

- Fuckin' A.

- Swear it. Check the tape.

My heart goes wild, my skin goes cold.

- *want the skinny on safety, on comfort.*

She pops out to the side of the hive-beings, big smile, full and alive and held firmly to earth by the weight of who she is, by this thing we suspect is gravity.

four

She said, *I need to tell you, I'm weird about time. I don't know how long it lasts.*
I said, *you may have a mild form of tempus fugit syndrome. Otherwise known as Sequential Dysplasia. I call it by its street name, Temporal Narcolepsy.*

Morning in her Berkeley apartment, looking west down the hills toward town, the university. She sits in the breakfast nook with her first cup of coffee, head bent, thumbing through pages in a road atlas. Week-old roses from me, in a vase center-table, the flowers are still full and wine-red. I'm padding around in slippers in the kitchen, toasting English muffins, admiring how the light from the bay window treats her. She wears a black tank-top. Gold chain glinting on her brown wrist, the strong veined hands, a swell of muscle in her upper arm.

Daddy's body, she's said. The hallway is home to a sprawling gallery of family photos, from the Sipes' early days in Spokane to Connecticut to Nantucket, Harmon and Elizabeth, the boys Carey and Tom, and the sister Abigail. She's in the middle, the teaser and the teasee, brutalized by Carey, ruthless with Tom. From the 'Sixties through the 'Nineties Harmon dutifully grays, head and chest hair, but keeps his fullback physique and his intimidating smile. Carey gets the same body, will pass it on to his kids. Abby has the broad back and muscly arms. The odd one out is Tom, lanky like his Mom but towheaded like none of them. Merciless teasing about being adopted, Tom survived, now has two blond smiling kids of his own, boy and a girl. There are children on horses at their little ranch near Spokane, teenagers in a pool in Connecticut, the kids in their thirties at a barbecue on the front deck in Nantucket with the

Atlantic beyond. Harmon was an investment banker. Caught the attention of Wall Street in the 'Seventies, packed the whole brood up and moved east, made a fair amount.

High up in the cluster is one small picture of Barry Kline, a promotional photo from his pharmaceutical firm in New Jersey taken in 1995, a year before he died. Barry is a handsome, intelligent-looking man with thinning black hair and a practiced smile. If she didn't like him enough, I'm glad to be spared the obligation of meeting him.

"Veins and arteries," she says, as the English muffins pop up.

I quiz her with my look.

"The road atlas. All the interstates are blue, the US highways are red. The nation's circulatory system, blue veins, red arteries."

She's talking about a road trip somewhere, and the truth of colors, blue and red. The interstate veins are thick and swollen, oxygen-depleted. The smaller highway arteries are fueled with the real people and commerce of the land, the juice of real life at ground level. Wherever we drive, we should go with the energy. She's done it this way before, leaving New Jersey some months after Barry's death, driving cross-country to California, skirting the blue veins for the red back roads. She does it whenever she can, driving city to city for one conference or another.

"Where do we want to go?" I need more coffee, start pouring.

"Maybe the Plains. Maybe the Southwest. Too early for thunderstorms, though."

I sip my coffee and set it down by the roses. I move behind her, wanting to smell her sleep-hair, touch her again, it's been a half-hour since we pulled apart in bed. Hands on her bare shoulders, her traps, flanks of her neck. She mmmms, I start massaging her. Thumbing the vertebrae in her neck. She tilts her head forward, mmmms. I imagine, all of Abigail's beauty can telescope to this place of hairline on her nape, not a line but a gentle sweep of fine black hairs feathering into nothing. Like her eyebrow edges at the corners of her eyes, the hairs drift invisibly into down. She smells wonderful, her skin and hair smelling like sleep, like her home with morning sunshine warming it.

Firm thumb presses, rotations around the bumps of bones.

"Hey look," I start.

"Mmm."

"Yesterday afternoon, you go behind the cutout display."

Instantly: "Maybe I disappeared."

“Well, we know that doesn’t happen. Seriously, Abs.”

“Higher up.”

My fingers slide up the sides of her neck close to her jaw. Tender here, maybe the carotids lie beneath, I’m not sure where they are but I’m gentle with my fingers. She’s firm and real, as consensually fixed as I am.

“I won’t make a thing out of it,” I say. But then,

“It’s happened before.”

I lean forward and kiss her hair and coo. Her neck muscles are knotty hard. I’m not sure what the feeling is I’m having, and I try to push it away.

“You beautiful thing.”

“Several times.” A breath. “Quite a few times.”

Now I get the galvanic rush, like a shred of aluminum foil in your food or a fork on a blackboard, the shudder zinging down to my toes.

“No shit.”

“No shit.”

“You’re solid, not vapor. What the hell happens?”

“I don’t know. It’s butterfly-like, a kind of flight. I have no memory. Everything is continuous, the movie doesn’t pause.”

Hands off her neck back to her shoulders and her traps.

“A few times, they see me and then they don’t. So they say.”

“Lordy.”

“Lordy all right. I don’t talk about this. Just Tom. Now you.”

She droops her head again and I give her traps a good firm squeeze.

“So what the hell is it?”

“Dunno.”

“When did it start?”

She pauses to remember, or else to choose not to answer. A big sigh, she lets it out.

“Summer on Nantucket. 1996. Pretty sure.”

I kiss her on the jut of a vertebra, my tongue tickling her nape feathers. Her body twitches.

“Just want it to go away.”

“Abs, you’re as solid as a fuckin’ rock, people don’t phase-shift, it’s something else.”

“Hope so.”

“Maybe it’s not you, it’s them. People go blind. All the time, people go blind.”

In psychology class in college we participated in an experiment apparently designed to test our visual acuity. About thirty of us crowded into a darkened room with the teacher showing pairs of slides of purple circles, side by side. The circle on the left started off as larger than the other, but as he changed slides the circle on the right gradually increased in size. Each time, he'd ask us for a show of hands to indicate when we perceived the right circle to be larger than the left. No hands went up. New slide, no hands went up, again and again until after about eight or nine slide changes it was fairly clear to me the right circle had become larger than the left. I raised my hand; I was the only one in class to do it.

Interesting, he noted. The others looked at me. He changed slides, and now it was perfectly obvious the circle on the right was larger. Again, I was the only one with my hand up, though I think the kid next to me was tempted. The others turned and stared. Two or three voices started harassing me. What's your problem? Are you blind? The left one's still bigger.

The teacher introduced a new element in the experiment: he wanted us all to *agree*. The others pressed me: why do you think the one on the right is bigger? It just *is*. You're crazy, you're blind, you're holding things up. One against thirty, I said all of you are weird. The right one's obviously bigger.

The pressure wouldn't let up. I'm daft, I'm impaired, retarded, damaged, an asshole. Name-calling. *Ewwwww. Hoo-boy. Hubeeeeeee.*

He hadn't changed the slide, but the circle on the right kept shrinking. Or else my brain was reversing the definitions of "larger" and "smaller." They had me beat. I lowered my hand.

Victorious, they applauded.

Then they told me the truth of the experiment: I was the guinea pig. It wasn't about visual acuity after all, it was about *group dynamics*. Peer pressure. Hugh Ogden's an easygoing guy, a math and science geek, let's work him over and mess with his mind.

We spent several minutes debriefing. At the moment I caved in, did I actually *see* the circle on the right as smaller?

I said, it's just as likely that the word "smaller" had lost its meaning, the way "foot" becomes absurd when it's endlessly repeated.

I don't remember if the circle on the right ever looked smaller, when it

wasn't. The eyes don't fool you, the brain does. I don't remember. Like the critters in my software, I became enthralled, feeding dumbly but hungrily on group intelligence.

Abs dispenses pieces of her memory in little bursts of facts, voices, pictures. A hyphenated movie. She's stacking papers into her valise, preparing for a meeting in San Francisco with a software company, and suddenly she's telling me of a rich Texan and a poker game. "Oceans of money, he didn't care about the house, he'd just buy another one. He knew Dad through business, his company invested through Dad. Golf pals, poker pals."

"When's this?"

"The first time. 1996, August, I'm pretty sure. Barry died in April, I was still a wreck, couldn't be alone, I was recovering with Mom and Dad --"

"The first time meaning --"

"Yeah, we were all on Nantucket, renting this guy's place. The poker game is way out of control, they play like a thousand a chip. I'm working with Mom in the kitchen, making snacks and drinks. The game is -- it's cards turned up --"

"Stud poker."

"Yeah, and other guys are folding. Wayne's concentrating on remembering the cards turned up. It gets down to him and Dad, the other guys -- their cards are flipped over now. And Wayne bets the house. The house we're in. I'm standing kind of opposite him about to clear off empty glasses. Hi, I'm Abigail your server. Wayne drinks too much, he's betting the house. I was a wreck, my life had shrunk to bits of housework and errands, just physical things, to keep my mind off people dying. I watch Wayne drink straight rum from a glass and the next thing I see is he's freaking out, saying *what the fuck* and *where'd you go* and stuff. And he just folds his cards and says, *you get the house, Harm.*"

"This was the first time."

Her valise snaps shut.

"I guess."

"Meaning."

"He says I disappeared."

She sucks in a breath, holds it, eases it out.

"He was shit-faced."

"Exactly. So it didn't happen."

"No one else saw."

"Nope. So it didn't happen."

"But."

She shrugs with a half smile. “I don’t know.”

No other Bay Area multimillionaires drive raggedy old Subaru sedans stitched together with duct tape. When I arrived here, newly divorced from Liza and fairly poor, I bought the car for a few hundred dollars from a kid who was in the habit of hitting brick walls, signposts, and parts of other cars. I drove it to work every day, made some money, decided to keep it regardless of my fortunes, patched its cracks and shattered taillight plastic with tape. Its tenuous hold on longevity appeals to me. The Sube reminds me of my hair-shirt start in San Jose, and the persistent frailty of my work, my business, my own life. The sounds of metal moving in the engine – the rattle of rods and valves, cams and pistons – make a kind of affirming industrial music. I like hearing the car work; I’m suspicious of cars that cushion you with silence. The Old Sube, Ol’ Trusty: I just like the damn thing.

Abby tolerates it with a wry smile, the cookie-sized hole in the floorboard by her feet where “the 880” (Interstate 880, blue vein) streaks by, San Jose to Oakland. She drives a classic Skylark convertible, a late ‘Sixties mellowish muscle car, fully restored, creampuffy powder blue.

I head downtown to the hotel auditorium where she gave her talk. I remember that the marketing conference ends today.

Check the tape.

I’ve been to a few big conferences before, mostly software people, and I’ve endured the speeches and presentations. People in the back of the room can watch presenters on screen, larger than life, while they move around the stage. Oddly, Abigail’s face never made it on screen. Just her name and the title of her talk. But the tech guys were shooting her nonetheless, shooting *something*, they had a camera aimed at the stage, they had TV monitors. *Check the tape.*

In the lobby I need to get around the registration desks. I head for Press and Media, have to gull them and tell them I want to find the show tech people, maybe hire them to produce our annual sales meeting. A young woman, California cool, points me to a hallway and a conference room, gives me a guest pass.

I shuttle from room to room – the production staff is scattered among various breakout sessions in smaller rooms – until I end up back in the main auditorium. Hundreds of empty chairs, a deserted darkened stage, but the scent of people and their body warmth linger.

The tech guys are in the back of the room, pulling up cable and breaking down the equipment.

I see the one I want, catch his eye. Can't be more than twenty, Rachel's age.

"Yes."

"My name's Hugh Ogden, I'm a friend of Abigail Sipes."

"Yes." He's unplugging things, wanting to be busy. His nametag says Jack, Something Media Group.

"I'd like to talk."

A heave of his shoulders, a bored sigh leaks out of him. He checks his watch.

"We're tight here."

"Couple of minutes? I'm curious about something."

He calls out to his partners, begs five minutes off, now leads me to a couple of chairs nearby.

"Hugh?"

"Yes."

"Like, Hugh Ogden, HO Software?"

"You knew us?"

He did, and he instantly thaws. "Just *about* you, you kept your stuff pretty quiet. No kidding, Hugh Ogden."

"Jack, it is?"

"Yeah, look, what happened yesterday, it made me think, like we're all part of a *system*, right? You're good friends with Ms. Sipes?"

"Yes. System?"

"Okay, so it's like in physics, the observer and the observed, the thing doesn't have a place or a speed till it's measured, I don't need to translate for you, right? You know that stuff?"

I nod. College physics, the mysteries of the quantum world, but it's not helping me.

"We're not talking about electrons."

"Okay, so who's to say three hundred people didn't fuck up, didn't pay attention? It was a *killer* talk, they were riveted, how could they not see?"

"You were running video."

"She told us, no close-up video, no feed to the screens. Just a record tape."

"A record tape."

"Just shoot the stage wide, camera on a tripod, it records what's happen-

ing, we don't feed it to the screen. Usually we'll cover something like this with two cameras, but she didn't want that. Don't know why. When she had that long pause, it seemed like hours, I don't know, man."

I'm watching his mouth, the white-headed zit on his chin and the spittle on his lower lip. He smells of work stress and something sweetly plasticky.

"I mean that literally – I don't know, we never know. We think we do and we don't. It's like David Copperfield, whoever. A distraction, a diversion. I don't know what I'm saying. I mean, am I the only frigging one who saw?"

I will remember this for months, years. Am I the only one? Or else, everyone sees, and then slips into a fog of collective amnesia.

"That's why you're here, right? Or not."

I say, "I'm curious."

"But you can't trust perception," he says. "It's fleeting, it's filtered. What's not filtered is electronics. Electronics don't lie. TV tells the truth."

"The tape?"

Yes, he's nodding. "I degaussed that part. Twelve seconds worth. It's just snow now, static. I took the blame, I lied, said I flipped the wrong switch, my brain cramped. It's history now."

"You erased it."

"Twelve seconds, yeah."

He's shaking. I'm surprised, believing techies are cool under pressure.

"I checked the tape first. Just me. I saw it, I copped the reel, went back, viewed it several times, and degaussed it. Those twelve seconds. When you don't believe something, you just degauss it."

I can't say anything.

"The truth is in the system, I swear. Do you believe that? You must, with your software stuff, self-adaptive systems, the hives, whatever –"

Jack! Someone's shouting to him, they have a problem. He's up and out of his chair.

"Sorry, gotta run," he says, and he's off.

I'm calling after him and can hardly believe the whiny tone in my voice, it's cracking, shrill and desperate. *Was she there?*

He spins around, his body freezes, he's mouthing *no*.