

Travel in the Mouth of the Wolf

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One. Iple's Memory

Iple walked and as he walked, having nothing specific to look at, only the vast abstract waves of ice and icy sky, he took unsystematic stock of his memories. He remembered standing at the window, the sun high, the sunlight with the worn-in gold of early afternoon, glowing, holy green lawns, cars driving past, though now he could pick out only one, a beige, preconscious BMW from the early 1980s, and evenly distributed, indeterminate pedestrians, and a vague, refreshed taste of water in his mouth and the back of his nose. Iple wasn't sure what window he'd been standing at, though he had a feeling the floor was carpeted in thick burgundy and the curtains royal blue with little white evenly distributed flowers, and he was unsure if he was remembering when he was six or when he was thirty, whether the car had maybe been from the late 1960s, whether it had driven past at all, or whether he was remembering an actual memory. What he remembered distinctly was the sense of fixity, brightness and inevitability, the slight sense of recognition that the moment would be remembered, unrecognizably.

Iple had thousands of memories like this one. They weren't enough to make a single childhood story out of. He remembered being curled on a cool linoleum floor with abdominal pains, wearing black pajamas with white pinstripes, and a sudden, unexpected sympathy from the linoleum, and nothing else. He used to check his wardrobe for a remembered pair of pajamas, empty his desk in search of a beautiful quill pen he remembered holding in his teeth late one night, hoping that the pen might give up some clue where it came from, why Iple had been holding it the way he had, hungry, from what he remembered, for a taco.

Two. Iple's Childhood

Iple walked and watched his breath curl out in long, momentary clouds, and tried to remember his childhood. He remembered his mother had worked wrapping chocolate bars to buy herself a beautiful purple bicycle when she was just a girl. He could still see her bicycle, which he knew he'd never seen, but could not remember the look of his mother, her alert eyes and her short tight curls of disorientingly black hair, her stewardess uniform in the far, dark corner of the closet, hanging over a pile of disused shoes, insinuating an invisible, unimaginable world folded into the actual one, or the gesture she used to flip a pancake.

He would test each memory by trying to imagine one of its opposites, his mother with her wild blonde pigtailed, her calm, sleepy eyes, her closet of nothing but delicate nightgowns, too thin almost to touch, she who never wrapped a candy nor cared to own a bicycle, and each memory seemed as believable as the one before it. It was his sister who bought the bicycle, and the bicycle had been orange, if he'd had a sister.

Iple couldn't isolate a single certain detail of his personal history around which he might build some probable corollary memories, which he suspected might lead him to something else he could be sure of, a second certain detail, then a third, and so on; and after an initial panic, he wasn't especially inclined to keep trying. The cold froze the inside of his nose hard like a flowerpot.

Iple decided to be glad not to know where or how he grew up. For almost a minute, he hoped he'd had a happy childhood, and then he hoped for fifteen seconds that he hadn't, and then he lost interest in the question entirely.

Three. The Antarctica Decision

Iple can remember why he came to Antarctica. He was walking around his block to get an idea. The clouds hung fixed, dumpling-shaped, shadowlessly bright. An orange cat looked at Iple with the poker face of a cat refusing to give up its idea. The birds laughed at Iple. Iple carried a wooden ball-and-cup game that he liked to play to make himself look casual, like he wasn't looking for anything, and he used it now. A string joined the red wooden ball to the yellow wooden cup on its blue wooden handle. Iple held it by its blue handle and swung the red ball in an arc upward and tried to catch it on the way down in the yellow cup. The cup was just slightly too small for the ball to fit into.

I will tell you something that no one knows for sure. Time is discrete, like the frames in movies, still moments in progression. For Iple to swing the red ball to when it bounced off the rim of the yellow cup took only about five thousand moments, still too many to notice individually, no matter how closely you watch. From when the red ball bounced off the yellow cup to when the truck touched the pump in front of the gas station Iple was walking past was just under a thousand moments. It's hard to talk about just when the truck touched the pump, since unlike time, space is continuous, and the closer you look, the more difficult it is to tell exactly when a thing is touching another thing and when a thing is not.

It took about four hundred moments from when the truck first touched the pump to the height of the explosion. The explosion killed five people and badly burned two. It killed the orange cat. It takes five whole moments for a thing to go from living to dead. It took twenty-six moments for Iple's hearing to go from normal human hearing to no hearing.

Iple should have been dead or badly burned. The bones in his ear felt hot, like they would burn through his head, but he could still think. He looked unscathed and sat down on the curb across the street. He sat there a long time, and the clouds kept looking like dumplings and didn't go anywhere or reshape themselves. Firefighters and paramedics came and did everything they could. Policemen came and asked questions. Iple pointed to his right ear and shook his head.

Iple watched the gas station and environs until everything was gone from it, and then watched until a bird landed for a minute and left again, which reminded him of how to leave, and he got up and went to a little traincar diner.

Iple pointed to the Monte Cristo on the menu. He didn't want to try speaking. His ears felt less hot, and he could think more. He thought to walk around until morning. In the morning, he thought to turn everything he had into money. Then he thought to rent a little room in an old janitor's attic and learn all he could about Antarctica and keep eating sandwiches.

Upon becoming an Antarctica expert, Iple still did not understand why people went there. He joined a group of scientists and went there.

Four. Zebedee

Zebedee was a gifted gambler. His first time in a casino he won until the casino men asked him to leave and not come back. They watched Zebedee for a long time for cheating, then they took him to a room and had him empty his pockets on the table. They had him take off his jacket. Zebedee wore a camel-colored jacket. Then they told him to take off his sky-colored shirt, and Zebedee said, "Please, gentlemen, this is absurd."

The casino men told Zebedee what they thought was absurd, and that was how much Zebedee won in the casino. They were going to find out how he cheated. Zebedee looked like he was cheating when he gambled, because he didn't pay close attention. He studied the light fixtures, a lady's necklace, the drinks going by on trays, their ice and their straws, their cherries and pineapple slices and olives and pearl onions.

Zebedee said, "I am too embarrassed for you to keep your money. You may have it back, and I will be going," and he put his arms both at once back into his jacket sleeves. One casino man said it was too late for that, but halfheartedly, and Zebedee walked out the door. Before he disappeared completely through the door, the casino man said don't ever come back to this casino.

Zebedee went home and grew a mustache, a swooping handlebar. He went back to the casino and won once on a slot machine and left, the pockets of his camel jacket swollen and jangling.

Five. More About Zebedee

Zebedee learned how to gamble inconspicuously, a little at a time, first a little blackjack, then a little roulette. He drew attention to himself only one other time. When he was twenty, he took Charlotte, the judge's daughter, to the diner and to a drive-in movie. Afterwards he took her with him to the roulette table and bet zero twenty times in a row, little bets, and she watched it come up zero twenty times in a row, and everyone else at the table afraid to really bet zero because there is no way it can come up zero again, not after six in a row. Not after fourteen in a row. Charlotte must have squeezed Zebedee's arm and bent her knees into a near-curtsey with excitement about fifty times, and each time it made it harder for Zebedee not to keep betting zero. But they were little bets, so when it was over everyone at the table walked away feeling it was just a small if essential chink taken out of their ethos.

Charlotte had little tiny ears and great big lips and an astonishingly swoopy waist and hips and a paunch and she picked out maidenly dresses to wear for Zebedee, and when Zebedee saw her in one of her dresses he would twist one end of his mustache and love Charlotte, and she loved him, for the way things seemed to want to happen well for him.

Then in February Charlotte got on a plane to Oahu with her father the judge, and the pilot flew it on purpose into the water, straight and fast. Zebedee thought, what if he had bet on her return, and why hadn't he.

Zebedee felt sick gambling, and took back his job tossing dough at the pizzeria. Then four years later he felt better enough to gamble again. He went to horse races and dog races and once to a chicken fight in Louisiana. He watched the women in large hats, the men in bow ties, a lonely girl work-

ing the betting booth, a pickpocket, sometimes the horses or dogs or chickens. He bet long shots, trifectas of long shots.

He never bet on real events, the birth of a nephew, or that Charlotte would walk out of the Pacific Ocean and into the Baja, not even out of breath.

He traveled and did favors, and everyone loved him. He traveled so he could buy gifts—novel, beautiful things for his brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews and Esther who owned the pizzeria and her boy Gottlieb. He brought back fireworks, swords, coins, a rickshaw, an Aztec spoon, a Fabergé egg for Esther, a Go set for Gottlieb, with an ebony board and pieces made of brilliant, polished coral.

Zebedee's hair went white, but his mustache stayed black. Gottlieb met a girl to marry, with irises the color of sand, which Zebedee found sweetly treacherous, and on the day before the wedding, Gottlieb said to Zebedee, I am very busy and can you do me the favor of driving these chickens to my mother? And Zebedee said, "Of course, Gottlieb," and driving the truck full of chickens his eyes clouded over and his balance clouded over, and he sent the truck straight into a gas pump, destroying himself and the chickens and the orange cat and ruining Iple's ears.

Six. How Great Things Are Done

With nothing but a swift horse. With nothing but a paper clip and a stick of chewing gum. With nothing but a compass. With nothing but a bright light and a penny whistle. With nothing but a pocket watch, a glass of water, and a match. With nothing but a kite and a loose tooth. With nothing but a breeze and a handkerchief. With nothing but a bowl of oatmeal. With nothing but a wedding ring and a postcard. With nothing but a pair of owls. With nothing but an apple, a river, and a handful of pine needles. With nothing but a bullet and a sewing kit. With nothing but a football helmet, a roman candle, and a padlock. With nothing but half a map. With nothing but a boot and a sword. With nothing but a stray dog and a strip of bacon. With nothing but hair off the barber's floor. With nothing but an idle lie and a milkshake. With nothing but a bite of rumaki. With nothing but a dowel and a bandsaw. With nothing but a chocolate grasshopper. With nothing but a square meter of plate glass. With nothing but a cell. With nothing but a cart. With nothing but a potato. With nothing but a potato bug.

Seven. The Ice Station

A big helicopter with two propellers dropped the team of scientists onto Antarctica, and Iple with them. Another big helicopter dropped a whole bunch of boxes full of the things the scientists figured they needed to survive (beans, Sterno). The fanciest thing was an auger that Wes, the humanist psychologist, brought to dig deep reservoirs for the outhouses. It took Wes a week to put the auger together, while everyone else was working on the igloos, and once it got running, he used it to take off his right arm at the elbow.

Wes didn't make a sound. He lay down in the snow and bled and cried a little to himself, and by the time Justin the photojournalist found him they all thought it was too late, but somehow Tina the doctor saved Wes. They had a toast to Tina in the central igloo and drank red wine and ate Brie with roasted red peppers and baguette.

Each night, Penelope the microbiologist played soft songs on her flügelhorn in the central igloo, where she took her turn watching over Wes, under a pile of blankets, his face gone light gray and fevered, sweating, by the fire. And each night, from his igloo, Iple thought he could just almost make out Penelope's song, round and muted, through the nothing he could hear.

In the morning, Iple walked far off from camp, with a sandwich folded into his parka and a Thermos of tea, until the village of igloos was gone over the horizon, and then on to where there was only the snow, and the sky reflecting snow, until it seemed fair not to hear anything. Then he sat down, took his tea and sandwich, and rocked himself a little in the cradle of blank, easeful lifelessness. This was the only time Iple's mind did not revolt against his body.

The days got longer, and for a while Iple stayed out as long as it was day. The team of scientists worried about him, especially Asa the architect, who had come to realize his village of igloos. They worried that Iple might not come back, but mostly they worried over any strange behavior, any trace of madness. There were six psychologists other than Wes, all of them watching for new symptoms, and only the old man, Benjamin the behaviorist psychologist, insisted on Iple's sanity. "He's an odd bastard, but harmless," Benjamin said at lunch, "unlike this puerile nimrod," pointing his croissant at Asa, "who is determined to ruin my back in these demented, midget igloos." Benjamin was eighty-nine and six-foot-nine. At Tina's toast, he declared, "I am amazed that the lady doctor has managed to save this stunning nincompoop."

Eight. Benjamin and Penelope

Benjamin was ever noticeably kind only to Penelope the microbiologist. On Sunday mornings he made her eggs Benedict. Penelope's igloo was near the kitchen igloo, and she woke instinctively at the faint smell of hollandaise sauce and came to the kitchen igloo and ate, still cloudy-eyed from sleep, and Benjamin would ask her what she'd been dreaming about, with yes and no questions, and Penelope nodded or shook her head, wrapped in a tangle of hair.

Benjamin had almost three hundred grandchildren. Penelope was the first one he knew about, and the sixth overall. Wes the humanist psychologist was third overall. The girl who married Gottlieb was one-hundred-fifty-first overall and second in a set of triplets.

As the days got longer and the nights almost unnoticeable, Benjamin was the most careful to keep a schedule and to sleep like the nights kept coming. He had a rowing machine and a juicemaker and four cats and nine gerbils to keep track of. He hoped to find out if Antarctica had any effect on their sense of direction.

Iple couldn't understand why anyone in the team of scientists had come to Antarctica. He watched the rings get darker under their eyes. Asa the architect got so he was up for four hours and slept for one before he jittered back awake, not sure whether he had slept. To Iple, they all seemed to be haunting the igloos. Everyone made a lot of swooshing noise when they moved, with the rubbing of the weatherproof shells of their coats and pants, but somehow no one heard Iple. He would just be there suddenly, startling, in the peripheral view of a psychologist or a cosmologist or Asa or Tina or Roy the artificial intelligence man. It made Iple seem ominous. To Iple they

seemed like nervous, frightened ghosts. He felt a little pity, and a little satisfaction at the chance that by not hearing himself, no one could hear him.

Nine. What Iple Found

As the days got longer, Iple stayed away longer. Sometimes, with the igloos still in view, he thought he could hear some hint of Penelope's flügelhorn; then when the igloos were gone, he relaxed his ears. He thought this might be what it was like to think straight, with all his senses feeling appropriate, and then he started to take unsystematic stock of his memories. He stayed out there, out past view of the village of igloos, sometimes for twenty hours at a time, misremembering his mother and father and their gestures and his siblings and childhood friends, if he'd had any, and the cars and the breakfasts and the lawns of his childhood, still hoping he might stumble across a real memory he could be sure of.

Then Iple saw a spot of red off in the distance. It must have been in his vision for a while before he noticed it. It wasn't far. It was Wes's parka, with Wes frozen into it, snow and ice caked deep into his beard and eyebrows and eyelashes. Iple was surprised to see Wes. Iple hadn't seen Wes leave his pile of blankets in the central igloo since they first laid him down there. Iple didn't think Wes was much inclined to move, and Iple especially didn't think Wes could make his way all this way away. Iple wanted to be proud of Wes for this unexpected gesture, but Wes was all frozen up and not breathing.

Iple figured this is what Wes had planned on when he set out from under his pile of blankets. He wasn't sure what to do with Wes. He was pretty sure Wes wasn't planning on getting found, and probably didn't want to be. Wes probably wanted to stay where he was. But then Wes probably also didn't have much of an idea now whether he'd been found or not. Iple tried to get a look out of Wes, maybe get a hint out of him, and Wes sat there with his eyes frozen shut. Iple pictured leaving

Wes there and Wes getting buried over by a few good gusts of snow. Iple could walk right past Wes tomorrow and not know it. It seemed lonely and wrong to Iple. He sat down and took his tea and half his sandwich, folded the other half into his coat, and hoisted Wes up over his shoulder.

Gradually Iple thought he could hear his feet crunching into the snow, and he tried not to think much of it. Then Wes spoke up.

“Is that you, Iple? You’re taking me back to the ice-station?”

“I am taking you back to the ice-station,” Iple said, his mouth almost too cold to articulate.

“Don’t take me back there.” Wes sounded good. His voice was calm and just a little amused. “You can drop me right here and I’ll disappear right into the snow very quickly.”

“What do you care where your body ends up?” Iple asked.

“And what do you care?”

“The knowledge of your presence will interfere with my enjoyment of the blankness of the landscape,” said Iple.

“That’s weird, Iple.”

Iple reimaged the ice as dotted through with corpses, each one too cold to move, even just enough to give up its ghost.

“Please, Iple. Tina may cryonically reanimate me. It’s something she’s prepared for. She’s eager to unfreeze someone. Don’t make a failed suicide of me.”

The roofs of the igloos crested over the horizon like angry swollen white bellies.

“There’s something I’d like you to see, something exceptional,” said Wes. “It’s not terribly far. Let’s at least stop there first.” Iple didn’t especially feel like going back to the village of igloos just yet. It was still early, and Wes sounded so benign and so minimally perturbed that Iple was curious. Wes talked Iple in the direction of the thing.

“You know what song I always loved?” Wes asked as Iple carried him. “I always loved ‘Paper Moon.’ It’s so tenderly, beautifully solipsistic. And it’s so casual, so effortlessly nonchalant;

every time I hear it, it comes like something very simple but elusive, almost animism; it's a love song to be sung by everything, by moon, sea, stone, ice, snow, wind. I always loved that song. Anyone can sing it, and it's always beautiful." Then Wes hummed it for a minute, and Iple thought he could feel Wes humming, and then Wes said, "Oh, this is it. Look down."

The ice was transparent under Iple's feet, so that, except for a little glare on the surface, it looked like he was floating. It was exceptional. And it went on like that, the giant piece of perfectly clear ice, and Iple could see, in the ice about thirty feet below him, a huge thing, on its back with its four legs all pointed straight up, like a cartoon of a huge dead thing.

Ten. Iple's Speech

Iple hadn't talked since the explosion had ruined his ears. He hadn't talked in anyone's presence. At first, he had been afraid to find out for sure that he couldn't even hear himself speak. He was also afraid that he might miraculously still be able to. After a week, he tried it. He tried reading a line aloud from the book he was reading up there in the janitor's attic. He knew the janitor was out.

"The explorers endured many hardships."

He might not have spoken it. He might have just moved his lips. He had to say it so he could feel his vocal cords move.

"The explorers endured many hardships."

Did he feel them move, or was that just breath wisping through his trachea in a lost whisper? He should at least be able to hear himself in some far away, underwater way.

"The explorers endured many hardships."

He felt the slight scrapes and pinches he used to feel at the top of his throat when he yelled.

"The explorers endured many hardships."

His throat burned a little, but still nothing, no far away, underwater voice.

"The explorers endured many hardships."

His throat felt raw. He went to get a glass of water to fix it. "Once more," he told himself.

Almost back to the village of igloos with Wes on his shoulder, he imagined he might soon have to say something. Always before he went to sleep, he exercised his mouth, tensed and flexed his lips, his tongue, his cheeks. For some time not moving his mouth except to eat felt strange, disturbingly calm, and once it felt natural, he started exercising his mouth before he went to sleep. He felt good

about his conversation with Wes. He'd found himself very comprehensibly articulate.

Most everyone was in the kitchen igloo when Iple came in. "The madman's killed Wes!" shouted Asa the architect, grabbing a steak knife.

"Quiet, you infantile jackass," said Benjamin.

Iple spoke slowly. "I found Wes far from the ice-station, frozen. I believe he did not intend to return. I also found an enormous creature preserved in an uncanny bit of ice, not too far away."

Eleven. Iple's Afterlife

Iple got his hearing back. He got back senses he never knew he lost. He remembered things no one knows for sure, like that time is discrete and that our ways of measuring are awkward for the way the universe is. He remembered what his mother looked like. Very freckly. When he was two she went for a swim in the Mediterranean and never came back.

Iple's mother laughed at him for everything he'd forgotten and she told him that the thing with his memory, the thing with his ears, every awful thing, was just the kind of joke they all liked to play on each other. She'd been in on it all along, and now he was in on it, and now that it was over Iple agreed that it was funny. Then she said, "Now give me over your shoes, Iple."

Iple's shoes were soft brown leather. They were sturdy but forgiving. He'd had them repaired twelve times. They had been his favorite thing. "No shoes in the afterlife," she said, only she didn't call it the afterlife. Iple gave her over his shoes remorselessly, and she told him what else there wasn't. Wallpaper, clocks and watches, recorded music, nail polish . . .

Already he wasn't listening, but watching the breeze blow the hairs on her left freckled forearm.

Twelve. Asa

Iple had orange eyes. They looked fugitive. Iple liked to look around almost always, and it made Asa the architect, who never looked around unless he should, nervous. A few times Asa thought he saw Iple's eyes throw back light like a cat's. Asa came to Antarctica to see his dream of a village of igloos come true. Igloos connected by ice tunnels, and astonishingly warm inside, as if alive. It made Asa feel almost fetal to think of it.

Asa's wife didn't understand the village of igloos. They had two young boys, a beautiful home deep in the woods near Medicine Hat, and access to superlative fruits and vegetables. "Why are you going to Antarctica?" she asked Asa, and Asa couldn't very well answer.

"I want to build a snow fort," he thought.

Asa had trouble believing Iple couldn't hear. Asa thought Iple's eyes said he was listening. Iple would look over at the oven for a minute. "Now he is listening to the oven for a minute," Asa thought.

Asa worried over what Iple did away from the village of igloos. No one else ever left the village of igloos. They really were astonishingly warm inside, and everyone had a personal igloo, plus there was the common igloo, and the kitchen igloo, and down some long tunnels, but still comfortably warm, there were two outhouse igloos. They had gone ahead and used the auger, in terror and insistently. It hurt Asa that Iple didn't spend more time in his village of igloos, and that Iple never smiled at Asa, the way people always did in Medicine Hat and usually did in the village of igloos.

Benjamin also never smiled at Asa, and in fact once spat on Asa's boot and cursed Asa's imbecilic snow fort, but Benjamin did not make Asa nervous. Asa never heard Iple coming. Iple would

be there all at once, and Asa would jump, first at the sudden appearance, and then again because it was Iple. Eventually he started jumping a third time, because his nerves had started to turn in on themselves, and sometimes a fourth.

Asa got so he drank a lot of coffee and lost control of his sleeping. He would sleep without knowing it, and sometimes be awake without knowing it, or fall asleep and dream a slight variation on just having been awake. He dreamt of his wife and boys, living in their beautiful home without him and not ever talking, he dreamt of Iple riding in on a brontosaurus and destroying the village of igloos, he dreamt of Iple riding through Medicine Hat, destroying his wife and boys, dashing their superlative produce, no one noticing until he was upon them, Iple, stealth annihilator, and then he woke up, not sure if he had slept.

Then Iple walked in with Wes on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. For three days Asa wept into his coffee and wept while he was sleeping and dreamt of Iple carrying everyone, frozen, out of Medicine Hat, and whistling.

Iple really had started to whistle. He whistled the songs Penelope played on her flügelhorn, though he couldn't be sure he'd heard them, and he wasn't sure he was really whistling, but Penelope started to give him looks.

After three days of weeping, Asa crawled into Iple's igloo while Iple was sleeping and put a hole in Iple's throat with a penknife.

Thirteen. Life on Other Planets

There's a way by which things get unsorted. A crucial button takes a gyre-dive down the sink's drain. A language vanishes, turns to babble.

Iple feels better. He doesn't miss his favorite shoes. In the evenings he uses his brain like a crystal ball to watch over the living world. He enjoys now understanding languages, the Bantu languages, the Mandarin dialects, the dialects of the owl, the dialects of water. There's a brook Iple watches over, that tells all at once the many interlocking stories of its polliwogs.

There's a boy who looks like Iple did, who takes naps by the brook in the afternoon. He wakes up from these naps feeling right and calm, then goes back into the world to get unsorted.

When someone is taking a trip, one way to wish that person off is to say, "*in bocca al lupo*," which means, "travel in the mouth of the wolf." If the wolf's mouth will have you, it is the safest place to be. Just the world alone is so big that it's hard not to vaporize. But when traveling, there is also the giant emptiness between one place and the other to consider.

Fourteen. Iple and Benjamin

Before Asa opened a hole in Iple's throat in Iple's sleep, Benjamin went with Iple to where Iple had found the giant creature frozen in the ice. Benjamin was wearing snowshoes his father had given to him seventy-two years ago on Benjamin's seventeenth birthday. Benjamin's birthday was the fourth of February. On Benjamin's seventeenth birthday, he walked with his father through the snow drifts in his new snowshoes, and the father gave Benjamin some of his brandy to drink, and the snow came down in big compound flakes, slowly enough to study it as it fell, and Benjamin could not tell if his cheeks were very cold or very hot.

Now Benjamin carried an orange flag and a stainless steel hammer for tenderizing meat. The hood on his anorak zipped up to keep almost his whole face covered. His eyes stung and watered, but his cheeks stayed warm. Benjamin could hear a deep, hovering whistle all around him. He could see the horizon resonating to it. To ignore it he talked to Iple.

"I have never in all my days seen a sky as blank as the Antarctic sky. It's gone from the mind the instant one looks away from it. It's as forgettable as if it were nothing. Even at night, with the stars, if I look away and try to remember them, I remember different stars and not the ones I was looking at. You seem to like it well enough. Penelope tells me it's not so awful as I say it is.

"I don't know how much longer I am for this world, Iple." Benjamin took long pauses between each sentence to muster his breath, and it was a surprise to him when a sentence seemed to have come after the one before it.

"Iple, I have seen the way you look at Penelope. When she was five I learned the piano so I could teach it to her, you

know. You must start early with these things. Music, languages, fine motor skills, reasoning powers. You must begin to establish the neural networks while the mind is still sufficiently adaptive. Her insights are now well beyond my own. She has grown into quite a beautiful young lady. I bought her flügelhorn, you know. When she was fourteen. I've seen the way you look at her, Iple. Everyone looks at her unusually, but you especially, because you don't notice yourself . . ."

Benjamin startled a little when Iple tugged at Benjamin's anorak sleeve and pointed into the clear ice.

"Good Christ, Iple, you've found a god-damned dinosaur."

Fifteen. Why Penelope Was a Microbiologist

When she was first just a little girl, Penelope liked chess. Then she liked other games, checkers and Parcheesi and Monopoly and Go and go fish and blackjack. She liked rules and made up rules and learned that some rules work better than others for making good games. She liked systems and she liked pure mathematics and the thought of big and little spheres gliding systematically through the universe. She liked to imagine the planets and quasars and pulsars and black holes as noble geniuses, who understood the rules of mathematics perfectly and obeyed because they were good sports. When that idea seemed too funny, she tried playing new games without making up the rules first, and tried to catch herself in the middle of the rules.

When Penelope learned to read, she liked to read detective stories. In detective stories the rules weren't mathematical enough to predict. Then she learned to predict the detective stories, and then she started to see all the rules. Then she read everything, and everything became a detective story. She just needed little clues for what might come next, and she got good at guessing right. Sometimes she was still surprised, and she liked to be surprised immensely.

Penelope started to wonder why she liked to be surprised so much. And so she became a detective looking for clues about where her brain came from, and so she looked at littler and littler things for answers, to find out where a thing stopped being just organized atoms and when it started being a thing capable of learning rules and being surprised, and then she tried to find a sign of pleasure at the surprise. Sometimes it seemed obvious to her that she would find out that even atoms get surprised and like it and that she should know that was the answer and that if

she was reading a book about herself she would think that she herself was a too-slow detective and too careful not to get the wrong answer, maybe because she was too emotionally attached to the parties involved. That was something that sometimes happened to detectives.

Benjamin also wanted to know where his brain came from, but people always totally astonished him, and he could never guess at their rules and so he was a behaviorist psychologist. It amused him and also made him sad, but he was consoled by having taught Penelope how to play chess at such an early age, and by giving her detective books.

Sixteen. Zebedee's Day in Paris

Before he drove into the gas station, Zebedee was in Paris. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his camel-colored coat on the street corner. There was one cloud in the sky, and Zebedee watched a small hole open up in the cloud, and then he watched all the cloud's insides leak out through the hole.

Zebedee went to the goldbeater's shop, which smelled like lamb because the goldbeater ate a sandwich of lamb every day for lunch. A thief came into the goldbeater's shop once to steal the goldbeater's gold and the goldbeater took off one of the thief's ears. The goldbeater cleaned as much of the mess of blood as he could out of his shirtsleeves and out of his rug, and what he could not clean of the mess stayed there, and one day out of ten the goldbeater wore his shirt with bloodstains on the sleeves, and not even fools tried to steal from the goldbeater, and the goldbeater was a jovial, happy goldbeater full of lamb.

The goldbeater liked everyone, but especially Zebedee, because Zebedee has come in with gold that he had won gambling and said, "This gold is for you, and this other gold will you please hold onto, and sometimes I will come in needing a sheet of gold leaf," and Zebedee came in once or sometimes twice a year and they smiled to each other and said polite happy things to each other and the goldbeater gave Zebedee a sheet of gold leaf. And this time when Zebedee came into the goldbeater's shop Zebedee said how cloudlife will never cease to astonish him, and the goldbeater said how there was something that might interest Zebedee, that a man the goldbeater knew hoped to sell something Zebedee might like, and would Zebedee like to speak with the man, and Zebedee said certainly.

The man said, "I have a little xebec I like to take out in the spring and summer months."

“That’s very nice,” said Zebedee.

“I think so,” the man said back, “but it has a figurehead, it’s beautiful, somehow it doesn’t wear in the water, I’ve always loved it, but now, I can’t explain why, I feel the need to be rid of it, and when I mentioned it to the goldbeater, he thought of you immediately.”

“Well, let’s see it,” said Zebedee. He looked up and saw that the insides of the cloud had spilled out so much that they were almost just more sky.

They went to the boat and Zebedee looked at the figurehead and it made his throat and nose constrict and he wept because he had expected to weep because he had expected the figurehead would be of a lady and look like Charlotte exactly as he remembered her, but it did not look like Charlotte but might have been her, or the figurehead might have been looking through this world and right at Charlotte. It was not the effect he was expecting, but it was a violent superstitious effect that made Zebedee weep. He bought the figurehead, and because he did not own much of anything else he had no address where he kept his things, and so he bought an address where he could keep the figurehead, and it stayed there alone in his house and he went to visit it at least once a month forever after that.

Seventeen. How They Got the Dinosaur Out of Antarctica

Benjamin used the meat-tenderizing mallet to hammer the orange flag into the ice where the dinosaur had been frozen into it. He looked at it for a long time. He looked at it and then looked away and then looked back. He looked away for a long time at a time, trying to imagine the ways his mind might have fooled him, and then looked back to see if his mind had fooled him one of those ways. He held his eyes closed until they didn't sting or water and looked back to see if this time it wasn't a dinosaur.

When Penelope was a girl she liked Benjamin to take her to the museum of natural history. Penelope liked the archaeologists because they were like detectives who weren't even sure what was the crime they were investigating, but still they were so careful, it was an implicit faith in criminality, in some high, hidden crime. So Benjamin saw the reconstructed dinosaur skeletons. He studied them lit by skylights from a bench while Penelope read each explanatory placard methodically and the museum of natural history made its murmur. He saw the plastic casts of the speculatively refleshed dinosaurs in their giant tropical diorama, and there was no mistaking this thing in the ice, it was a dinosaur. The ice was so smooth and clear it was like there was no ice. The eyes told the body it was floating to stand on it. Benjamin remembered buying his wife for their third anniversary a lily somehow at the center of a globe of glass, and he felt like a toy, or a pencil, something small and misplaced and only partially recollected.

Benjamin and Iple went back to the village of igloos and Benjamin said, "The boy found a god-damned dinosaur in the ice." The scientists talked about it and asked Benjamin if he was sure and he said Jesus yes he was goddamned sure.

They all went to bed and the next day had breakfast and packed lunches of tuna fish sandwiches and got bundled up and went out to where Benjamin had hammered the orange flag into the ice and they all looked at the dinosaur and looked at each other and at the dinosaur.

“It’s a brontosaurus,” said Penelope. “What a long tail.”

Benjamin looked at the sky for an idea for ten minutes. “God damn this Antarctic sky,” he said. The scientists stood around and ate their tuna fish sandwiches.

When they got back to the village of igloos Asa was unconscious in the common igloo with blood on his hands and arms and face, and Roy the artificial intelligence man found Iple in his bed.

Roy radioed to the government about Iple’s murder and about the dinosaur, and all the scientists went home except for Benjamin, because Benjamin’s brother was an ex-president. They built a brontosaurus laboratory at the edge of Patagonia and brought special helicopters to carry the brontosaurus in a big ice cube they cut and pulled right out of the continent. There were calculations. There were physicists, archaeologists, weathermen, public works administrators, helicopter repairmen, an ex-president and Eagle Scout, and a behaviorist psychologist.

Benjamin kept a radio in his igloo to talk to Penelope who was waiting in Argentina. “Tomorrow we’re going to lift that thing right out of the continent. You should see all the ridiculous mechanisms they’ve got out here. It looks like we’re getting ready to raise a circus tent over the whole Earth.”

Eighteen. Penelope in Argentina

Penelope sat in a lawn chair and drank an iced tea with a thin wedge of lemon. The clouds arranged themselves into stacks and then leaned in a little toward Penelope. The ice chimed in her glass when she considered it, and the wind rustled the grass against itself. Penelope thought about microorganisms, about the minuscule things in the grass and the wind and the ice and the glass letting out many chiming roars, or atoms doing it, the atoms of the grass and the ice and the microorganisms, surprised again that they are atoms, chiming out, the electrons, almost weightless, vague and verging on nothingness, the very first hint of being, singing to themselves all alike, and singing too up and around and through her nerves, she the detective, if it was the electrons who did it, if they are willful, they will have a motive, and what is their motive.

The weather was so exactly fine it wasn't even weather. A young, bright, beautiful bird fell plum out of the sky and landed in Penelope's tea.

Fifty-five. Harry & Valentina

Valentina's face is plain and hard. She has lips like chalk. Her eyes are nearly impossible to remember. Harry wakes up and tries to remember from his dream the look of her eyes, or even the color. He can't do it. Her irises are gray. Her pupils, too, are gray, not black. An intermediate, shadowy gray. They slip through the memory like eels.

Harry is a useless man now when he's awake. He eats only sardine sandwiches with ketchup, and watches historical documentaries on the television. He lives for his dreams, which are devoted to Valentina. He begs her to call him Harry, and she flushes and demurs. She cannot possibly call him Harry. He begs her again. He offers her his golden molar as a token of his devotion, which she cannot accept. He removes a bit of grenade, buried deep in his shoulder. Against his better judgment he offers her his eyes, to wear like jewelry. Valentina shudders. He is irrecoverably fictional to her, even in his own dreams, where she herself is part fiction.

She's fleeing him now, coasting into space in her Soviet spacesuit, under which she wears a modest white blouse and a modest olive skirt, her hair in a bun. Harry must have her intimacy, which he estimates is roughly more interminable than space itself. He makes chase, wearing not even a spacesuit, only his pajamas and slippers. He will do everything in his power not to wake up from this dream. His slippers are slowing him down, and he kicks them off to dance with each other, barely gravitated, lost in the mildest weightfulness in the universe.

Harry has brought a great shimmering length of pink ribbon with him, and he strings it up across the cosmos through his pursuit of Valentina, either to decorate space for her or to catch her in it, he doesn't know which. He holds his breath. It's

easy. His breath doesn't even want to get out. Valentina is a distant speck among the stars. Maybe she's decided to hide out behind one. Harry will not lose her tracks. He readies his mind for her intelligence, whatever unknowable intelligence, to occupy him.

And he kicks his legs dauntlessly to propel himself onward, as though he were roller-skating. Watching it, I continue to harbor a slight suspicion that someone might yet fall permanently in love.

Fifty-six. Epilogue

First, there's Gottlieb. Gottlieb for whom Zebedee bought a Go set. The Go set had some of Zebedee's luck leaked into it, and Gottlieb became a master. The board seduced him and he in his turn seduced the pieces. He could seduce his opponents' pieces into admitting their deep secret faults. He played only against the great masters, who were helpless against him. Then he played only against himself, in matches too sophisticated for anyone else to recognize their brilliance. Gottlieb neglected his mother and his wife until they disappeared from him forever. Meanwhile he broke his own heart, over and over, with inexpressible elegance, on his Go board.

His wife disguised herself as a man and lived among pirates as a pirate. She remained fair-faced. Even for a woman she had a fair face. But she was agile and merciless. Her reputation was for cutting off earlobes and swallowing them. The gesture was so inexplicable that it inevitably struck terror. Other pirates feared her violently, and this, they thought, explained their strong sexual urges for her. She died by snakebite. Gottlieb's mother, though, died quietly of a stroke behind the counter of her pizzeria.

Then there is Asa. During his trial for murdering Iple, he set his own head on fire.

There is the goldbeater. The goldbeater had perpetually cold hands and feet. They were cold as streamwater. Frauds shivered when they met the goldbeater. He may reappear. We might look for him in any of a million places.

There are disappearances. The shortstop has disappeared, and Isabella. And Harry's son, Louis. What great thing might Louis do? I have a feeling some terrific catastrophe is in store. Some world-stopping turn of events. Perhaps my twenty-eight

brothers will wake up and find their purpose. They were never limp idiots after all, they were simply waiting for their moment. They will set sail for your planet. They have awful, miraculous technology, a fluency with those exotic things of the universe about which you can only speculate like a child. In the moment of catastrophe, it will be only those who seem to have disappeared from the Earth who might save it. The critical moment of heroism for the painfully forgotten or misplaced souls.

No, my brothers are lobotomous. They will not set sail for your planet. I will simply go on watching it, wondering after Louis, who seems out of range of even my telescope, perpetually missing.

There is the figurehead, catching dust and light in Zebedee's empty house, filling up with souls, like it's getting ready for something. There is an undeniable getting ready for something. Perhaps Louis will roam and stumble into Zebedee's old house and crack the figurehead open like a piñata, for a great unhousing of souls, an unburdening of that unlocatable, irresistible imbalance. Or he may crack it open to no effect whatsoever.

Penelope has given up her detective persona.

Iple has very little to do. He whistles, kicks his heels once in a while so as not to weep depravedly, of which he has already done considerably more than his share.



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