

OFFICER EXCHANGE PROGRAM MUSICAL
OR
LIVING IN THE PAST
OR
ART OF THE 22nd CENTURY

By James Bradley

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. In order for the reader to obtain the fullest comprehension of the subject matter, characters and events depicted herein, he or she is advised to first view the made-for-television movie *High School Musical* (Disney Channel, original air date 20 January 2006), as well as the television series *Star Trek: the Next Generation* (Paramount Television) episodes “A Matter of Honor” (Season 2, episode 8, 4 February 1989) and “Lower Decks” (Season 7, episode 15, 5 February 1994).

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I.

THE LAMENTATIONS OF TROY

“...the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle—and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary—What?

And this wouldn't be—*circulus vitiosus deus*?”

-Friedrich Nietzsche

I have forgiven you, but only in my heart, and only in my mind. There is another place, a vastly more important but even more ill-defined one, in which it is possible to place forgiveness, in which to forget about it and store it there forever. I'm sitting here today, in the Past, looking out the storage bay windows, through my reflection in the glass, sipping green tea and looking at a green world. The stars that frame the massive sphere like foam frames a wave are twinkling,

twinkling, *twinkling*. There is something about the way the glass refracts light, something related to its enhanced durability in the face of the constant tugging of the vacuum of space, that lets you control the twinkling by shifting the position of your gaze. It's kind of like looking through the surface of a soap bubble, or like looking through 4-D glasses.

Earth, I think of you, and wonder what it is exactly that you have done to earn my forgiveness.

I look at my hands, the bottom of my boots, the tip of my paintbrush: *dirt*. It cakes and coagulates, it breaks into balls as it dries and leaves itself behind as I get up to walk across the room.

It comes from *you*, O Earth, you who spin imperfectly in my memory like a skipping DVD, always getting stuck at the same parts. It comes from you as surely as history is borne of human heartache and disappointment, as surely as memory drips from a crack in the surface of the desire to forget, as surely as night destroys the work of day.

I used to paint you. That is to say, I used to make paintings *of* you, in dripping pigment on canvas. *Landscapes*, they call them in this day and age, after yet another revolution of the people, of the Video-Proletariat (or VidPro) Class, as they're calling themselves now, in retrospect. The people in the Past, for the Past, *of the Past*.

An entire planet is a landscape in the age of space travel.

You're terrible, you're ugly. I love you. I can't stop wanting to own you by constantly recreating your image.

The world before me is slightly too distant to make out the contours of land masses beneath the cloud cover, and it appears to be similar to you in many ways, but I know it is not you. Even if I wasn't on the other edge of the galaxy, as I find myself today, that is a mistake I would never make.

I haven't painted you in two years. Not since I signed up for this ridiculous experiment, for this exercise in intergalactic tolerance. I'll admit, though, if you twist my arm, that I have learned much, and that the bartering of dirt and daydreams for all I have seen and heard in the interim has proven to be not completely ill advised.

II.

ON THE KARAOKE PLANET

“I have no troubles, I have money like a capitalist, no boss,
no wife, no children; I exist, that's all. And that trouble is so
vague, so metaphysical that I am ashamed of it.”

-Jean-Paul Sartre

At the beginning the program was the only thing any of us ever talked about. Every self-respecting ensign worth their weight in paint thinner had spent months scrambling to polish and perfect his, her or its application. So much ambition among the senior space cadets and newly commissioned officers galaxywide, all channeled towards the same endeavor. It was like a stampede. I mean, don't get me wrong. I knew it was important. It would look good on our résumés. *The Officer Exchange Program*. An unprecedented gesture of cooperation between all known inhabited worlds. The very heart of Humanoidkind would look down upon us favorably. This is what we wanted; recognition from the arteries of a radiant heart that has, despite the chatter and activity to the contrary, certainly grown weary of looking at itself in the mirror by now, but that, despite this, can't seem to shake its “indomitable” will to beat and

beat and beat.

I remember the first time I met Gabriella, on the Karaoke Planet. We had each been chosen to represent our respective planet's space fleets at a big diplomatic karaoke dance-off, her by virtue of assuming a fairly high-profile role in the revolution of '68 (and being one of the only off-worlders to lay claim to such a distinction), all that business with her supposed "heroic calculations" at the orbital barricades, and everything, me for being the guy who almost single-handedly resurrected Earth's centuries-old painting tradition by founding the *School of Post-Apocalyptic Painterly Abstraction*. We were both kind of like big shots at the time, still are, I suppose, so naturally we were cajoled into singing a number together, something for the gossip column of the morning edition of *People of the Stars*. "The Start of Something Neutral" was what they chose for us, an old mid-21st century smash hit by that Franco-Japanese pop phenom whose name escapes me at the moment. Before that night I'd always hated that song, now I'll consider myself lucky if it *ever* stops running through my head. It's like the ocean water that presumably fell off the side of the planet, back when they thought the Earth was flat. It just goes on forever, into the blackness.

When we started singing that trifling, paltry pop standard we were strangers, but little by little, as the notes piled up, one by one, and as our vocal chords loosened and we grew more accustomed to each others presence, our bodies all squished together on that tiny neon-laced stage, I think we both began to realize the same thing, and, even more remarkably, we realized it in the same instant, the same high-pitched, drawn out note: *we both really like to sing*. As we

looked into each other's eyes, hers peeking out through the windows of her thick-framed reading glasses, mine unmediated and increasingly confident as we made our way through the peaks and valleys known to the pop music world as "verse, chorus, verse," the rest of the party, all the delegates and generals and celebutantes, indeed the whole glistening universe, began to melt away.

There was nothing but a huge absence, an absence made all the more concrete by the overpowering *somethingness* of Gabriella and me, together in front of an audience that, through their own stupidity and failure to recognize true luminous transcendence when it was right there in front of them (*singing a duet*, no less), couldn't have been less interested.

Later we snuck away and were alone just long enough to chat about eternity, and to exchange web catalogue numbers under the twin moons. She looked so beautiful in that silver-pink light, like a marble statue glowing with its own internal heat source, like a nightlight cover.

III.

THE CREATION MYTH MYTH TRILOGY

“The noiseless din that we have long known in dreams,
booms at us in waking hours from newspaper headlines.”

-Theodor Adorno

I didn't think I'd ever see her again after that night. It was just one of those things, enchanting and mysterious as is *anything*, really, given the proper circumstances, and which it is Fate's fancy to occasionally plop down at your feet. As a means of forgetting I plunged headfirst back into painting. I painted to follow my life and my desire down a hole, *and to trap it*. Besides, I had only another month or so of summer vacation left before I began the Officer Exchange Program aboard the Starship Icarus. I knew I would be accepted, it was just a matter of actually going through with it. I packed all my art supplies but once on board I could hardly get myself to look at them. At one point I even stashed them in a trunk I had the Virtual Matter Browser create, then I tucked the trunk away in an obscure corner of my personal hard drive, so that it technically no longer even resided on this plane of existence. I don't pretend to completely understand the technology, but let's just say that it was a hiding spot worthy of intergalactic

smugglers.

Anyway, one of the other artists on board the Icarus was named Chad, and we quickly became close, exchanging stories about our respective home worlds' unique customs and claims to fame and whatnot. I can picture his curly brown locks bouncing around above his head like fake plants in an aquarium as he told me the story of his planets vainglory and subsequent ruin, the story he had been tiptoeing around for weeks:

“It was because of a *movie*,” he said definitively, as if that would explain everything. It was the first time I had asked him about it openly, after we'd each had a couple glasses of asteroid-extract ale in the cafeteria, amidst countless other officers and crew people from as many worlds as there are grains of sand at the beach. Well maybe not that many. We were seated at a small table near the back.

“Huh? What's *that* supposed to mean?” I shoved a quizzical look right smack down his retinas.

“Well, okay, not *a* movie, rather, a *series* of movies...*a trilogy*.”

“Oh...NOW it makes *sense*!”

“I'm serious, man! Don't make light of this! To my people this is still *serious business*! I shouldn't even be talking about it *at all* with an *off-worlder*...”

“Okay, okay...um, *sorry*. It's just that I've heard so many rumors, and some of them just seems so...so...*outlandish*!”

“Well I guess it *IS kinda* farfetched, but no more so than the shit that went down on *your* world recently, right??”

“I guess. But enough about *Earth*. I need to talk about that ball of dirt right

now like I need an extra nose on my *forehead*.” I pointed to make it clear where exactly I meant, whatever the hell I meant by that.

“That’s a weird thing to say. An Earth expression?”

“Not exactly...” I faltered, “Ummm...what’d I just say? NO TALKING ABOUT EARTH! Uh...*Go on...*”

“All right, I’m gonna tell you, but only because I like your paintings...”

“I don’t paint anymore...”

“*Whatever!* Then I’m gonna tell you just ‘cause I fuckin’ *feel like it!*” A look of sassy resolve spread across his face from ear to ear, from brow to chin.

“Ever hear of the movie *The Glass Lake of Delirium*?”

“Ummm...”

“I’m not surprised if you haven’t. There’s nothing but philistines on this ship! Philistines and *counterrevolutionaries*...hahhahe...”

The last was to get a reaction out of me, I guess. To Earthers, *counter-revolutionary* is just about the lowest blow in the book these days. Like the image of a lightning bolt on the surface of a reflecting pool, I remained silent.

“Anywho, *The Glass Lake of Delirium* is kinda like a retelling of the founding of our once-great planetary empire, like an ‘epic tale,’ or whatever, with all the characters and the *grand sweep* of philharmonic string sections and all that, but it’s also a parable and kinda-sorta completely fictional, like, *made up*, I mean, but on another level, a more *poetic* level...it’s *completely true*. It’s *complicated*, you know what I mean?”

“Uhh...sure...”

“*It’s a great movie!* And so was the sequel, *Smoke Radiates Knowingly From the Watchtower*. I mean, these movies broke all kinds of Box Office records...they were like a phenomenon in our society, across our entire *world*. They overcame every social division you could come up with. *Everyone loved ‘em. Everyone*. There was, like, no precedent. So by the time the third and final installment was being announced our society was in the midst of a *complete renewal*. Leaders *resigned*, wars were halted mid-blitz, and all because of the rallying power of *cinema!*”

At this point I just *had* to interrupt. It wasn’t easy, he had gained so much momentum I doubted he could have stopped his monologue if he’d wanted to. Luckily he remembered to breathe after what must have been a particularly exhausting phrase (“the rallying power of cinema”) long enough for me to wedge a sentence in edgewise: “You sound like a PR guy for the studio that releases these movies, and,” I added, “one prone to the most shamelessly self-serving *aggrandizement* at that!”

He was still so caught up in his cinematic utopia that he wasn’t deterred one bit. “You weren’t *there*. You don’t *know*. Between the release of the second and third movies, you could walk down the streets and everyone seemed to *know* everyone else. Everyone seemed so *wise*. With these movies we had finally hit on something universal, something primordial, yet something so *civilized* that for the first time civilization actually made sense...”

“Do you know if these movies are on *Netflix*...?”

“*They were supposed to save us...*” He slumped in his seat and let out a

long sigh, as the memories slid down his body like rainwater. His lower lip always juts out just a bit too far, and his eyes are black and too close together. His face is like the mask of a creature of limited means in deep contemplation, but despite these things he still manages to be rather handsome. “I was so excited when I first read the title of the third movie on the internet...*Cloud Fire*...it seemed so mysterious, so foreboding. It gave me goose bumps. I stood in line for a month to make sure I got tickets for the 12:01 showing on opening night...*a month*...I camped out, lived off of savings, checked all the websites constantly for any tiny little clues about the plot—there were none, amazingly. Everyone’s lips were sealed. In the Industry, to talk would have been *career suicide*. So finally opening night rolled around. I took my seat in the sold-out theater, which seated like 5000 people, clutched my popcorn like a crucifix, held my breath as the curtain rose...”

“*And...was it the greatest thing ever...?*”

“No. It wasn’t. *It was...off...somehow*. All the elements were in place, but it just *wasn’t very good*. My heart sank as I looked around the darkened theater and saw the same look on everyone’s face. It wasn’t just me. The most anticipated movie of the 22nd century, hell, *of all time*...was *monumentally mediocre*.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“What do you *mean* ‘what do I mean?’ *I MEAN WHAT I MEAN!* It was *okay*...good but not *great*...nothing special...*three stars out of five*...”

He was shifting around in his seat nervously, rolling his glass around between his palms. “And then things got *bad*.” Then suddenly he threw the whole

thing back in one solid motion, gulping the frothy liquid until there was nothing left but a thin trickle of suds running down the inside. He returned the empty glass to the table, letting it slide out of his fingers at the last second so that it teetered around the circumference of its base for a few seconds before finally coming to rest.

“Careful man! You’re gonna short-circuit the microchip in your brain!” I laughed.

“It’s insured.”

“So go on...*what’d the critics think...?*”

“They *hated* it. The general public was definitely disappointed, but the critics *despised* it. So anyway, there was nothing left but for life to go on like before, only that didn’t really happen. As much as the first two movies had imbued the general social atmosphere with an air of joy and optimism, this one filled people with acute nausea and resignation. Things *were* the same, on the surface. At least at first. People went to their jobs. They still went to the movies. They still...I dunno...*ate dinner...*but everyone was just so...*depressed... deflated*. No one said so, but everyone knew the cause. Even our economy became depressed. That was when our government, ever vigilant, its finger on the pulse of the people, sensed what was up, and with the usual bureaucratic swiftness that think tanks, focus groups, and Ministries of Information facilitate, came up with a solution: *they were going to RE-FILM THE MOVIE!*”

“*Re-film it? You mean like a remake?*” Just then a stringy young cadet, with two heads at the end of long necks and a video camera in hand for each one,

happened to pass by our table. He said something in a language that sounded like it didn't even require *air* to be spoken, then let out a slightly more universal sound: a loud scoff. I guess he didn't like remakes.

“*Video artist from a distant world*,” Chad clarified, kind of dreamily, then snapped out of it and continued his tale: “But anyway, yeah, kinda like a remake. Not a *typical* remake, but a remake.”

“What was so *atypical* about it?”

“Well for one,” he leaned in closer, “they got the green light and began pre-production only about a year after the first one flopped. There was a sense of urgency about the whole thing that had nothing to do with those nostalgic *trips down memory lane* that your Hollywood loves oh so much.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“And secondly, this movie was funded by the government, *the Department of Defense*, to be exact, which meant that it was going to have a *huge* budget. The biggest ever. In the end I think they said it accounted for like eleven percent of the total economy of our planet that year...”

“Wait a minute. You're talking about the *military*. Why would the *military* get involved in a project like that?” My attention was his. My detachment had disappeared with the ale, glug glug glug, down into some dark place I knew not how to access, even if it was my exact center. I thought about ordering another glass, but I figured it could wait until I'd gotten the whole story.

“*They were the only ones who could do it*. It sends chills down my spine to think of it now...” A casual glance told me he wasn't lying. “We were fools. We

all wanted this movie so badly, we...well...we didn't see it coming. We wanted a *masterpiece*. We wanted to be the generation remembered for these things. These acts of greatness. These blockbusters.”

“I get the feeling that you *will* be remembered all right,” I said without a hint of sarcasm.

“Yeah. As monsters. Listen, maybe I should call it a night...I've got 4-D Painting Seminar in the morning...”

Chad started fumbling through pockets, tugging at his uniform, looking like an all-around restless ensign. Over his left shoulder, and beyond the window, I saw a tiny metal object drifting slowly through the blackness; a space probe in the distance. It looked ancient, like some forgotten remnant of the twentieth century's early space exploration endeavors. Of course, to say the thing was from Earth is pure speculation, but it *could have been*. Drifting all this time, the years a pack of hounds exceptionally unkind. I focused my attention back to the other end of the table and said calmly:

“Tell me what the military did with this movie.”

“Well...okay.” He paused. “You might as well just know. There was a scene in *Cloud Fire* that everyone agreed had to be simply phenomenal. It's a key scene in which the flagship of the planets fleet, a massive vessel ten miles long, normally meant only for space travel, is forced to enter the planets atmosphere to fight a decisive battle against the invading alien armada.”

“But a ship that size...there are *huge* risks involved if someone ever wanted to dock it planetside. The atmospheric disturbances caused by

displacement alone could...”

“Yeah. Weather disruptions and all that. There were a million factors the scientists, generals and strategists were supposed to take into account. But the thing was, it *wasn't impossible*. Just extremely difficult. In the first version of the film, the scene was done with CGI and other special effects imported from Industrial Light & Magic Planet. But it just didn't work. As is sometimes the case with computer effects, *it just looked fake*.” He looked at me. “The director was a general.”

“Huh? A general *what?* A general bore? A general *pain in the neck?*”

“A *GENERAL*. A career military man. He had seen battles firsthand and he knew what he wanted. In the *story* what happened was the flagship, upon entering the atmosphere, used its fuel reserves to set off a controlled burst, igniting the CO₂ in the air, or something, and acting, basically, as a non-localized floating napalm against the aliens, our people looking on from the surface, from the cities and the fields, as the armada was miraculously wiped out in one fell swoop, with all the grace and economy of a perfectly crafted poem.”

“A poem,” I said as if this meant something, then, my mind back on the topic, added, “Napalm?”

“Yeah you know, like flammable liquid bombs, only in this case the liquid was the rainwater in the clouds in the sky.”

“Turning clouds into weapons. *Lightness into weight*. Geez Louis.”

“Yeah. Personally I prefer *this* liquid,” Chad said, motioning with his chin to the empty glass at his elbow. “It turns weight into lightness.”

I laughed weakly through my nostrils. “Well that explains the title of the movie, anyway...”

“*Cloud Fire*,” he intoned ominously. “The crowning glory of our great and just war against merciless aggressors from the stars, my friend. The *coup de grace*. The moviemakers thought they had a surefire plan to guarantee a *hit*: they decided not to simply *simulate* the event. The logic was that these things are always better in real life, so they decided to *recreate* it.”

“*What?* They would attempt such a high-risk maneuver, endangering the lives of millions...*just to get the footage they wanted? Were they insane?*”

“You have to understand, it was those same millions who *desperately wanted it to happen*. They needed it. They needed *something*.”

“And what did they get?”

“The calculations had to be perfect...”

“*What did they get??*”

“What they...what we...deserved.”

“They miscalculated, didn't they?”

“I was *THERE*, man. I was one of the lucky ones. The sun, which had up to that point been eclipsed by the flagship...the sun appeared to swell and envelope the entire sky, slowly at first, then like a flash. Everything was warm, then hot, then...colors, sounds, motion, it was all the same. Every color existed at once, every lie we ever told ourselves came true, a deafening roar of colors and aborted possibilities. It was beautiful, watching our entire worldview catch fire, then disappear as if doused in bleach.”

“And your planet...?”

“Fried to a crisp. About ninety percent of us didn't survive. I lost *everyone*...my parents...my girlfriend...That was five years ago. We found ourselves with no movie and no world, and those of us that are left wander the galaxy like orphans, each searching out our destiny in his or her own way. Me, well...*here I am*, taking part in this Officer Exchange Program, light years away from the home that no longer exists.”

And it was all there. Everything he was describing to me was there, in his eyes. It was a side of him I'd never seen before. Hell, it was an aspect of humanoid consciousness I never imagined, if only for never having had occasion to do so. Thoughts tumbled through my mind, things I should say, and things I should *never* say. And it was in the midst of all this awkwardness between friends that I was struck with what surely must have been a vision. Even as I was still struggling to make sense of everything Chad had just told me, I happened to look over to the far end of the cafeteria to see the automatic double doors slide open silently, and in walked Gabriella, the math nerd of my dreams herself. Here. On the Icarus.

“Uhhh...listen Chad, I'm really sorry to hear about the tragic destruction of your way of life...but I gotta run!” And before he could raise even an eyebrow in protest, I was off.

IV.

THE ETERNAL MEMORIAL

“We were born never to grow old, never to die. All we can hope for, however, is an awareness of having come too soon. And a healthy contempt for the future can at least ensure us a rich portion of life.”

“With the rate at which economic 'imperatives' are buying up feelings, desires and needs, and falsifying them, people will soon be left with nothing but the memory of having once been alive. Living in the past: the memories of days gone by will be our Consolation for living on.”

-Raoul Vaneigem

“*I'm thinking about '68.*”

“No you're not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No you're *not.*”

“Yes, I *am.*”

“Well *stop it*,” I demanded as I rolled over to face Gabriella, the tangle of her bed sheets restricting my movements like my inability to come to terms with the Past tends to restrict my words. I took her chocolate milky face in my hands and thought about how much she resembles the Mexican girls back home, knowing that she is *not* Mexican. She's from another planet, how could her physiognomy possibly conform to that of one of Earth's so-called *nationalities*? It's just a coincidence. She looks *coincidentally Mexican*. Still, I always thought Mexican girls were the most beautiful in the world, their intermediately dark skin acting like a compromise for all races. From her high cheekbones and the soft, roundish contours of her face I turned my eyes to the angular, metallic geometry of her living quarters. An ensign's quarters: windowless, spare and unadorned, practically ascetic. There's the bed, the desk, and the closet, and all of our additional needs are met by virtue of the Virtual Matter Browser, so supposedly we want for nothing. The only piece of décor, and even this one indulgence was a potential pushing of the ol' regulatory buttons, was a faded poster on the far wall, a heroic-looking picture of Guy Debord, twentieth century Earth “prophet” (and funny looking little cigar-sucking gremlin), with the phrase *IL EST STRICTEMENT INTERDIT D'INTERDIRE* running along the bottom third. A nagging little pilot fish that clung to the momentum of our relationship, an aspect of Gabriella's personality I was never able to fully accept, was her hopeless *terrabilia*.

She adjusted her pillow and sat up, and as she did so the blankets cascaded from her body, revealing her suspiciously perfect, perky breasts. Whenever she

was naked I had a hard time looking her in the eyes when I talked to her, as these two optical surrogates on her chest always seemed to be staring me down with more ferocity than her eyeballs ever could, so the natural course of action was for me to stare right back. But of course I always blinked first. With her it was all eyes. She was already a “four-eyes,” since she wore glasses, but her tits threatened to strain the expression beyond all comprehension. Six eyes?

“You can't keep pretending like you're not an Earther,” her voice danced on the air from somewhere above her clavicles.

“Hello! I'm up here!” she said as she grabbed my chin, forcing my gaze upward. “Gawd, I swear! I lose my virginity to an Earth boy and look what I find out about your kind! It's the sort of thing you don't learn on Myspace! The kind of thing there's no readily available equations for! There can be no hope for equations *when every number is a variable!*”

“Sorry! It's not like I'm not *trying*,” I pleaded. “It's just that you have the most perfect tits I've ever *seen*. It doesn't even seem *possible*. I'll admit it...I'm positively *mesmerized*.”

She looked liked she was coming to some sort of decision in her head. “All *right*. I'll make a deal with you. You want me to reveal the *secret* of my immaculate breasts?”

This time I did manage to look her squarely in her shiny baby browns and nod affirmatively.

“Okay. I'll tell you. But you have to do one thing for me. Just *talk to me about the revolution of 2168*, so I can try to understand these hang-ups you refuse

to let go of, and so I can try to *help you*.”

“What? That's not *fair!*” I furled my brow as I looked toward the poster of Debord with annoyance. His thin, round glasses contrasted sharply with Gabriella's thick, heavy ones, but one thing was certain: together they formed a regular *society of the bespectacled*.

“That's my condition,” she said, covering herself back up again to the cleavage.

I'm usually not such a pushover, but she just seemed to have some sort of power over me none of the other girls from the myriad worlds could match. She was hopelessly romantic. She was kind of uptight. But somehow all this added up to a kind of balance, a gestalt I couldn't pick apart. She was in possession of a perfection I couldn't account for. It was like she wasn't real at all. It was like I had somehow created her out of my subconscious mind. In other words I was all hers.

“... ..*Fine*... ..”

Practically before the syllable was out of my mouth she had already pounced on the new set of circumstances. “*Really? Great!*” She then flung the sheets halfway across the room in one swift motion, like a magician removing his velvet cape and having it instantaneously transform into a flock of doves. “Hee hee hee!” She was all aflutter now. “No going back on your word! *Promise?*”

“Alright, already! I promise! *Now out with it!*”

“Okay...” She said as she suddenly grabbed my wrist and yanked me toward her until my face was right-smack between the two mammary glands that had become the source of so much controversy. “You see that?”

“See what?”

“Oh...maybe you're *too* close...back up a little...”

Which I did, but I still would not have spotted the object in question had it not caught a stray shaft of light from overhead and became momentarily visible. It was a tiny metal disk, barely perceptible, which adhered to the skin on the middle of her torso just below the ribcage. I examined it for a moment, then just as I was about to ask she said:

“It's nanotechnology.”

“*Nanotechnology*? But what does it *do*?” I scratched my head.

“Well, my love, what you see before you is the galaxy's smallest *Antigravity Field Generator*, lovingly cradling and conforming to the contours of the tender bosom of the girl you're *crazy about*, giving her the support and comfort she so desperately needs as she makes her way through the arduous and treacherous world of metaphysical calculus studies, not to mention drooling, groping suitors. Hee hee hee!” With this she plucked the tiny device from her chest and held it in her palm between us. “Now do what you do best, and look at my boobs.”

I watched as one of her breasts drooped and relaxed, and then the other. Finally I pieced it together:

“*It's an antigravity BRA!*”

“That's right, Einstein. An antigrav bra. Very rare and *very* expensive. I won it in a Mathelete scrimmage sponsored by and hosted on Victoria's Secret Planet when I was thirteen. *First place*. I won out against girls twice my age. It

had something to do with an ad campaign they were launching at the time about brains being sexy.”

“Well they got *that* part right, at least,” I said as I deftly slid my arms around her waist and kissed her on the lips.

“*Sigh*...the field is completely invisible *and* intangible to the touch. The devise itself even has a lo-res cloaking devise built in, making it semi-transparent, except in direct light. So the result is...perfect breasts that boggle the imaginations of even the most creative and artistic of young men.”

“Well I've got to admit I'm impressed. Antigravity technology is no laughing matter. The technology in that little devise must be *so* advanced, I bet if it were applied to the schematics of our own antigrav generator aboard the Icarus, we'd be able to gallivant across the galaxy with twice the energy efficiency.”

“4.75776 times the efficiency, actually,” she corrected, “according to some calculations I worked out last Saturday night when I was bored. The night before I saw you in the cafeteria...”

“And to think, it's all being used to sell a *bra*.”

“Yeah,” she said as she placed the disk back upon her torso, and I gawked as her breasts rose and re-perked to the shape I'd come to know and love, “But what an amazing bra it is.”

And just as I was about to agree with her by way of moving in for the kill, she stuck her opened palm out and halted me mid-lunge.

“*NOT SO FAST, ROMEO!*” She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose with her index finger, then used that same finger to poke me repeatedly in

the chest.

“Hey! Cut it out!”

“I’ve told you my underwear secret, now you’ve got to uphold *your* end of the bargain and tell me all about *Earth’s dirty laundry*.”

“Maybe we should practice our duet for the *Spring Musicale*...Remember our idea about setting that one Sylvia Plath poem to music? *The Moon and the Yew Tree*? Ahem...”

“Maybe...”

“*This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary...*”

“...later, but first...”

“*The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue...*”

“...you’ve got some *questions to answer!*”

“... ..*Okay*. What do you want to know?”

“*The past*. There’s something with you Earth people and the past, some kind of anomalous relationship, that I know is there, but that isn’t in any books or websites. The idea of the past somehow strikes a *different chord* with you than it does with the rest of us...”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I clutched my pillow. “It has to do with the Past. Very perceptive of you.”

“I take my studies *trés* seriously,” she stated proudly, “but I still don’t get it. What does this have to do with the revolution? I mean, I know all about the worldwide economic recession, the boredom, the wars, the colonization of leisure by global corporate interests, the banishment of actual, lived experience, the grey,

empty blandness of your ancient consumption-based lifestyles...the so-called *proletarianization of the masses*...”

“Yeah. The proletarianization of the masses...but that just refers to the process in which a greater and greater number of people live lives that they have less and less control over. To establish that as a fact still doesn't explain *how* they were convinced that they needed to *regain* that control. You seem to understand all our standard reasons for *wanting this thing to happen*, the only thing you're missing is the *kick in the eye* that finally got us off our asses. You described our lives as being *grey*. Yeah, they were. But so is *gunpowder*.”

“And now you're going to tell me about the *spark*,” she said as she leaned in closer, propping herself up with her elbows.

“I guess I am. Before the revolution it was forbidden to talk about outside of Earth, by order of his Imperial Majesty, the late Emperor Obama VII. But now the government is toppled, Obama is dead, Hollywood is ours, and we're left trying to figure out what to do with this information. 'Planetary Security' seems like such an arcane concept now, the product of a paranoid administration obsessed with maintaining the delicate balance of power. The Officer Exchange Program is *proof* of this. The Galaxy is uniting like never before, whether we like it or not.”

“What's the variable, my love?”

“Earth,” I gulped, “has discovered the secret of *time travel*.”

“*Wha-at?*” Gabriella choked on the word as it came out, and she began to cough violently. Her remarkable breasts barely jiggled.

“I swear it's true, but you mustn't tell *anyone*. Obama may be out of the picture, but there are still people back home who...well let's just say corporations and government are not the only sources of *corruption in the universe...*”

She wiped a tear from behind her glasses and asked, “But how? It was said to be impossible...*cough cough*...it was pretty much a consensus in the scientific community...”

“Yeah well the scientific community is *wrong again*. Big surprise. It was almost a decade ago now, back in 2160. During the Super Bowl. Super Bowl CLI, if I remember correctly, but I'm not much of a sports fan. Everyone thought it was just part of the halftime show at first, *but they were wrong*. On televisions all across the world people watched as a strange broadcast interrupted the regularly scheduled programming. On the screen a group of men and women in white lab coats appeared. They greeted their viewers and claimed to be scientists, *scientists from the future*. Sometime late in the 23rd century, to be more precise. And if that weren't enough for us to take in between halves, they claimed to have a very important message for the people of our time. They started talking about the year 2168. 'In 2168 *this*' and 'in 2168 *that*,' they kept saying. From our point of view, at the time, it was kind of hard to follow, but after repeated viewings on YouTube and elsewhere, it started to make sense. They were talking about the perils that awaited us. They spoke of 2168 as a time of upheaval, or rather, as a time in which upheaval would seem *possible*, maybe even *desirable*, but that we must be patient. They wanted us to weather the storm...”

“They were *historical revisionists...*”

“*Literally*. Or at least, that seems to be the case now. It's so goddamn complicated...they were basically trying to talk us out of a decision we hadn't made yet.”

“Counterrevolutionaries. *They were counterrevolutionaries...*”

“...From the future. *Maybe.*”

“But how did you know it wasn't a hoax?”

“They provided, at the end of the broadcast, detailed information about the ten biggest earthquakes that were to occur that year, information about weather patterns, sunspot activity, stuff like that. Impossible to predict information about the natural world. And it all turned out to be one hundred percent accurate. That was a surreal year. Watching, one by one, all of those things come true. It must have been easy for them. They just had to look it up in an almanac. I was just a little kid, but I remember it vividly. Also, supposedly the signal was traced, and it was crawling with quantum fields no one had ever seen before. All of this weird growth and activity where there should have been normal radioactive decay. After extensive examination, it was generally believed that the activity being observed was that of particles moving *backwards through time.*”

“Okay. Okay. Let's say it really *was* from the future. Why didn't people *listen* to them? The broadcast obviously had the *opposite* effect. How could these 'scientists' have been so stupid? Did they...”

“Did they *cause* the very uprising they were trying to prevent? *Incite* the mass of people they wanted to placate? It's impossible to know for sure. Maybe they *knew*. Maybe it was impossible for them *not to know*. It's a loop. *Circulus*

vitiosus deus. The process of working out time travel paradoxes is definitely an art, not a science.”

“*Circulus vitiosus deus?* 'God as a vicious circle,' right? Wait a minute. Are you suggesting they used *reverse psychology* to trick you all into rising up against your masters?”

“I'm saying I don't know. *No one does*. We don't pretend to understand *their* motivations, all we can do is attempt to understand *our own*.”

Gabriella's shoulders slumped and her whole body kind of pouted. “I lived on Earth that whole year. You guys must have all felt *very* clever, with your little secret. I can't believe I was there, *I helped you liberate yourselves from yourselves*, and I knew nothing.”

“Now you know plenty. I thought that night on the Karaoke Planet was it for us, but now here we are. We were reunited through the coincidence of assignment. The odds must have been astronomically *against* it, but it happened. You're a part of my life now, and that's the only reason I'm telling you this. So are you going to sit there and feel *left out*, or are you going to listen?”

She didn't even have to think about it. “I guess the only logical thing to do at this point,” she said as she stroked my cheek, “is to take in as much as I can, even if it *is* from a strange Earth boy who, a part of my life or not, I hardly know. A boy who is certainly too *pretty* to be much in the way of a *reliable source of information*.”

“Umm...I'm not sure if I should be hurt or not.”

“Be hurt. Or not. Just know that I love you. And,” she leaned in and gave

me a big, slow, deliberate kiss, “I want to know more about your Earth conception of The Past.”

I wiped the spit from my lips. “Alright. It springs directly and, some would say, logically, out of the message from the future, and continues right down the well-worn path to revolution. People on my planet call it *the Eternal Memorial...*”

V.

“STICK TO THE STATUS QUO”

“Research makes time march forward, it makes time march
backward, and it also makes time stand still.”

-Greil Marcus

Date: Thu, 27 Oct 2169 03:07:47 [10/27/69 3:07 GST]

From: “Sharpay Evans” <sevans@ssicarus.edu>

To: “Commander Darbus” <cdarbus@ssicarus.edu>

Subject: *Spring Musicale* Callbacks

Dear Commander Darbus,

It is my distressing duty to notify you of certain...how shall I
say...questionable activities currently being conducted by two of the ensigns
recently brought into the trust of the great and mighty Starship Icarus, in direct
violation of the rules and regulations set forth by the Officer Exchange Program
Charter, signed in strict and confident agreement by delegates from each of the
333 participating worlds. The two ensigns in question are Ensign Troy Bolton,

Painting Sector, and Ensign Gabriella Montez, Metaphysical Mathematics Sector.

As the Charter clearly states, and I quote: “Upon arrival on board his, her or its assigned starship, an ensign participating in the Officer Exchange Program is to immediately embark upon an intensive, highly specialized course of study within the stringent boundaries of his, her or its chosen field, the length of this initial course of study being no less than six standard months.”

It has been brought to my attention, Commander Darbus, that you have allowed these two upstarts to take part in last week's auditions for the Starship Icarus' famed *Spring Musicale*, in clear violation of the enforced six-month division of sectors. Not only this, but I have more recently been informed that the two of them, based on the strength of their duet “What I've Been Exploring For,” have been given the much-coveted *callback* for a *second* audition (for the lead roles which my brother and I are, coincidentally, in direct competition for, as well). I am writing this report to inform you that, as the rules currently stand, this cannot be allowed to go any further.

This painter and this mathematician cannot be permitted to make further mockery of our regulations, for without these enlightened guideposts how can we ever be expected to blossom into ultra-atomized professional competency? We in the Theater Sector cherish your nurturing hand, your creative vision, and your inflexible dedication to the performing arts. But this is not a creative decision. This is regulations, and we are confident that your wisdom will not be further clouded by these two ensigns who, though they clearly know how to “put on a good show,” exhibit considerably less aptitude when it comes to recognizing their

places within the rigorously regimented order of the Starship Icarus.

Furthermore, in light of the fact that the two ensigns under scrutiny are both operating under somewhat of a celebrity status at present, I recommend addressing this issue sooner rather than later, lest you allow this attitude of *laissez-faire* slackening of the rules to infect the entire crew. For, as recent events on Earth have made clear, even from the lowest levels of authority, the spirit of ideals threatens to spread unabated, possessing as it does a thirst unquenchable save by a drinking of the wellsprings of the highest levels of the chain of command.

With Love, Always,

Ensign Sharpay Evans

<sevans@ssicarus.edu>

Theater Sector

P.S. I stumbled upon the most *adorable* little outfit on a remote little world on my last shore leave, and I think it would be just *perfect* for my solo number.

Note: Additional fact checking, research and editing for this email provided by

Ensign Ryan Evans.

VI.
SPECTACULAR NAUSEA

“Time frightens...it is made of qualitative jumps, irreversible choices, occasions which will never return.”

-Guy Debord

“I feel nauseous.”

“Why? *What's the matter?*”

“I dunno. Maybe I need some fresh air.”

“But we're on a spaceship, darling. All the air is recycled.”

“Yeah, you're right. Just turn off the television.”

“Oh,” squeaked Gabriella, who proceeded to jump out of bed and stumble over to the Virtual Matter Browser. It had been generating a 36-inch screen displaying cuddly, furry cartoon creatures dancing in a field of dandelions, or something. She pressed a button on the wall and the device disappeared and was silent. “Sorry. I forgot that I had even turned that thing on. It's so easy to let it sink to the bottom of the lake of consciousness, and become obscured by gallons upon gallons of the awareness of other stuff.”

“That's very lyrical of you,” I sneered.

“*Thanks*. Mathematics *is* the language that makes the poetry of the universe possible, you know.”

“So I've heard,” I grumbled as I hid my head under the covers. “But I've also heard it said that math is the most BORING of all subjects.”

“Hmph! I'm going to pretend I didn't *hear* that,” she said as she climbed back into bed beside the cancerous lump beneath the sheets that was me.

“Everything is Past, nothing is possible,” I droned from under the covers, letting the muffling of my voice add to the vagueness of the thought it carried.

It was already a foregone conclusion. Our “pillow talk” had entered the realm of the treasonous, why stop now? Besides, it was all just a matter of Earth's *image* amongst the network of the mirror of other worlds. Even with the revolution come and gone, cultural supremacy is still a trophy we have a hard time loosening our hot, clammy grip on. We just polish and polish and polish. It's always about culture. We overthrew the whole stupid order, we seized the means of cultural production, and what did we get?

“What was that? I can't *hear* you. Get out from under there! I want to talk to you some more to make sure I've got this all sorted out.” Gabriella began counting on her fingers. “As far as I can tell, the Video-Proletariat of Earth revolted not out of distrust of the authority of the broadcast from the future, but rather *because of* the very fact that it was from *the future*, and they *knew it*. People saw this very fact as a profound affront to the normal, forward-flowing contingency of their lives.”

I poked my head out to resume the discussion once more: “Of *all* lives. Of

life itself. People began to ask themselves, 'What would we be without our memories?' The way I see it, life only acquires its true significance through the filter of memories. To realize the significance of events *as they are happening* is to experience life as if it were a memory, and if this particular kind of awareness was ever to be bestowed upon an entire civilization collectively..."

"But that *is* precisely what happened on Earth! It cancelled out *the possibility of possibility*...Your whole Modernist, and Postmodernist, and Neomoderist, and Postneomoderist Project..."

"...Was rendered philosophically impotent. Because everything is Past, *nothing* is possible. That's right. These are the ideas behind the Eternal Memorial. These are the tribulations of Earth in the 22nd century."

"The idea of progress was turned on its head. Yes, I see it now!"

"Those scientists from the future, some people even began to see them as emissaries, not of some future enlightened society, but of God itself. Even now they're in the process of formulating a religious doctrine based on the notion of God being an entity that exists only in the future. That hasn't even been born yet. Others saw the broadcast's origin point in the 23rd century as the fixed point from which *all time flows*. From this point of view we are all condemned to life in the Past until we catch up to it, then we'll have one shining moment of Present before being jettisoned for the rest of eternity through an unending Future."

"So what do we do in the meantime, before the birth of God?"

"I don't know. I guess people saw this glimpsing of the *prenatal age* as our window to end three centuries of domination within a spectacle-based, ideological

omni-reality.”

“*The Eternal Memorial*,” she said as she breathed a heavy sigh. “A complete restructuring of temporality based on something you guys all saw on *television*.”

“Yeah. And with that insight, it is possible that you have finally pierced the thick armor of the human imagination. Umm...” I tugged on the skin of my face as I said the next few words: “Do you wanna get out of here? You said a little while ago that all the air here is recycled, but that's not entirely true. There is *one* source of genuine, honest to goodness oxygen on this floating, metallic son of Daedalus. Put on your uniform. I say we go for a little walk...”

We exited Gabriella's living quarters and headed to the periphery, to the outskirts of the Starship Icarus. Sixteen levels up and one hundred and ten subsections over lay the goal of our excursion: the Arboredome. A giant glass dome bulging from the hull of the ship like a pimple, housing hundreds of photosynthesizing species of trees and shrubbery from dozens of worlds, the Arboredome is the closest thing to a natural environment one is likely to find on a starship.

Gabriella and I walked hand in hand down a winding path, and as we did so I became aware of a rare occurrence in the lives of starship officers in the middle of a voyage: our boots became speckled with *dirt*. We took in the overwhelming variety of shapes, sizes and colors that make up the amalgamation of an entity that has become more and more alien to us, in our travels through nothingness; the organisms still clinging to the surfaces of the pinpricks we pass

like painted lines on a highway; the persistence of biospheres.

There are so many shades of green in the universe.

“I've yet to take anyone here,” I said to Gabriella as we made our way deeper into the foliage. “It seems as though this place is an as-yet undiscovered oasis among the crew members. I rarely even see biochemists or horticulturists when I come here.”

“It's spectacular.”

“No. Not spectacular.” I pointed up past the tops of the trees, to the expanse of blackness registering through the green blizzard of leaves. Hundreds of stars were visible, and through the glass each created its own tiny arc of rainbow colored smears.

Gabriella didn't say anything, she simply squeezed my hand tighter as she allowed her mouth to gape slightly at the sight. At least an hour passed before either of us spoke again. We stopped in a clearing with a wide-opened view of the undying night, and it was there that she asked:

“Sooo...there's a rumor among the ensigns that you've given up painting...*is this true?*”

“I've just been so busy,” I said while twirling a blade of grass between my thumb and index finger, watching the emerald pigment smear off onto my skin.

“We've only all been here for a couple of months, it takes time to get situated.”

“Don't lie to me, Mister *Greatest Living Earth Painter*. I know other painters onboard who have already finished complete bodies of work in the same amount of time it's taken you to '*get situated*,' so what's the story?”

“There is *no story*, okay,” I stated dryly as I looked at the trees around us, arranged according to the tastes and whims of humanoid aesthetics, with little room for consultation with nature itself.

“They call me a landscape painter, you know. Hundreds of years ago, this is what landscape painters were confined to;” I motioned with a sweep of my arm to indicate the portion of the environment immediately in front of us. “Ultra-specific, zoomed in, idealized little segments of the whole. I showed the art world a *different* view, a *wider* one, and they loved me for it. I became a satellite, orbiting their narrowly defined panoramas. But you know what I saw the farther and farther I rose from the planets surface?”

“What did you see?” whispered Gabriella.

“*Faults*. Cracks. Everywhere. They became all I could see. Everyone thought that they were beautiful, but to me they became, with each new canvas, increasingly *hideous*.”

“I see. And this? Does this all originate in the Past as well? Is this part of the Eternal Memorial?”

I ignored her question. “I just can't understand humans anymore. There are revolutions, and there are revolutions within revolutions, and revolutions within *those* revolutions, and I don't know where, if *anywhere*, it ever stops. I just can't help but think that there are forces out there...forces we still know nothing about...”

“You mean like *God*...?”

“*No! Not like God*. I mean forces we, ourselves, have created. Forces that

run, unabated, like perpetual motion machines, like the Energizer Bunny, until it gets to the point that you *know* he's out there, even when you can't see him, lurking in the shadows of every commercial you ever see. Everyone on Earth keeps talking about breaking free from the chains that have bound us...taking giant steps forward for the race, but I think maybe we need to start thinking about stepping *backwards*. I mean, it's only by stepping *backwards* that we can give ourselves a wider picture of the scene in front of us, until eventually we can see the picture frame itself, only to take another step back to find that the frame is itself framed..."

“But there are *always* unknowns. It might be sad. It might be disappointing, but dear, it's the nature of our lives as humanoids.”

I could see that behind her glasses Gabriella's eyes were filling with tears, that she didn't know quite what to make of my tirade, that I was scaring her. A strange wind blew through the trees, causing the branches to sway almost imperceptibly. I knew it was part of the Arboredome's climate control system, that it was normal, but for a second I allowed myself to entertain the thought that the ship's hull had somehow suffered the most miniscule of breaches, and that this breeze was the first indicator of a soon-to-be massive decompression that could potentially destroy the entire ship, killing all aboard and sending its exploded husk hurtling through space until a chance collision with some heavenly body or another should finally halt its freefall. But of course this wasn't the case. If it were, I'd not be alive today, nearly two years later, to record these observations.

As the first tear rolled down her cheek, she asked me again: “So are you

going to start painting again or what?”

“Maybe someday, far in the Past.”

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