

Little J

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Sometime subsequent to our evening meal, when the tiki torches have been lit and slippery couples have begun to grope one another, a little boy drowns across the far side of the pool. This very nearly interrupts my Reflecting Time, as does the injunction from my wife.

I do like to think I can see these things coming, but my head is buried in a particularly engrossing portion of the magazine, and her whine startles me. I have recalibrated a cylinder on the tool which I am building because the whine of the hydraulic piping sounds like Mary, and Mary knows perfectly well that her voice is about as welcome as a mosquito in my ear. She's useful to blame my mistakes on, but that's not cricket now, is it.

'I'm pleased you picked the red trunks, Big J.'

'*You* picked them.' The woman sloshes across the top of the large spa pool toward me and her wake wets the lip of my *Top Scientist*. 'Do watch it, Mary. This water's unpleasant enough as it is without being sloshes about. The bacterial count in this water is... Words fail me.'

'God you're a grump. You're a mean grump. That's your father talking. I'll bet you don't talk to your machine like that.'

She flicks water at me which I shake off my *Top Scientist*. 'It isn't a machine. It's a tool.'

I shift my rump along the ledge. We had supposed we'd better enjoy the pool since we'd invested in four units of this expensive exclusive timeshare resort. Still, one can't pretend that pools of warm water with bits of bistro food floating in them aren't breeding ground for *Staphylococcus* and his kin, and then there are the significant clusters of juveniles and their parents with their dribbling ice creams and white tongues and dripping shoulder tattoos to truly make this investment a disappointment – for myself, that is. Mary, being the way she is, has a content smile on her lips and sounds as if she is orgasming with relaxation. She makes similar sounds when reading Ruth Rendell novels.

I'm wading through the laughable Letters to the Editor from daft amateur twats in Adelaide basement labs when a wave douses my *Top Scientist* and I lose it in the underlit water. Mary has undone the drawstrings of my togs and is rubbing my genitalia as one would two persimmons in the fruit aisle of a supermarket. '*Let's*,' she whispers, nasally. Mary has no idea how irritating her voice can be. In her bathing costume, she is as shiny as a clutch of balloons. Attractive, I suppose, if one uses the word literally. Eye-catching, appealing like a new carbon inhauster.

I hold the sopping magazine up to block Mary's face. I try not to register the boy who wobbles past me, his elbows jutting everywhere, mouth agape in demented ecstasy – he's just another splasher, to me. The boy's father should

have taught the boy how to swim. I wish I had a child. A chimp's not an appropriate sponge to soak up what I have to teach about compressing matter – believe me, I've tried. Mary's mind isn't expansive enough, God bless her, so the person I mostly complain about the difficulty of reducing visible matter to subatomic size and reversing its atoms spin to direct it backwards in time is my journal. The high GSM pages are empty, kindly ears.

Stuck in tepid water with children drowning and wives attempting to fornicate, I hold *Top Scientist* up high, push Mary to the far side of the pool with a kick against her torso, and for the final time I attempt to enjoy the article on the current state of tools “competing” against my own (for none can hold a torch to my own.) I have to re-read the third paragraph several times while a grumpy-sounding man rescues the struggling, flubbering boy and weeps, “Jesus I'm glad I dived in after you,” and other such sentiment unrelated to quantum mechanics. I can't remember from whence the man's clichéd words came, I can't pick the film. If I could swot the boy and the father without further wetting my magazine, I would.

Mary is persistent in licking my ears and tugging my togs as she swims past, and soon a cucumber has been cultured between my legs and I struggle as Mary tows me into a discreet area of the spa and unties the drawstring around my waist and clenches her labial muscle around my staff. It's a distraction from the child flapping and thrashing not far away, I suppose. I wonder where the child's father is. Presumably, he's somewhere in the dark recesses of the pool, where the night lights and mosquitoes can't reach him.

‘Do hurry up,’ I order her, ‘I'd like to check on that cadmium shipment before bed.’

‘*Hard metal*,’ she whispers, peppering my neck with kisses, essentially demonstrating her entire grasp of science. The erection between my legs, I like to think, is not my own. I'm hoping that the fatherly figure who took the boy from the pool reappears in my gaze as a reason to shove Mary off my lap, but she gets her thrills, and I manage to approach the conclusion of my article. There is a sharp pain in the head of my staff although I'm not sure whether I ejaculate or not, I must confess I am preoccupied thinking about the handling of my cadmium rods and trying to recall whether I requested that they be encased in rubber during shipment.

Big Father used to bring me to these pools when I was a juvenile, before they were developed, although his idea of my learning to swim, as I recall, involved my floundering and being criticised and his commending himself for having saved me. Perhaps this is a revenge of sorts, mine and Mary's aquatic lewdness. It amuses me to neutralise my father's potential grandchildren my ejaculating into this hot, chlorinated water. Thank God there's science to redeem the embarrassments Mary always drags us into.

I hear further splashes and a commotion and I announce, ‘Should've dived in after.’ One would think the pool poopers would take my advice and move on with their evening but my advice seems to be unacknowledged

because a commotion erupts across the pool, and Mary is on the cold, wet tiles shrieking about something or other, and I groan and lower my magazine and take a quick survey of what the issue is.

It seems paramedics have arrived and have leapt in the water, utterly ruining a couple of half-decent walkie talkies as they seize a log of shaggy hair. The little boy is floating face-down and is a peculiar shade of blue, like oily steel. I tug the shirtsleeve of one medic, who is photographing the scene, and he tilts his head towards my mouth as I give him a piece of my mind. 'I could see that this was going to happen.'

The medic's head swivels towards me. 'You could, could you?' That's when the police are first contacted.

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The shift nurse milks 30 millilitres of ejaculate from my penis and sits me down and I decline coffee before the police officer who enters the room has offered it, explaining that there is free coffee available in the warehouse of my firm.

'It's Saturday. Watcha workin Saturdays for? What, you go in just for the coffee?'

'I confess to having taken home coffee from work. If you wish to arrest me, I shall enter a plea.'

'We're just interested in the boy, there's things we haven't got figured. You see who he went off with? See anyone play rough with him? See the person that said that thing you were tellin us, Jesus I should've dived –

'It was Jesus-I'm-Glad-I-Dived-In-After-You. Is English your first language or fifth?'

'Don't make this worse on yourself, sir.'

I can see this fool's questions years ahead of time. 'I'm not in the habit of profiling other people with whom I'm legitimately sharing a pool. Are you? Well, actually, perhaps you're the species of person who is... No, I myself didn't see a soul. A grown man was obviously playing with his boy – his father, presumably? If security cameras didn't capture your suspect, then I don't see how interviewing me will–

'Let's move it along. You been going to the pool for years, right? Your dad, he was–

'– involved. Consumed. Inattentive. Unloving. Returning to the subject at hand: My peripheral vision didn't allow for a detailed visual of your villain, I'm afraid.'

'In English?'

'I didn't see who drowned the boy. Yes, I understand you're seeking a male of my age who was in the pool at the time that this *unattended* child drowned, and yes, I understand there was semen on his shorts, but as I have already explained, my wife was sexually assaulting me and you'll have to press charges against her if you're under pressure to secure a conviction.' I stand up and move over to the window. I can tell that the interviewing officer is

about fifteen words behind. His cerebral cortex is trying to catch up. ‘I happen to have overheard a paramedic on the radio refer to the death as an accident. Does your department intend to contradict medicine? Do you pretend to be a qualified pathologist? Because I’ll be needing legal representation if that’s the case.’

The police officer opens his mouth and almost continues with his questioning, then closes it and says, ‘Very good. Very nice. Some big words there. That sample shouldn’t be long, sir.’

‘You’re using a Senco Centri? A second generation?’

‘What?’

‘Of centrifuge. To process the semen sample. They’re good, those Sencos, if you are using one, that is. Good motor on them – that’s what ensures consistency.’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Of course you don’t.’

‘So am I getting you a coffee or no?’

‘I’ll decide that.’

‘Your old man never said no to a cuppa coffee.’

‘I’m not him. I drink hot water only. It’s refreshing and non-addictive. One shouldn’t be dependent on anything in this world.’

‘He in that magazine, still, your dad? He had that famous column, right?’

‘No. Just me.’

‘I seen you on *60 Minutes*, you know. You did that job on the cicadas, right? Made ‘em hatch early? You could control their perception of, what was it, light-time? Whatcha building nowadays?’

I roll my eyes. ‘A death ray. Do I require a permit for that?’

He opens his mouth then closes it.

‘I take it hot,’ I say to him. ‘You were about to ask how I take my water. In a mug. 80 degrees.’

He hands me a cup of steaming water and a newspaper. It’s today’s, but it’s already redundant by hours. By writing events in time, we affect their outcome, so that we may as well not have written them at all. Why take an hour immortalising an event of which the permutations are changing every millisecond?

‘Shouldn’t be long, now.’

‘It’s been two weeks, for God’s sake. It is customary here to interrogate men who have been nominated for the Walker Prize in Quantum Mechanics? What’s your medal recognise *you* for? The Fields Prize in Belligerence? Anyone with, hmph, even a B.Sc. would be aware *that the toxicity of the spa water should have killed off any sperm which might have germinated into offspring*. Thus, your extraction of semen from Mary perplexes me immensely.’

‘We ain’t testing for viability. DNA and RNA plus markers, only.’

‘You are aware that I’m impotent? I did ask Mary to tell you. If she’s failed to— ‘

‘Steady on. That ain’t my business. Just finding dead sperm’ll back up your story, sir. Folks saw a man not dissimilar from your description and due investigatory process requires– ‘

‘YOU’RE INTERRUPTING MY WORK!’ I snap, standing up from my plastic chair as Mary emerges from the curtain of the testing room with a female officer in tow, fingers on her shoulder. ‘THE LOT OF YOU! AN ENDLESS INTERRUPTION!’

‘Wanna tell me about this time machine Mary says you’ve been working on?’ asks the female officer. I can’t recall the proper term for addressing a female police officer – Officerette? – so I ignore her question and try to get my breathing under control. Mary must have said something to her. The officer’s questions are typical of reporters and Average Joes swirling wine at soirees. They’re obtuse enough to actually believe that I would build a death ray, and they’re obtuse enough to investigate me in the murder of some unattended tot. I begin buttoning my woollen coat and announce loudly that I will be telephoning my lawyer as soon as I get home. Mary, snail trail sparkling on her cheeks, seizes my arm and attempts to worm into my warm core.

‘I’m sorry they had to do that to you,’ she pouts.

The Officerette holds open the front door of the police station. The wind makes her earrings sway. They are crosses. The daylight spilling on her face tells me that she is much younger than Mary, and I do a quick calculation which tells me that the Officerette is probably 80% fertile. She’s hovering like a fruit fly, expecting a quote to trade to reporters, likely. Headline: *Son of famous scientist suspected in child killing.... No. Scientist who deserves to be more widely recognised than his overpraised father suspected in child killing.*

The Officerette says, ‘Tell your lawyer you’re not technically being charged with anything, yet.’

‘I could have told you that. And you can forget the ‘yet’ – you will not charge me with anything, ever. Do you understand?’

‘Ha,’ she sneers, ‘Build that time machine did ya? See into the future?’

‘You know perfectly well from your testing that I was ... *mating*... with Mary at the time of the boy’s accident. I presume you intend to check the alibi of every single person present?’

‘Only the suspicious ones.’

I open my mouth to respond, but I break off to scold Mary for pulling her hair into her mouth and biting into it. I fish my car key from my pocket. ‘You know, a prophet is never accepted in his home town.’

‘Luke 4:24,’ the officerette responds, and boosts her belt. ‘Please don’t compare yourself with the J-man.’

Mary gasps a question at the cop. ‘How long will it take you? To get him?’

‘Can’t prophesy that.’ She begins to pull the door closed and withdraw her feet inside the police station, frowning at a transcription of our

interviews. ‘Good luck with the pregnancy, lady. Sir – your wife tested positive.’

*

Despite her taking bends extremely slowly, and taking exorbitant lengths of time to change lanes, Mary’s driving our modest Fiat gives me an opportunity to catch up on my reading.

I have an investors’ report on the timeshare unit. We own four units out of an exclusive sixty, and they have been producing a reasonable degree of profit, however, we’ve only become savvy in our investments by always considering the dimension of time. Time will sour our investment if we aren’t proactive.

As Mary takes the final bend at 30 an hour, I say, ‘We’re selling, today, the timeshares,’ and, upset, she bumps into the driveway. ‘DO BE CAREFUL! D’you have clear-coat to replace any chips in the bumper paint, do you? No?’

Mary swallows and says, ‘Our timeshare units. Yes.’

‘Media attention is unlikely to be in our favour.’

‘You’re talking about the investigation.’

I clap thrice, slowly. ‘An astounding deduction, Mary. It’ll last sixty days, the hype, the headlines. Mark my words. By then, our units’ll be worth half, sixty percent, something like that. Devalued. You shall ring the broker this evening and sell those timeshares before the tabloids get nosy.’

‘Don’t be so mean to me. Yes, I’ll ring her this evening.’

I open the passenger door, but I don’t swing my feet out right away. ‘These... *problems*,’ I begin, looking at her belly, which she’s stroking underneath the steering wheel, ‘These problems can be eliminated. Gotten rid of. You know I love you, right?’

*

I pursue venture capitalists to move my production along to the next phase, so that I don’t have to do monthly calibrations for engineering firms or temporal reports for banks. Mary slows down, generally, taking longer and longer to pour a cup of tea. She kisses my shoulder in the night as if craving intercourse, however I point out to her that as she is already pregnant, sex is unnecessary.

I try to trudge downstairs to my laboratory in the basement just once a day, and get on with a solid ten hour shift most days, but it is too cold and lonely to linger in there for long and I have to fetch my own cups of tea.

One night the moon nosies through the curtains and I can’t sleep and I realise that Mary has been waiting for an apology for something or other. I wouldn’t mind a child in the house so that we don’t always have to be each other’s interlocutor. We could use a boy to unite us and to distract my wife.

‘Tell me, Mary: the police, did they ask if you killed that boy?’

‘No.’ She doesn’t roll over.

My eyes open and I almost reach for my spectacles. ‘D’you mean, Nah,

they didn't ask you, or- Am I the sole suspect? - MARY? Respond!

I reach over and touch her midriff, the centre of her knotted, tense body, and she scratches my hand and rolls out of bed and hugs a pillow to her pregnant core.

'DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM.'

*

Fallen leaves become trapped in ice, and then the ice thaws, leaving muddy pools in the back yard. I watch it all on closed circuit television from my laboratory. I am omniscient, God-like.

There are periodic visits from the officerette. It's obvious from her persistence – or *pestilence*, if you will – that she has no other witnesses, thus I remain somehow associated with the drowning of the young boy, and the police haven't any other leads, hence the reason why they are hassling me, a revered public figure, a person from whom advice is frequently sought. Nothing quite titillates the tabloids like a murder at a resort swarming with prime movers, the wealthy, the renowned, and prized minds.

The officerette once visits and without realising it, she enters my house uninvited, and I'm too jaded to rebuff her. We have a conversation in which she suggests hypnosis to see if she can extract a description of who pushed the boy in the hot pool. I tell her that a much more straightforward solution to the mystery would be to recreate that day by standing in a sufficiently large beam of light-time, at the timeshare resort, and simply waiting the sixty-or-so days it's been since the incident, and then observing the incident when the regressing beam of light-time arrives in the past.

The officerette does not write this down. I offer to email her some directions for building a rudimentary time machine. Her department might need to appropriate next year's budget to achieve this – but of course when that arrives, she can go back in time, reappropriate the money and balance the books.

She closes her note pad.

I tell Mary to brew a cup of something for the officerette, and invite her to tread with me down the black steps, through the boron curtain and into my laboratory to witness the great tool which I am building. Yes, there are decontamination showers and centrifuges and great stainless steel tables, and a Bunsen burner which can melt stone, but the officerette becomes recalcitrant and toes the stairs. She says she doesn't think my great tool is relevant to the inquiry. She's uneasy. Perhaps she knows that the Buchstaller ring which circles the centre of my laboratory will reduce her to pure invisible energy if I activate it. I could transfer her to an AA battery and discard her in a rubbish bin.

She says I timed the sale of my shares in the resort interestingly, that they sold just before the media got wind of the death. She's interested in how much money I made. I give her the figure, and she blinks. I was anticipating that she would gasp and commend me for my foresight, my mastery of time.

I point her back up the stairs, telling her she won't find a clue down here. Mary's expanding pot belly means it's taking longer and longer for her to brew a simple cup of tea, or pour me a hot mug of water, and while she bends and squints and pats herself, the Officerette pulls a chair back from the kitchen table and persists in asking Mary how the pregnancy is progressing, if I am giving her massages and support, and from the cool, sterile comfort of my laboratory, where time can't find me, I make quite a zesty joke over the intercom about the preposterousness of immaculate conception, and watch their reactions from my monitor, and Mary does her best to laugh toward the camera, har-har, but the Officerette simply grasps Mary's hand as if she has protective feelings for Mary.

I read the Officerette's lips. She's asking about the drowned boy. She's asking how Mary feels when I bat her with my rolled-up magazine, and growl at her, and why it's taken so many years for her to conceive, and I can see Mary's bottom lip quivering like a loose washer on my tool as the officerette slides across the table a card for one of those pathetic women's refuge clubs.

*

Oh, of course there are interruptions, such as having to drive Mary to the clinic, but I do the best that I can to bring something special into this world. The majority of my time is spent ensuring the Buchstaller ring is perfectly circular – 99% is not sufficient, it must be *perfectly* circular – and having the cadmium plates cut accordingly, for you see, temporary quantum shifts simply require HSP (holistic spherical pressure) – pressure from all dimensions within this universe simultaneously – and while a cubic arrangement of the cadmium baffle plates does have a number of advantageous reflective properties (especially once electrified!), curved plates are ideal, however, these can only be put together if simultaneously mounted, and I must do this myself as I don't trust hired labour, and until the full payout from the resorts, I can't afford all of the plates at once anyway.

If I could go back in time, I would ask for more when selling my shares in the resort complex.

Once each of plates is delivered, I scratch the bubbles from my mask and begin welding them in my foundry, down the twenty-step ladder in the deepest, coolest part of my laboratory, where the walls and the water are black. I don't take breaks to surface and suffer Mary's cups of boiling water, instead, I sit sipping in the dark and try to get the blue vision out of my throbbing eyes. I suppose this was what made my father so irritable. For our last Christmas together, he gave me a document wallet (unwrapped) containing all the shares of his company. I didn't say thank you – he was condemning me to a life of stress and suffering under his legacy. I never saw him again; no one did.

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Mary gives birth to a wriggling purple baby. The baby's weight and arrival are within a modal rang inside the usual outliers, so quite why she acts

like it's a miracle, I haven't a clue. His birth interrupts an otherwise mellow Christmas Day. We name him Junior. They tell me Junior has my eyes, and I wonder if that means he has my intellect, too. When the nurse asks me if I intend to get the boy Christened, I laugh until my abdominal muscles ache.

'Christened? Oh, of COURSE, ha-ha! Let's deliberately force my son into a pool, shall we? We've seen how that works out! Oh, mercy.'

'OUR son,' she says, and bursts into her usual tears.

'This has got to stop,' I want to say, but she has fled. I console myself by listing all of the species which die once procreation has successfully occurred. There's the wolf spider, Charles' Seahorse, the caecilian, several shrews...

*

Little Junior passes through a series of predictable integers – one, two, three – each interrupting my Christmas work. I'm becoming frustrated with my tool, I feel impotent, it must – MUST! – be tested on a living subject, although resource consent for such tests is a nightmare. The problem is that my registration has lapsed and the fee and auditing requirements for a testing licence are quite prohibitive to scientific endeavour and after eight years, I must admit that I am running out of drive and editing a few theses here and there to pay the power bill – which frequently tops \$1000 a week. Electricity is an expensive commodity, light even more so, and time is the most expensive of all.

Drained, I take the elevator to the ground floor and collapse at the kitchen table. The boy is there, trying to cram a yolk back into a broken egg. 'If repaired, it still has a viable chance of becoming a chicken,' I tell him, and his bafflement cheers me up a fraction. 'No, I'm sorry, that's a lie,' I say, and to stop his tears, I have to lead him down into the basement and activate the machine, at a cost of around \$80.00 per minute. He sits on the stairs, sniffing, sucking on the bottom of his t-shirt, until I place his egg in the Charge Bowl and run light-time through it. I give him back his repaired egg. He's not allowed to tell Mummy, and he's certainly not allowed in here again unless I say so.

His eyes dry.

It is at the celebration of 1826 Days Subsequent to Birth (5th birthday) that a now grey-haired, po-faced Mary slurps too much champagne and makes a crack to her PTA chums about my vasectomy having been our only poor investment, and something follows about Little J's conception not having been so immaculate, and their laughter sound like panes of shattering glass, and I descend into my lab and stay down there long enough to grow a beard, surviving on tinned food and decontamination showers.

I must have a live test subject, I must, I must. It is impossible to acquire rhesus monkeys when one's licence has expired. The housecat grinds against my shin, but a cat is not simian enough.

I write Mary a letter beseeching her to produce another baby, for me to test on. I've become attached to our first baby, who's now a hefty boy who can wash and shampoo and dry himself AND read the signs telling him to keep out of my laboratory.

I can't keep the funders waiting. They expect me to deliver. They know that it is no death ray that I am constructing. I leave the letter on Mary's desk.

I watch on the CCTV as Mary pays for tradesmen to build us a pool, and for Junior to be the star of some birthday party, and his pals attempt to throw him in the pool but Mary intervenes. The boy can't swim – Mary really should be coordinating lessons for the boy. I certainly haven't time to teach him.

I begin to suspect that Mary despises the child: I once catch Mary holding a novel in front of her eyes, drunk on a poolside recliner, as Little J kicks and struggles in the pool, and his head repeatedly falls under, and then it doesn't, and I am sprinting up and out of my laboratory and diving headfirst into the pool to salvage the boy, and dumping his saturated, spluttering log-of-a-body at the feet of the pinup girl for Post-Natal Depression, and she is angry at me for interrupting her novel.

'I thought you wanted to test on him,' she says, and lights a cigarette – something I've never seen her do. I can't believe she knows the technique for lighting one.

'I – I – that's not–

'I've still got your letter.'

Little J rolls onto his side and gasps for air. I stand there with water running out of my coat. 'CAN'T YOU SEE THE BOY CAN'T BREATHE?!' I want to slap Mary, but what she says in response is a slap in itself.

'They're disposable. We can always make another. Your words, not mine.' She turns the page in her book and takes a sip of her cocktail.

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Our swimming pool becomes out of limits. I would drain it, but it serves as a coolant chamber for the exhaust from the laboratory. With the ring operational, and the plates installed expertly after a few rearrangements, I'm making 500kg masses disappear to wherever I want in time, and of course the exhaust vapours from such work can get up to 400 degrees centigrade, necessitating a pool to absorb the heat.

It keeps the water warm and carbonated enough that it can kill any small lifeforms – waterboatmen, bacteria... sperm, even.

The boy is too afraid of breaking his gyroscope to play with it, so I take it back to the lab with me and tweak it to power a fly wheel which keeps the pads in the starter motor of my tool turning.

Tis remarkable how fast the years will pass when one is busy. The house is quiet; the cat was vaporised long ago and never re-materialised. Mary

seldom speaks to me, unless it pertains to money. She occupies her time by chairing some philanthropic society. The boy is growing up a tad ratbaggish. He's definitely in need of some parenting. I often catch Little J with his ear pressed against the door to my laboratory, his bottom lip curled up under the top. He came damn close to losing the spelling bee at his school when it appeared – for just a moment – that he'd forgotten the spelling of *centripetal*.

I try to tell my son once or twice that I don't want him ending up like my psychopath of a father, but Little J simply strokes the cadmium plating on my tool and fails to scrub his snotty, sooty fingerprints off it and, well, I have no choice but to issue him a trespass notice.

As the boy flees from my lab, I call after him, 'I'm simply trying to make you realise that you're destined to end up like *HIM!*' but my son does not look back.

The Foreseer graph correlates initial JOLT tests (Jumpings Of Light-Time), and although I reboot twice, it won't give me a different result, when the passing of seconds is factored in. The simple truth of it is that after perhaps a thousand cups of water down here in the dark, lit only by a titanium filament bulb, I am ready to begin testing, I must, I can't wait. If I do not produce some results, my venture capital loans will be recalled, and insolvency proceedings against me will occur. I will hang myself rather than allow my name to be disgraced in this way.

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The unveiling has been scheduled for today, venture capital should be just an overnight transaction away, and the press are phoning relentlessly about what they understand to be a death ray. Mary catches me as I come out of the bathroom. Everything that she has buried, concealed, covered up has turned her eye sockets black. Her eyeballs are pink.

'Is it ready?'

'Haven't you any shame? For God's sakes, I'm, I'm – not ready.'

'How could you not know they were coming? Your machine –'

'Tell them... heavens, I don't know... Just tell them some codswallop about Little J. Tell them I couldn't have done it without him.'

'Tell Little J yourself, he's with you today.' She sucks on her cigarette.

'HE CERTAINLY IS NOT.'

There is a long, cold silence. Mary sways and chuckles.

'This is... you're not the woman –'

'This is on you,' she says, and wafts into the kitchen and takes the bottle of vodka from the freezer.

THUNK-THUNK. Thunk-thunk-thunk.

'The little bastard! You let him down there!'

The front doorbell sounds and the both of us flinch.

'STALL THEM!'

Mary smooths her cardigan and approaches the front door, and there is the sound of a whining child as she pulls the door open. Nobody has oiled the damned thing. I certainly AM NOT going to oil it myself –

But when I turn around, the front door hasn't been opened at all. A child really is crying. I scurry down the steps to the basement. 'Boyyyy! Little J! Are you down here? You'd better not be!'

Oh, but there are sticky fingerprints on the banister, and footsteps in the dust leading toward my tool, the shining platinum on the central cannon, the curved plates, the lighting, the bold pink patent stickers.

The blue ignition light is on, and beneath the hatch are soggy footprints leading inside her.

There is a cup of coffee on the bench. I don't drink coffee. I see myself in the mirror. My hair has whitened. Everything has shifted, aged instantaneously. There is a newspaper on the bench. I never left any newspaper there. Its headline reads *Tot Drowns – Scientist's Son Suspect*.

The shape of a boy is winking in an out of existence. He's waving his arms, as the lifeguards taught him to do on that swimming course he did at school. I dive into the centre of my time machine and try to find a part of him to grab and pull with a lifetime of power and determination and anger and resistance and my chest wraps around his hot, pink body as the chunks of jelly-like energy try to replace portions of my body. Smoke is coming out of his nostrils. I run up the stairs and barge a reporter out of the way and get my son onto the front lawn. I take the garden hose and douse him with it until his flesh becomes opaque again. He's had a billion charged nematodes pass through his delicate body and his lips have turned black. He looks up into my eyes. A whiff of smoke rises from his nostril, but he's unhurt.

'Jesus I'm glad I dived in after you,' I tell Little J, and press my sobbing head against his chest. I can't see into the future, but most people would then destroy the time machine.