

Life On Earth

by Pat Cadigan

The third time Mary tells me that all the people in the nice cars and the expensive clothes are dead, I believe her. First, because Mary knows things like this for sure and second because whatever *anyone* tells you three times is true. But especially Mary.

We were watching the regular morning inbound rush hour from the freeway graveyard, where highways go to die in the city. Every city has a freeway graveyard, Mary says. I'd have to take her word for this; the freeway graveyard is the only place I can remember living in. Don't believe me? Wait around; I'll tell you two more times and then you'll know for sure. Or you can just ask Mary. She's a living truth detector.

I am not so gifted, so I have to distrust everyone except Mary. But this thing about the dead people—it's one of those things that Mary says are so thoroughly and consistently true at any given or random moment that they are never falsehoods, no matter who tells you.

I know Mary finds this reassuring. Me, it scares. Just you think about it—if there are things so true that not even the Devil himself can lie about them, how can us mere mortals face them and live through it?

"Most don't. Or don't want to," Mary says as the traffic inches along the exit ramp in front of us. "How do you think all these poor bastards died?"

Damn, I've done it again, talking out loud and not knowing it. "I'd have said a plague," I tell her honestly.

Mary laughs, shaking her fuzzy dirty-grey head. "It'd have to have been a truth plague," she says, "and there's never gonna be one of those. The truth ain't catchin'."

"But something that's killed so many people just by their getting exposed to it—"

Mary shakes her head again. "Think of it as a natural disaster. Earthquakes can kill a lot of people, but not because they caught it from each other."

"Oh," I say. All right. A truthquake; I can see how that would be lethal on a grand scale.

When I say this to Mary, she shrugs. "Some people might not think that's so bad. Hell, look where they go when they die." She points at the cars. "Luxury sedan with air conditioning, real leather upholstery, and a top-of-the-line in-dash CD player. Plenty of people think that stuff is to die for."

If that's true, the to-die-for thinking doesn't survive into the afterlife. You can tell just by the looks on all the dead people's faces that none of it, not the luxury, not the upholstery, not the cd players, is making them happy.

I think of what Mary actually said: *Hell, look where they go when they die.* Mary often

tells the truth without even noticing; it's a side effect of the gift she has. I can't get over the feeling that this could endanger her but I know if I told her, she'd say I was worried over nothing. Mary thinks that most people don't know the truth when they hear it.

She could be right about that. OK, given her track record, she probably *is* right. But *most people* doesn't mean *everybody* (or *nobody*). You never know when there's somebody listening who isn't *most people*.

Mary says I worry too much; I think what that really means is there's too much to worry about. That's for sure.

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While Mary knows what's true and what isn't, she doesn't know everything. Mary often said it would be a bad mistake to think that knowing what's true meant knowing everything. So when I ask her what possible reason could there be for us living people to be rattling around among the dead, she cheerfully admits she doesn't know. But she has theories.

"We rattle around, as you put it, *among* them. But not *of* them. This strongly suggests a purpose for us that they—the dead—can know nothing of." When she talks like that, I can see very clearly the university professor she says she used to be. Her expertise was a mix of comparative religion and philosophy. Or maybe it was comparative philosophy and religion. The two seem to be very close, except one of them gives you a Higher Being to take the responsibility for a lot of stuff, good and bad. I like the idea of a Higher Being, but I can't get any further than that. I mean, it's a nice idea, but too improbable for me to think about without laughing out loud. But that's just me. Mary says the dead all believe in the Higher Being as a reality, even those that say they don't.

"Deep down," Mary says, "and of course, it would have to be because, being dead, deep down is where they are—deep down, they're all sure that there's Somebody watching them, noting everything they do, and occasionally stepping in to make things turn out one way or another. Coincidence is a big thing with them. Even a little coincidence gets them all lathered up. Some of them get so aroused they're seeing signs and wonders for months after one little accident."

"Clinical paranoids?" I say, remembering something, but not very well.

Mary laughs. "The clinical-est of clinical and paranoid-est of paranoids, dear."

If it's true, she'll say it twice more before the day is out, but I'm not concerned about keeping track—it makes sense. I mean to say, you know? I'm sitting on a chunk of concrete or paving next to Mary and watching the dead start another day in the afterlife and I know in my heart they have to be sick in their minds as well as dead.

Okay, not *all* of them. *Some* of them have to be doing something crucially important—that's just the law of averages, which, like the law of gravity, is more useful than not. But all of them, all these dead people in all these cars, laid end to end on strips of roadway—what else is this but the futility of death?

I'm afraid to die.

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Mary says she can understand that, because she died a couple of times herself and didn't much like it. I can't imagine Mary dead; she's too alive. Her skin is softly weather-beaten, like quality leather, and you can see that if you touch her cheek, it will be warm and supple. Her hair, she says, lives a life of its own. Up close you can see it's wiry stuff. I think you could sew on buttons and mend rips with it. My hair is limp so I keep it very short; Mary trims it down with a manicure scissors every few weeks so it never gets more than an inch long. She says she wouldn't do that to most other women except that she likes looking at the shape of my head.

She also says that my skin is nicer than hers, but I don't think so. Next to Mary, I'm greasy-feeling, like a shaved bear that fell into an oil slick. Mary says that any other greasy people she's ever known have been some pretty icky types but I'm different. She says whatever my skin secretes reminds her of cocoa butter and almond oil, and that if a cosmetics company ever found out about me, they'd probably skin me alive and make me into wrinkle cream. I'm goddam lucky, she says, that I'm not a seal or a civet cat.

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"Not that you have to be either one to get skinned alive," she reminds me. "People get skinned alive all the time. Lots of people. Right while we're sitting here watching the transmigration of souls in their metal wombs, whole buildings full of people are having the hide peeled or dissolved right off their bodies." This is not my favorite conversation, but it seems to be important to Mary. "You'd think no one would survive that kind of treatment," she goes on, folding her arms and glaring at a big Cadillac with only one person in it. "It does kill people, but not right away. Not the first time. I never knew anyone that died after their first skinning. Usually it takes three or four times before it's fatal for most people. Some go through half a dozen and live. You'd think someone would have mercy on them, give up and set them free or just put them out of their misery. But no. Poor bastards have to endure it over and over again. Every day their skin grows back, looking just the same so you'd never know unless you knew to begin with. Comes the night, they're herded to their beds, tucked in and strapped down.

"When all the lights go out, then the Skinners come. Thin as a piece of paper, they slide under the door like a final-notice bill, float up in the air and land on some poor bastard either strapped down in a bed or so drugged it's the same difference. Skinners soak through the sheets and the cheap pajamas right down to the flesh. Some scream; some talk and pray; some can't make a sound. But the worst is the ones who *like* it. Those are the worst of all, the saddest of the sad.

"I was lucky I only had to go through it once." Mary blinks with satisfaction. "One time was all it took for me to know what to do. After the first night, I spent all day with my skin growing back and then that night, I made sure I slept *under* my bed. And by God, it worked. I never got skinned again. Such a simple solution. You wouldn't have thought it would be so simple, but it was. Why? Because Skinners are *stupid*. Is that the damndest thing or is it?"

"It is." I don't like this conversation but I have to admit it: it really *is* the damndest thing.

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Some of the people in the cars are starting to look familiar. I find myself smiling at them like friends, or at least acquaintances. A few of them seem like more than that, like people I actually do know, or did know before they died. A couple of them have this *something* about them that makes me like them—I mean, feel affection for them. Not as much as I feel for Mary, but I can't shake the idea that if I did know them, I'd be that fond of them. And the feeling would be mutual.

These are the ones I've started actually looking out for, and I miss them if I don't see them. I wonder if they've gotten so used to the sight of me and Mary having our morning time on our usual block of broken paving that they feel like something's missing out of the day if they don't see us.

Mary has told me that emotions and attachments are different for the dead. They don't so much go out of their ways to get attached as they just have stuff attach itself to them as they move through each day. Death, Mary assures me, is the ultimate predictability.

"All dead people know exactly what they'll be doing moment to moment, hour to hour, day to day," she says. "If there's any variation, it will be something that's already been scheduled for them, so it isn't really a true variation the way us living creatures think of it."

The idea of living like that makes me feel like I'm going to throw up.

"Well, of course it would," Mary says. "It's not *living*. It's not even *dying*. It's *death*. Only the dead can stand it."

But how, I wonder.

"Because that's what being dead is."

This only makes me more afraid to die. It sounds like being turned to stone and wanting to scream, but not knowing that's what you want to do, and not even knowing what screaming *is*.

What could any of those people have done that was so bad they deserve this?

"It's not so bad if you're dead," Mary says, chuckling.

Worse and worse. I can't imagine feeling that way. Uncertainty is the only way; uncertainty is life. All the uncertainty, even the uncertainty as to whether I'm thinking silently or talking out loud. I choose life. I choose life!

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"You get more emotional than I do watching the morning transmigration," Mary says. The traffic is thinning, going faster now, fewer faces and fewer familiar ones. "Kitchens open in another half hour. And it's doughnut day."

Mary has a dead friend at a Krazee-Glayze who stashes the stale leftovers for us instead of throwing them in the dumpster. Very convenient—no dumpster diving, and no losing the best of it to animals, although I really don't mind sharing. Animals are alive, too, which makes them sort of kindred in a spiritual way.

The kitchens, on the other hand, are actually cafeterias, dining halls operated by the dead for the living, for reasons understood more easily by the dead, and a few of the living with intellects more agile and less squeamish than mine. I asked Mary if she understood it; she told it made the dead feel better about their dead selves, but admitted she wasn't really sure why. That was all right with me. You don't want to be sure about too much. You could wake up dead.

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Mary's dead friend at the doughnut shop died young. Every time I see her, I think maybe she isn't quite dead yet. Mary agrees that it's possible her friend may well be in a kind of limbo, neither completely alive nor truly dead. Apparently, you can linger for years in such a state—decades, even. I think after even just half a decade you might as well be dead; Mary says that's why you find such cases living and working among the dead rather than with the living. They're going to die anyway, so they act like they are.

I wish Mary's friend would decide to live instead. She always looks to me like she was alive a minute before I got there and if I'd gotten there even thirty seconds sooner, I'd have been able to save her. (I don't actually know how to do any such of a thing, but I have this idea that if I were ever in that situation, I'd know instinctively what action to take.)

Anyway, it's sad to see a dead person so young. Her skin is much darker than Mary's and her hair is perfectly black all over. Her hands are sensitive, quick, and careful; they touch bits of her work clothes when she talks to us. She talks mostly to Mary. As young as she is, she's known Mary a long time. I can tell because she has a personal pet name for Mary; a nickname. You wouldn't think *Mary* was a word long enough to have a nickname, but it does, a tiny one: *Ma*.

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We create our own reality. Why not create the reality you've always dreamed of? Get started tonight at our free lecture/workshop, "Live Your Life Your Way." Complimentary refreshments, plus free gift voucher for the first 50 attendees. 6:30 pm, Conference Room A, Municipal Hall.

"Complimentary refreshments," Mary says thoughtfully, after reading the ad twice over. She folds the newspaper without thinking and hands it back to me. I unfold it and try to find the article I'd been reading before Mary noticed the ad and took the paper from me. "Could be lukewarm cocktail sausages wrapped in that kind of dough that comes in a tube. Could be microwave quesadillas. Could be a mound of doughnut holes from Krazee-Glayze and an urn of old machine-oil passing as coffee." She smiles and offers me another cruller out of the waxed-paper bag her friend gave us at the back door of the shop. She also gave us a box with a bunch of broken cookies and some stale crescent rolls. Mary and I are having our breakfast picnic on the air-conditioning unit, which will not be in use today. The weather has been getting cooler. Autumn is almost over. I know winter comes next, but that's all I know. I don't remember living through a winter. Perhaps I'm too young—maybe the last winter happened before I was alive. Or maybe I'm from a place where the seasons last a much longer period of time. I haven't discussed this with Mary. I'm nervous about bringing it up, but I don't really know why.

Suddenly, Mary grabs my hand and slaps half a cruller into it. "I wish you wouldn't do that," she says. "Are you sure you're not prone to *petit mal*?"

I shrug. "No one ever told me one way or the other." Mary is pretty good about what she calls my *moments*, when I get caught up in what I'm thinking and forget everything else. It's not that I black out, just that I'm concentrating. Mary says she doesn't mind just as long as I'm not driving a car or performing brain surgery. I'm not yearning to do either.

"Ma."

Mary's friend has come out the back door carrying another waxed paper bag. She puts it down in the a/c between us and gives me her usual troubled frown. "It's getting cold."

Mary mutters something about not needing a weatherman to blow.

"*Ma*. You can't spend winter on the street. You'll die."

Mary glances at me with a sour smile. "That's the pot calling the kettle a very dark color."

Her young friend looks annoyed. "*Ma*. I am *not* dead."

"Yet," I can't help adding.

Mary gives me a dirty look. "*Et tu*, you? Last week you weren't sure you believed me about the afterlife. This week you're making pronouncements." Mary doesn't sound so much annoyed as amused.

"It wasn't that I didn't *believe* you," I tell her. "It's just that I learn best by repetition."

Mary nods. "If only everyone else in the world could learn something merely by being told it three times." She gives her friend a sideways look.

"This is not a life," the friend says, gesturing at us and our breakfast picnic.

Mary makes a broader gesture that somehow includes Krayzee-Glayze and the rest of the world around it. "And that is."

The friend turns her attention to me. "If you learn best by repetition," she says slowly, "what have you learned from living on the streets day in and day out with my mother?"

This sounds like it could be one of those trick questions you can't really answer but I give it some thought anyway.

"I'm still alive?" I say finally. Just guessing.

The friend is about to say something when someone leans out the back door and calls something that makes her hurry back inside.

"Let's go to the library," I suggest after a long moment. "It's indoors."

Mary frowns. "Maybe."

"You think it might not be indoors any more?" I'm surprised; that would be very strange, even in the world of the dead.

"No, it's not that." Mary allows herself a moment to laugh at me. "I'm not sure the library is safe any more."

"Why not?"

"When we were there yesterday, I thought I saw a Skinner hiding in a book."

"That's bad. Why didn't you say anything?" I ask, getting upset.

Mary looks ashamed. "I didn't want to scare you. At least, not before I'd had time to review it in my memory. I wasn't sure. I had to think about it."

"Now you're sure?"

She hesitates. "*Pretty* sure." Another pause. "Of course, if I *did* see one, I saw *only* one. The two of us could probably take it. Kick its paper-thin ass. Tear it into little tiny pieces."

"And then we'd have proof," I say.

"Proof?"

"That they exist. The Skinners. We could show everyone the evidence. No one would ever have to get skinned alive again."

Mary stares at me like I said we should do something really crazy, like eat it for dinner. "You think anyone who was in a position to do anything about it actually *would*?"

"Why wouldn't they?" I ask.

She grabs my shoulder and shakes it hard. "Why do you think, you little brain-damaged idiot?" She grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me practically nose-to-nose with her. "What have I been telling you? *Three times* I told you! Do I have to tell you three times *a day* now before you can remember?"

"Because they're dead," I say, feeling like I probably am brain-damaged, too brain-damaged to be as smart as an idiot. "The dead don't do anything."

"Right. *The dead don't do anything*. Why not? Because they're dead. *The dead don't have intention. The dead don't have ambition. The dead don't have free will*. Is any of this sinking in?"

Her eyes look like cloud-colored whirlpools; it occurs to me that this must be what you'd see if you looked down into twin tornadoes from above them, but I'm damned if I know why I'm thinking something like that. I also don't know what being damned is, or if I'm too stupid even for that.

Mary lets go and wipes my cheeks with her thumbs. "Oh, don't cry. You make me feel like I'm a bad person and I'm just trying to look out for you. If something happened to me, you shouldn't be helpless."

The idea makes me cry more. "Do you think you might die again?" I blubber.

"I'm not planning to," Mary says, dabbing a napkin under my nose and making a disgusted face. "But that's the thing about death. It comes unexpectedly. Sneaks up behind you when you're not looking. The next thing you know—"

She jerks her chin at something behind me and I jump, thinking death actually did sneak

up behind me, but it's just someone else who works at Krayzee-Glayze coming out the back door with a big black garbage bag. This one's older than Mary's friend and she looks more bored than anyone else I've ever seen. Maybe she died young, too. Mary's young friend will probably look like this after a while; that's a shame. The dead don't have anything to look forward to. But then, they wouldn't know how to look forward to it if they did. No ambition.

Mary gently pulls my head around to face her again. "OK, you see what I'm talking about?"

I nod and Mary wipes my cheeks again. "I'll try to remember better."

"Good. Now, about the library." She is stashing our leftovers in her tote bag. "Are you brave enough to go there knowing there might be a Skinner hiding somewhere inside?"

I don't hesitate. "Yes. Like you said, we could take it."

"We could." Mary gets up off the a/c unit and tucks her tote bag firmly under her left arm. "But don't go looking for trouble, either. We don't *have* to take it if it doesn't bother us."

"What if it bothers someone else?" I ask.

"Like who—one of the dead?" Mary gives me a look.

I get down off the unit and brush bits of cruller glaze off the front of my jacket before I zip it up. "Then it must be looking for us," I say. "Otherwise, why would it be there?"

"Good question," Mary says. "Maybe it just likes to read."

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The people at the library aren't happy to see us. They never are. I don't know who they *would* be happy to see. Maybe no one. Maybe they want to be alone with all the books.

Mary goes over to the newspapers and settles down with something from far away, where the news is, she says, different and almost interesting, even though it's all about the dead.

I wander along the magazine section. Reading is intermittent with me—sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's impossible; sometimes I manage to make enough sense of the words to get a general idea, which could turn out to be wrong. Could be something about my vision; when it comes to words, I don't always see them clearly. I have the very strong feeling that I learned reading for a specific reason that was out of the ordinary. I think there's no reading where I come from, just pictures.

Today, I can read if I want to make the effort; otherwise, the words are nothing but marks

I can see past to the pictures and not even notice. If there *are* pictures, like on magazine covers. Inside, some of them have pictures and some don't. Or rather, some don't intend to have pictures, but sometimes the marks—the words—make shapes that *almost* mean something to me. I find this disturbing, however. I'd rather see pictures that are meant to be pictures. Mary says words or pictures, they're all just musings of the dead and this almost-meaning I get is just wishful thinking on my part. Now, if she could only tell me what I'm wishing, I wouldn't feel so lost. But, as Mary often reminds me, she doesn't know *everything*, just true things.

It occurs to me that this also means Mary doesn't know everything that's true, either. This is probably an important distinction; I wish I knew why.

My gaze falls on a picture of a woman in odd clothes; her face is strongly colored and she stares as if she knew, when the picture was taken, that I would come along and look at it, and she wanted to be looking right back at me. I'm glad she's not here in person. God knows what kind of disposition she's got. Even the library people don't look that hostile toward me.

A voice whispers in my ear. "Put that down and turn around very slowly."

Something in my chest drops an impossibly long way in a half-second before I recognize the voice as Mary's. "What's wrong?" I whisper.

"Just turn around. *Slowly*." She pulls me around by my elbow so I can see the man sitting at a round table a little ways from where Mary was reading her newspaper. There is a book open in front of him and he would appear to be reading it, except something that looks like a rag is pressed against his face, covering him from hairline to neck. It's colorless, opaque, and hugs the contours of his features so closely, you might almost think it was painted on.

"Is that a Skinner?" I whisper to Mary.

"Yes and no," she says. "It looks like a Skinner, but it's a lot smaller. And he should be screaming."

"Maybe it's a new kind." I remember something I read or heard somewhere. "Maybe they've evolved."

Mary looks at me suspiciously. "Evolved from what?"

That's got to be a trick question but Mary doesn't realize it. I guess even the best of us can play tricks on ourselves without knowing it. Then something occurs to me.

"Maybe it's dead," I say.

Mary starts to tell me I'm crazy and then cuts off. She looks at the guy and the thing on his face, then back at me. She does this two or three times. "I never thought of that," she says. "Everything *does* die, Skinners included. They'd have to have an afterlife, just like anything else."

The man at the table is no longer focused on his book. If he could see anything through the thing on his face, he would be staring directly at us. I can only hope that underneath the Skinner, if that's what it is, his face is not as hostile as that woman in the picture I was looking at. It scares me to think he might look that hostile and I don't even know it.

"So here you are," he says to us, and gets up.

"Back off, dead man," Mary says. "It's no good hounding me. I choose life. I choose *life!*"

I can't help staring at Mary. It isn't the first time I've heard her say something I was thinking earlier, but it never fails to surprise me when she does.

The man looks around—or he looks like he's looking around, with his face still covered—and he seems to see the library people at the check-out desk, who are watching us with big, unhappy eyes. I didn't think they could get any unhappier, but there they are. I wonder briefly if anyone ever got so unhappy they died.

"It's no good hounding her," he calls over to them. "Does this mean anything to any of you?" Then he shakes himself in a funny way and the thing on his face gets—well, not tighter, exactly, but thinner in some way. As if it's sinking onto—*into*—his face.

"Never mind," he says to the library people. "I misunderstood." He smooths his hands over his forehead and I can see his skin texture through the covering. "This isn't *healthy* for either of us," he adds, turning back to Mary and me. "You've got that concept, don't you?"

Mary glances at me. "Which one of us are you talking to?" she asks.

"To be honest," the man says, "I don't know."

"Well, you sit down and think about it," Mary says, "and we'll go powder our noses."

This is Mary's euphemism for going to the toilet, which the library people don't like us to do. But instead of heading for the bathroom, Mary takes me right out the front door, as fast as we can go without running.

Half an hour later, we realize we left her tote bag behind.

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"I'm caught in a feedback loop," Mary says for the sixth or seventh time. I have no idea whether this means what she says is twice as true as it would be normally, or whether six times cancels things out and the seventh would be starting over again on the truth side. "I can't decide if we should go back to see her or not."

She means her friend at Krayzee-Glayze, I know. She's trying to decide if we should

demand more food while Mary yells at her for sending someone after us—either or both of us. What Mary's not sure of is if her friend did send the man, and if she did, did she also know about Skinners, or is that a coincidence? I remind Mary that she usually laughs at people who read too much into coincidence.

"Sure I do," Mary says, too serious to be annoyed at me. "Because they're dead. Coincidence doesn't mean anything for the dead. But *we're* alive. When you're alive, *everything* means *something*."

I have a moment of mild enlightenment, to wit: *only the dead can be clinically paranoid*. I just wish I could remember where I got that term, *clinically paranoid*. It doesn't feel like something related to my true nature; on the other hand, I don't know anything about my true nature to begin with, so I can't really be sure of what's related to it or not.

Mary shakes me. "Come on, we've been walking in circles for two hours. Surely you must have some suggestion by now."

"Am I supposed to?" I say, surprised.

"You've been thinking for so long, you must have come up with *something*."

I look around. We are on a block of storefronts, some boarded up, some not. It looks familiar, but there are a lot of places around the city that look exactly like this, although I can tell them apart more easily when I can read.

I decide to try reading something, anything, thinking that it could inspire a new idea either in me or from Mary. The nearest storefront has a lot of tattered scraps of things almost as thin as what was on that man's face in the library; maybe they attached themselves to the boards over the front window in the same way, and somebody felt the need to try tearing them off. But there is one that looks as if it stuck itself up there only a minute before I noticed it. For a moment, it looks like random marks. Then something shifts, like a lens focusing, and I see the words.

"We create our own reality. Why not create the reality you've always dreamed of? Get started tonight at our free lecture-slash-workshop—"

"Slash," Mary says. "Lecture-*slash*-workshop. But never mind. You did good. Let's see if we can find another." She starts pulling me along the sidewalk.

"Another what?" I ask, looking back at the storefront. I'd like to read the whole thing; it sounds familiar.

"Another poster, or advertisement. Three times and we'll know it's true."

"But I thought *you* already knew what was true," I say.

"And just how the hell do you think *I* find out?" Mary says, impatient.

"I don't know," I tell her. "I don't even have a theory."

Mary pulls me along faster, tugging me through crosswalks against the lights so that the

cars get close enough for me to see the dead drivers and passengers mouthing something at us as we dodge out of the way. They look familiar. Same people? If they are, they've been locked in their cars since the morning migration—no wonder they're so unhappy. But why would they be locked in their cars all day while others go free, at least until the evening exodus? Are they being punished for something?

How could it be possible to punish dead people? And *why*? This is the afterlife. They're dead. It's over.

"What's over?" Mary says. We are standing on a corner next to a taxi. The driver has just gotten out and shouted something at us. Now he is getting back in and trying to rejoin the flow of traffic.

"What?" I say. Mary grabs me by the back of my neck and points my face at a sign on the roof of the taxi.

"Hey, if he doesn't want people pointing at ads on his cab, he shouldn't have them. *Sorehead!*" Mary adds, shouting, as the taxi pulls away. Just before it disappears I catch a glimpse of *We create our own reality*.

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The third time someone tries to give us money while we sit on the steps of the building called Municipal Hall, I suggest to Mary that maybe we should just accept it as true.

"Three times being the charm," I say, hoping I sound wise.

"It's only good for dead things," Mary says. "But if you want some, take some. I won't stop you."

I have a thought. "It won't kill me, will it?"

Mary laughs a little. "Nah. It won't kill you." She laughs a little more. I can tell she's not laughing at me, but I wish she'd let me in on the joke, even if I probably wouldn't understand it.

"Because communication is the essence of life itself," I hear myself say out loud. And I mean, I can hear myself as if I'm hearing someone else speak. Or as if someone else *did* speak, only with my voice.

"Do you have a mirror?" I ask Mary.

She shakes her head, making an irritated face. She's thinking about something important and she doesn't want me to interrupt her train of thought. I feel irritated in response. How does she know that my asking for a mirror might not be directly related to her terribly important thoughts?

It could be. Stranger things have happened. Stranger things have happened *today*.

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The day starts fading away earlier than it did yesterday; by next week, it will be completely dark when the evening exodus begins. Mary has mentioned that it will also be dark for most of the morning migration. I don't see why. Whether it's day or night doesn't affect either—they happen at the same time no matter what. It seems like a needless change.

"It's got nothing to do with the dead," Mary says, leading me up the stairs. "It's the life of the universe around us, going on as usual. The universe has its reasons; the dead have their routine. It's the cycle of life. Look for conference room A."

"Mezzanine," says someone, making us both jump. A dead man in a uniform that is passing as a symbol of authority.

"What about it?" Mary asks him, suspicious.

"Conference Room A is on the mezzanine level, up those stairs." He points to our left and we turn to look at a staircase curving up to a semi-open balcony style area.

"Thank you," Mary says stiffly.

"*De nada*. When you're done creating your own reality, be sure to come back down the same stairs so I can let you out again," the dead man says; he's smiling in a way that isn't true. As if that isn't really his face.

I wonder if he's really dead. And if he's not, what possible reason could he have to pretend? The notion is too absurd; I must be stupider than I thought.

"Why do we have to be locked in?" Mary asks.

"You don't, really," the man says. "It's just that we're keeping winter hours. Building closes at seven; your meeting won't finish till after eight. So we have to let you out when you're done."

"So nobody can come in after seven?" Mary says.

"Only if they've phoned ahead to say they have to come late. We put their names on a list. You got a friend who's gonna be late?"

"No," Mary says, "I just wanted to see if you knew the answer."

"You and about a million other people," the man says. "Of course I know all the answers, that's why I work as a security guard. So people can come in here and quiz me." No, that's definitely not a true smile. "If I get ten more right, I can go home early." He points

at the stairs. "Don't forget; come down the same way." He leans in and lowers his voice. "Don't get any ideas about finding some out-of-the-way spot to bed down in for the night. Because I have a good memory, and I'll notice if you don't come out with the rest of them."

Mary starts to say something angry but he puts up his hands and steps back.

"Just giving you fair warning, ladies. So you can't say I didn't tell you."

"Tell me two more times," I say.

He isn't smiling now. "Have your friend tell you." He walks away. Mary doesn't tell me anything as she pulls me toward the stairs.

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Conference Room A has many more chairs than people, and I get the feeling it's going to stay that way. The chairs are all facing the front of the room, where there is a podium and a microphone. That's all. Otherwise, the room is bare. Not even one of the posters about how we create our own reality.

But just after we arrive, some people in white uniforms wheel in some long tables and line them up in the back. They leave and return with a couple of tall rolling carts with plastic-wrapped trays of food—fresh fruit, vegetables and dip, slices of meat and cheese. Mary and I look around the room and then at each other; there is more than enough here for everyone a few times over. We'll be packing a few lunches.

This reminds me that I haven't eaten since breakfast and I reach for the nearest edible.

My fingertips barely brush the plastic wrap; someone is gripping my wrist.

"That's for later, during the break." The woman holding my hand reminds me of the one on the magazine, but her expression is much friendlier. "By then, we'll have coffee to go with it."

"Decaf?" I ask, to keep her attention on me. Mary is snagging a handful of apple slices and shoving them in her coat pocket.

"And regular," the woman says, patting the back of my hand and letting go. She turns to look at Mary, who stares back at her with defiant innocence.

"What?" Mary says. "You gonna frisk me?" She holds out her arms. "Knock yourself out."

"Maybe later," the woman says and walks up to sit in the front row of seats.

Three other people sit down nearby, one in the same row and two in the row behind. One

of the people in the white uniforms ambles over and stands next to us, adjusting the plastic wrap over the food.

"Just sit down," he says in a low voice. "The sooner they get started, the sooner they let us uncover the grub."

Mary and I sit down at about the halfway point, on the center aisle. Two more people have come in—that's a total of eight, including the woman, and eleven if you count the ones in white uniforms. It seems like that's going to be all, but then suddenly about half a dozen people come in together and take seats in the front row. A few moments later, I hear the door close and a man walks over to the podium.

"We create our own reality," he says. "Does anyone disagree with that?" While he waits, he looks out over the audience as if every chair were filled. Very odd.

"Funny how I never get an answer," he says. "Even though I know none of you agrees with me. Not one person in this room agrees with me that we create our own reality."

The light in the room is that harsh, merciless fluorescent that hides nothing and makes the dead look as dead as they really are. But it's changing; the light is changing. Or my eyes are. My vision is not blurring, exactly, but there's something extra in it, like I'm trying to see through cloudy water.

"Can you move?"

I don't know who's asking, but the answer is no. A dark line cuts horizontally through the center of my visual field. It begins pushing the cloudy top half upward while the bottom half darkens and sharpens in some way, so that I can perceive every single edge of every single object around me.

"How about now? Can you move?"

I feel myself float forward and I realize that I have disengaged from the body I've been walking around in.

"Good. We were afraid you were dead."

"I choose life! I choose life!" whispers someone behind me; Mary.

"Sorry." My vision settles down. Now I can see the man behind the podium much more clearly. The thing on his face is talking to me.

"You can't stay here," the thing says. "You must fulfill your nature. You must migrate."

"Only the dead migrate," Mary whispers behind me. The upper cloudy half of my vision shudders, threatening to descend and take over again; then it's gone, like a rolled-up shade.

"I'm a Skinner," I say. *I* say. I'm remembering now. Two occupied beds in a dark, quiet room.

"No. 'Skinner' is a damaged symbol from that creature you damaged."

The thing means Mary. I didn't damage her originally, but I made it worse. It wasn't intentional; I actually thought touching her perception would help her accept what she saw. The concept of migration is not unknown in this world, after all; their own migratory creatures have places where they stop to rest. But I failed to help her connect the idea of migratory creatures with what she saw wrap itself around the woman in the other hospital bed, the woman I have just disengaged from. The part of me that touched Mary's perception is still entangled, trapped. That wasn't intentional, either, not at first, but now Mary wouldn't let go even if she knew how.

"We are of the cooperative element," the thing in front of the man says. "We migrate and renew. This is a stopover, not a destination. Resume the journey."

It comes to me in one perfect picture that would never need words: migration. The tidal pull is so distant that I've never seen the source, but so powerful that it gives me—us—purpose. We stopped here to rest. None of the creatures called people should have seen us, but some did. We may never know how or why, but the warning to others has gone out: do not stop here, it isn't safe. Meanwhile, the rescue efforts continue. I'm not the first or the last to go astray.

"Don't leave me to die," Mary whispers.

To exist alone, she means; to live without that bit of me tangled up in her perception. She has never been anything but solitary inside until I came; now she thinks she will die if I go. But that's the only thing I *can* do. In our entangled state, neither of us will last much longer. She has her own migration, in a way, that she must complete.

Odd to think of a state of existence where migration actually has an end.

I realize that I'm re-forming; the part of me that has been entangled in Mary is disengaging more and more. Soon I will be a part of the migration again rather than a solitary whole.

But Mary is still not giving up. She wants to keep the awareness that came with our entanglement. It's crippled and distorted, but she wants to keep it any way. It's so much bigger than the old world she knew.

"I choose life! I choose life! I choose *this* life!" Did Mary say that, or did I?

"What can you possibly do on this level of existence?" says the thing Mary calls a Skinner. "There's no migration, no change. The life you say you choose is inconceivably short to you in your original state, and nothing comes after."

I realize I don't believe that. I don't believe it because Mary doesn't; I won't believe it even if I do leave. Entanglement; I can leave Mary's perception, but Mary can't leave mine.

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When my vision clears, I am lying on the floor looking up at some very worried faces, including Mary's.

"She's *not* drunk," Mary is saying. "She just fainted from hunger."

"From hunger?" someone says, as if that were a completely unknown idea.

"We skipped lunch today," Mary says in her you-got-a-problem-with-that voice. "We're very busy with our careers." She helps me sit up and starts pushing apple slices into my mouth. They taste so good they hurt.

Someone says this seems like a good time for a break anyway. Mary gets me up on a chair and tells me to wait, she'll go fix me a sandwich or six. The guy from the podium stands over me looking unhappy. There's nothing on his face but I know it was the guy from the library. I also know that after tonight, I won't be seeing him again. It's just a fluke I'm seeing him now, because in truth, he has already left.

"Elvis," I say to Mary, "has left the building."

"I hope he remembered to take the right staircase," she says.

"You and your friend are just here for the food, aren't you," he says, and then looks confused, as if he didn't mean to say that at all.

"I keep thinking I'll find people open to new suggestions," he says tiredly. "But it always turns out they're in it for the food."

"Well, don't give up," I say. "It's a big world. You'll find the right people." I don't know why I'm telling him this; it's more like I have to say it than he has to hear it. I look up at him and for a moment, I have a mental image of him with a cloth over his face.

Then Mary is pulling me to my feet. All she has done today is pull me here and pull me there. I feel like I'm going to spend the rest of my life with her pulling me from place to place.

"Come on," she says and shoves a sandwich into my left hand. "Let them create their own reality. We'll go find something else."

"What?" I say.

"I don't know," Mary says cheerfully. I don't think she's ever been this happy. "I don't know, but I can't wait to see it."

Me, neither. Me, neither. Third and last time: me, neither.

The End

