

# The Edge of Nowhere

## JAMES PATRICK KELLY

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*"The Edge of Nowhere" was published in Asimov's. It is a posthuman story with some references to Swanwick's Darger series, we think—see the Swanwick story later in this book, and perhaps also Swanwick' classic tale, "The Ends of the Earth." It is a far future small town Utopia set "nowhere"—in the "cognisphere" of humanity. It relates what happens when three talking dogs show up and ask for a book.*

Lorraine Carraway scowled at the dogs through the plate glass window of the Casa de la Laughing Cookie and Very Memorial Library. The dogs squatted in a row next to the book drop, acting as if they owned the sidewalk. There were three of them, grand in their bowler hats and paisley vests and bow ties. They were like no dogs Rain had ever seen before. One of them wore a gold watch on its collar, which was pure affectation since it couldn't possibly see the dial. Bad dogs, she was certain of that, recreated out of rust and dead tires and old Coke bottles by the cognisphere and then dispatched to Nowhere to spy on the real people and cause at least three different kinds of trouble.

Will turned a page in his loose-leaf binder. "They still out there?" He glanced up at her, his No. 2 pencil poised over a blank page.

"What the hell do they think they're doing?" Rain made brushing motions just under the windowsill. "Go away. Scram!"

"Scram?" said Will. "Is scam a word?"

Will had been writing *The Great American Novel* ever since he had stopped trying to prove Fermat's Last Theorem. Before that he had been in training to run a sub four-minute mile. She'd had to explain to him that the mile was a measure of distance, like the cubit or the fathom or the meter. Rain had several books about ancient measurement in the Very Memorial Library and Will had borrowed them to lay out a course to practice on. They'd known each other since the week after Will had been revived, but they had first had sex during his running phase. It turned out that runners made wonderfully energetic lovers—especially nineteen-year-old runners. She had been there to time his personal best at 4:21:15. But now he was up to Chapter Eleven of *The Great American Novel*. He had taken on the project after Rain assured him that the great American novel had yet to be written. These days, not many people were going for it.

"Where do dogs like that come from, anyway?" Will said.

"Don't be asking her about dogs," called Fast Eddie from his cookie lab. "Rain hates all dogs, don't you know?"

Rain was going to deny this, but the Casa de la Laughing Cookie was Fast Eddie's shop. Since he let her keep her books in the broken meat locker and call it a library, she tried not to give him any headaches. Of course, Rain didn't *hate* dogs, it was just that she had no use for their smell, their turds hidden in lawns, or the way they tried to lick her face with their slimy tongues. Of course, this bunch wasn't the same as the dim-witted dogs people kept around town. They were obviously creatures of the cognisphere; she expected that they would be better behaved.

Will came up beside her. "I'm thinking the liver-colored one with the ears is a bloodhound." He nodded at the big dog with the watch on its collar. "The others look like terriers of some sort. They've got a pointer's skull and the short powerful legs. Feisty dogs, killers actually. Fox hunters used to carry terriers in their saddlebags and when their hounds cornered the poor fox, they'd release the terriers to finish him off."

"How do you know that?" said Rain, suddenly afraid that there would be dogs in *The Great American Novel*.

"Read it somewhere." He considered. "Jane Austen? Evelyn Waugh?"

At that moment, the bloodhound raised his snout. Rain got the impression that he was sniffing the air. He stared through the front window at... who? Rain? Will? Some signal passed between the dogs then, because they all stood. One of the terriers reared up on its hind legs and batted the door handle. Rain ducked from Will's side and retreated to the safety of her desk.

"I'm betting they're not here to buy happy crumbs." Will scratched behind his ear with the rubber eraser on his pencil.

The terrier released the latch on the second try and the door swung open. The shop bell tinkled as the dogs entered. Fast Eddie slid out of the lab, wiping his hands on his apron. He stood behind the display case that held several dozen lead crystal trays filled with artfully broken psychotropic cookies. Rain hoped that he'd come to lend her moral support and not just to see if the dogs wanted his baked goods. The terriers deployed themselves just inside the door, as if to prevent anyone from leaving. Will stooped to shake the paw of the dog nearest him.

"Are you an Airedale or a Welsh?" he said.

"Never mind that now," said the dog.

The bloodhound padded up to Rain, who was glad to have the desk between them. She got a distinct whiff of damp fur and dried spit as he approached. She wrinkled her nose and wondered what she smelled like to him.

The bloodhound heaved his bulk onto his hind legs. He took two shaky steps toward her and then his forepaws were scrabbling against the top of her desk. The dark pads unfolded into thick, clawed fingers; instead of a dewclaw, the thing had a thumb. "I'm looking for a book," said the dog. His bowler hat tipped precariously. "My name is Baskerville."

Rain frowned at the scratches the dog's claws made on her desktop. "Well, you've got *that* wrong." She leaned back in her chair to get away from its breath. "Baskerville wasn't the hound's name. Sir Charles Baskerville was Sherlock Holmes's *client*."

"You may recall that Sir Charles was frightened to death by the hound well before Dr. Mortimer called on Holmes," Baskerville said. He had a voice like a kettle drum. "The client was actually his nephew, Sir Henry."

Rain chewed at her lower lip. "Dogs don't wear hats." She didn't care to be contradicted by some clumsy artifact of the cognisphere. "Or ties. Are you even real?"

"Rather a rude question, don't you think?" Baskerville regarded her with sorrowful melted-chocolate eyes. "Are *you* real?"

The dog was right; this was the one thing the residents of Nowhere never asked. "I don't have your damn book." Rain opened the top drawer of the desk, the one where she threw all her loose junk. It was a way to keep the dog from seeing her embarrassment.

"How do you know?" he said reasonably. "I haven't told you what it is."

She sorted through the contents of the drawer as if searching for something. She moved the dental floss, destiny dice, blank catalog cards, a tape measure, her father's medals, the two dead watches and finally picked out a bottle of ink and the Waterman 1897 Eyedropper fountain pen that Will had given her to make up for the fight they'd had about the laundry. The dog waited politely. "Well?" She unscrewed the lid of the ink bottle.

"It's called *The Last President*" said Baskerville, "I'm afraid I don't know the author."

Rain felt the blood drain from her face. *The Last President* had been Will's working title for his book, just before he had started calling it *The Great American Novel*. She dipped the nib of the fountain pen into the ink bottle, pulled the filling lever and then wiped the nib on a tissue. "Never heard of it," she said as she wrote *Last Prez??* in her daybook. She glanced over at Will, and caught him squirming on his chair. He looked as if his pockets were full of crickets. "Fiction or non-fiction?"

"Fiction."

She wrote that down. "Short stories or a novel?"

"I'm not sure. A novel, I think."

The shop bell tinkled as Mrs. Snopes cracked the door open. She hesitated when she bumped one of the terriers. "Is something wrong?" she said, not taking her hand from the handle.

"Right as nails," said Fast Eddie. "Come in, Helen, good to see you. These folks are here for Rain. The big one is Mr. Baskerville and—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your names." He gave the terriers a welcoming smile. Fast Eddie had become the friendliest man in Nowhere ever since his wife had stepped off the edge of town and disappeared.

"Spot," said one.

"Rover," said the other.

"Folks?" muttered Mrs. Snopes. "Dogs is what I call 'em." She inhaled, twisted her torso and squeezed between the two terriers. Mrs. Snopes was very limber; she taught swing yoga at the Town Hall Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights from 6-7:30. "I've got a taste for some crumbs of your banana oatmeal bar," she said. "That last one laid me out for the better part of an afternoon. How are they breaking today, Eddie?"

"Let's just see." He set a tray on the top of the display case and pulled on a glove to sort through the broken cookies.

"You are Lorraine Carraway?" said Baskerville.

"That's her name, you bet." Will broke in impulsively. "But she hates it." He crumpled the loose-leaf page he had been writing on, tossed it at the trashcan and missed. "Call her Rain."

Rain bristled. She didn't hate her name; she just didn't believe in it.

"And you are?" said the bloodhound. His lips curled away from pointed teeth and black gums in a grotesque parody of a smile.

"Willy Werther, but everyone calls me Will."

"I see you are supplied with pencil and paper, young Will. Are you a writer?"

"Me? Oh, no. No." He feigned a yawn. "Well, sort of." For a moment, Rain was certain that he was going to blurt out that *he* was the author of *The Last President*. She wasn't sure why she thought that would be a bad idea, but she did. "I... uh..." Now that Will had Baskerville's attention, he didn't seem to know what to do with it. "I've been trying to remember jokes for Eddie to tell at church," he said. "Want to hear one?" Fast Eddie and Mrs. Snopes glanced up from their cookie deliberations. "Okay then, how do you keep your dog from digging in the garden?"

"I don't know, Will." Rain just wanted him to shut up. "How?"

"Take away his shovel." Will looked from Baskerville to Rain and then to Fast Eddie. "No?"

"No." Eddie, who had just become a deacon in the Temple of the Eternal Smile, shook his head. "God likes Her jokes to be funny."

"Funny." Will nodded. "Got it. So what's this book about anyway, Mr. B?"

"Will, I just don't know," said the bloodhound. "That's why I'd like to read it." Baskerville turned and yipped over his shoulder. Rover trotted to him and the bloodhound dropped onto all fours. Rain couldn't see what passed between them because the desk blocked her view, but when Baskerville heaved himself upright again he was holding a brass dog whistle in his paw. He dropped it, clattering, on the desktop in front of Rain.

"When you find the book, Rain," said Baskerville, "give us a call."

Rain didn't like it that Baskerville just assumed that she would take on the search. "Wait a minute," she said. "Why do you need me to look for it? You're part of the cogni-sphere, right? You already *know* everything."

"We have access to everything," said Baskerville. "Retrieval is another matter." He growled at Spot. The shop bell tinkled as he opened the door. "I look forward to hearing from you, Rain. Will, it was a pleasure to meet you." The bloodhound nodded at Fast Eddie and Mrs. Snopes, but they paid him no attention. Their heads were bent over the tray of crumbs. Baskerville left the shop, claws clicking against the gray linoleum. The terriers followed him out.

"Nice dogs." Will affected an unconcerned saunter as he crossed the room, although he flew the last few steps. "My book, Rain!" he whispered, his voice thick. With what? Fear? Pride?

"Is it?" Rain had yet to read a word of *The Great American Novel*; Will claimed it was too rough to show. Although she could imagine that this might be true, she couldn't help but resent being shut out. She offered him the whistle. "So call them."

"What are you saying?" He shrank back, as if mere proximity to the whistle might shrivel his soul.

"They're from..." He pointed through the window toward the precipitous edge of the mesa on which Nowhere perched. "... out there."

Nobody knew where the cognisphere was located exactly, or even if it occupied physical space at all. "All right then, don't." Rain shrugged and pocketed the whistle.

Will seemed disappointed in her. He obviously had three hundred things he wanted to say—and she was supposed to listen. He had always been an excitable boy, although Rain hadn't seen him this wound up since the first time they had made love. But this was neither the time nor the place for feverish speculation. She put a finger to her lips and nodded toward the cookie counter.

Mrs. Snopes picked out a four gram, elongated piece of banana oatmeal cookie ornamented with cream and cinnamon hallucinogenic sprinkles. She paid for it with the story of how her sister Melva had run away from home when she was eleven and they had found her two days later sleeping in the neighbor's treehouse. They had heard the story before, but not the part about the hair dryer. Fast Eddie earned an audience credit on the Barrows's Memory Exchange but the cognisphere deposited an extra quarter point into Mrs. Snopes's account for the new detail, according to the Laughing Cookie's MemEx register. Afterward, Fast Eddie insisted that Rain admire the banana oatmeal crumb before he wrapped it up for Mrs. Snopes. Rain had to agree it was quite striking. She said it reminded her of Emily Dickinson.

They closed the Very Memorial Library early. Usually after work, Will and Rain swept some of Eddie's cookie dust into a baggie and went looking for a spot to picnic. Their favorites were the overlook at the southwestern edge of town and the roof of the Button Factory, although on a hot day they also liked the mossy coolness of the abandoned fallout shelter.

But not this unhappy day. Almost as soon as they stepped onto Onion Street, they were fighting. *First she* suggested that Will show her his book. *Then he* said not yet and asked if she had any idea why the dogs were asking about it. *Then she* said no—perhaps a jot too emphatically—*because he* apparently understood her to be puzzled as to why dogs should care about a nobody like him. *Then he* wondered aloud if maybe she wasn't just a little jealous, *which she* said was a dumb thing to say, *which he* took exactly the wrong way.

Will informed her icily that he was going home because he needed to make changes to Chapter Four. Alarmed at how their row had escalated, Rain suggested that maybe they could meet later. He just shrugged and turned away. Stung, she watched him jog down Onion Street.

*Later, maybe*—being together with Will had never sounded so contingent.

Rain decided to blame the dogs. It was hard enough staying sane here in Nowhere, finding the courage each day not to step off the edge. They didn't need yet another cancerous mystery eating at their lives. And Will was just a kid, she reminded herself. Nineteen, male, impulsive, too smart for his own good, but years from being wise. Of course he was entitled to his moods. She'd always waited him out before, because even though he made her toes curl in frustration sometimes, she did love the boy.

In the meantime, there was no way around it: she'd have to ask Chance Conrad about *The Last President*. She took a right onto Abbey Road, nodding curtly at the passersby. She knew what most people thought about her: that she was impatient and bitter and that she preferred books to people. Of course, they were all wrong, but she had given up trying to explain herself. She ignored Bingo Finn slouching in the entrance to Goriot's Pachinko Palazzo and hurried past Lin-ton's Fruit and Daily Spectator, the Prynne Building, and the drunks at the outdoor tables in front of the Sunspot. She noticed with annoyance that the Drew Barrymore version of *The Wizard of Oz* was playing for another week at the Zieg-fowl Feelies. At Uncle Buddy's she took a right, then a left onto Fairview which dead ended in

the grassy bulk of the Barrow.

Everything in Nowhere had come out of the Barrow: Rain's fountain pen, the books in the Very Memorial Library, Will's endless packs of blank, loose-leaf paper, Fast Eddie's crystal trays and Mrs. Snopes's yoga mats. And, of course, all the people.

The last thing Rain remembered about the world was falling asleep in her husband Roger's arms. It had been a warm night in May 2009. Roger had worked late so they had ordered a sausage and green pepper pizza and had watched the last half hour of *The African Queen* before they went to bed. It was *so* romantic, even if Nicholson and Garbo were old. She could remember Roger doing his atrocious Nicholson imitation while he brushed his teeth. They had cuddled briefly in the dark but he said he was too tired to make love. They must have kissed good night—yes, no doubt a long and tender last kiss. One of the things she hated most about Nowhere was that she couldn't remember any of Roger's kisses or his face or what he looked like naked. He was just a warm, pale, friendly blur. Some people in Nowhere said it was a mercy that nobody could remember the ones they had loved in the world. Rain was not one of those people.

Will said that the last thing he remembered was falling asleep in his *Nintendo and American Culture* class at Northern Arizona University in the fall of 2023. He could recall everything about the two sexual conquests he had managed in his brief time in the world—Talley Lotterhand and Paula Herbst—but then by his own admission he had never really been in love.

The Barrow was a warehouse buried under the mesa. Rain climbed down to the loading dock and knocked on the sectional steel door. After a few moments she heard the whine of an electric motor as the door clattered up on its tracks. Chance Conrad stood just inside, blinking in the afternoon sunlight. He was a handsome, graying man, who balanced a receding hairline with a delicate beard. Although he had a light step and an easy manner, the skin under his eyes was dark and pouchy. Some said this was because Chance didn't sleep much since he was so busy managing the Barrow. Others maintained that he didn't sleep at all, because he hadn't been revived like the rest of the residents of Nowhere. He was a construct of the cognisphere. It stood to reason, people said. How could anyone with a name like Chance Conrad be real?

"Lorraine!" he said. "And here I was about to write this day off as a total loss." He put his hand on her shoulder and urged her through the entrance. "Come, come in." Chance had no use for daylight; that was another strike against his being real. Once the Barrow was safely locked down again he relaxed. "So," he said, "here we are, just the two of us. I'm hoping this means you've finally dumped the boy genius?"

Rain had long since learned that the best way to deflect Chance's relentless flirting was just to ignore it. As far as she knew, he had never taken a lover. She took a deep breath and counted to five. *Unu, du, tri, kvar, kvin*. The air in the Barrow had the familiar damp weight she remembered from when she first woke up at Nowhere; it settled into Rain's lungs like a cold. Before her were crates and jars and barrels and boxes of goods that the people of Nowhere had asked the cognisphere to recreate. Later that night Ferdie Raskolnikov and his crew would load the lot onto trucks for delivery around town tomorrow.

"What's this?" Rain bent to examine a wide-bladed shovel cast with a solid steel handle. It was so heavy that she could barely lift it.

"Shelly Castorp thinks she's planting daffodils with this." Chance shook his head. "I told her that the handles of garden tools were always made of wood but she claims her father had a shovel just like that one." He shook his head. "The specific gravity of steel is 7.80 grams per cubic centimeter, you know."

"Oh?" When Rain let the handle go, the shovel clanged against the cement floor. "Can we grow

daffodils?"

"We'll see." Chance muscled the shovel back into place on its pallet. He probably didn't appreciate her handling other people's orders. "I'm racking my brains trying to remember if I've got something here for you. But I don't, do I?"

"How about those binoculars I keep asking for?"

"I send the requests..." He spread his hands. "They all bounce." The corners of his mouth twitched. "So is this about us? At long last?"

"I'm just looking for a book, Chance. A novel." "Oh," he said, crestfallen. "Better come to the office." Normally if Rain wanted to add a book to the Very Memorial Library, she'd call Chance and put in an order. Retrieving books was usually no problem for the collective intelligence of humanity, which had uploaded itself into the cognisphere sometime in the late twenty-third century. All it needed was an author and title. Failing that, a plot description or even just a memorable line might suffice for the cognisphere to perform a plausible, if not completely accurate, reconstruction of some lost text. In fact, depending on the quality of the description, the cognisphere would recreate a version of pretty much anything the citizens of Nowhere could remember from the world.

Exactly how it accomplished this, and more important, why it bothered, was a mystery.

Chance's office was tucked into the rear of the Barrow, next to the creche. On the way, they passed the Big Board of the MemEx, which tracked audience and storyteller accounts for all the residents of Nowhere and sorted and cataloged the accumulated memories. Chance stopped by the creche to check the vitals of Rahim Aziz, who was destined to become the newest citizen of Nowhere, thus bringing the population back up to the standard 853. Rahim was to be an elderly man with a crown of snowy white hair surrounding an oval bald spot. He was replacing Lucy Panza, the tennis pro and Town Calligrapher, who had gone missing two weeks ago and was presumed to have thrown herself over the edge without telling anyone.

"Old Aziz isn't quite as easy on the eye as you were," said Chance, who never failed to remind Rain that he had seen her naked during her revival. Rahim floated on his back in a clear tube filled with a yellow, serous fluid. He had a bit of a paunch and the skin of his legs and under his arms was wrinkled. Rain noted with distaste that he had a penis tattoo of an elephant.

"When will you decant him?"

Chance nibbed a thumb across a readout shell built into the wall of the creche. "Tomorrow, maybe." The shell meant nothing to Rain. "Tuesday at the latest."

Chance Conrad's office was not so much decorated as overstuffed. Dolls and crystal and tools and fossils and clocks jostled across shelves and the tops of cabinets and chests. The walls were covered with pix from feelies made after Rain's time in the world, although she had seen some of them at the Ziegfowl. She recognized Oud's *Birthdeath*, Fay Wray in full fetish from *Time StRanger* and the wedding cake scene from *Two of Neala*. Will claimed the feelies had triggered the cancerous growth of history—when all the dead actors and sports stars and politicians started having second careers, the past had consumed the present.

"So this is about a novel then?" Chance moved behind his desk but did not sit down. "Called?" He waved a hand over his desktop and its eye winked at him.

"*The Last President*." Rain sat in the chair opposite him.

"Precedent as in a time-honored custom, or president as in Marie Louka?"

"The latter."

He chuckled. "You know, you're the only person in this town who would say *the latter*. I love that. Would you have my baby?"

"No."

"Marry me?"

"Uh-uh."

"Sleep with me?"

"*Chance.*"

He sighed. "Who's the author?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Chance rubbed under his eyes with the heels of his hands. "You're sure about that? You wouldn't care to take a wild guess? Last name begins with the letter... what? A through K? L through Z?"

"Sorry."

He stepped from behind the desk and his desktop shut its eye. "Well, the damn doggie didn't know either, which is why I couldn't help him."

Rain groaned. "He's been here already?"

"Him and a couple of his pooch pals." Chance opened the igloo which stood humming beside the door. "Cooler?" He pulled out a frosty pitcher filled with something thick and glaucous. "It's just broccoli nectar and a little ethanol-style vodka."

Rain shook her head. "But that doesn't make sense." She could hear the whine in her voice. "They're agents of the cognisphere, right? And you access the cognisphere. Why would it ask you to ask itself?"

"Exactly." Chance closed the door and locked it. This struck Rain as odd; maybe he was afraid that Ferdi Raskol-nikov would barge in on them. "Things have been loopy here lately," he said. "You should see some of the mistakes we've had to send back." He poured broccoli cocktail for himself. It oozed from the pitcher and landed in his coffee mug with a thick *plop*. "I've spent all afternoon trying to convince myself that the dogs are some kind of a workaround, maybe to jog some lost data loose from the MemEx." He replaced the pitcher in the igloo and settled onto the chair behind his desk. "But now you show up and I'm wondering: Why is Rain asking me for this book?"

She frowned. "I ask you for all my books."

He considered for a moment, tapping the finger against his forehead and then pointed at her. "Let me tell you a story." Rain started to object that she had neither goods nor services to offer him in return and she had just drained her MemEx account to dry spit, but he silenced her with a wave. "No, this one is free." He took a sip of liquid broccoli. "An audience credit unencumbered, offered to the woman of my dreams."



She stuck out her tongue.

"Why does this place exist?" he asked.

"The Barrow?"

"Nowhere."

"Ah, eschatology." She laughed bitterly. "Well, Father Samsa claims this is the afterlife, although I'll be damned if I know whether it's heaven or hell."

"I know you don't believe *that*" said Chance. "So then this is some game that the cognisphere is playing? We're virtual chesspersons?"

Rain shrugged.

"What happens when we step off the edge?"

"Nobody knows." Just then a cacophony of clocks yawped, pinged, and buzzed in six o'clock. "This isn't much of a story, Chance."

"Patience, love. So you think the cognisphere recreated us for a reason?"

"Maybe. Okay, sure." A huge spider with eight paintbrush legs shook itself and stretched on a teak cabinet. "We're in a zoo. A museum."

"Or maybe some kind of primitive backup. The cognisphere keeps us around because there's a chance that it might fail, go crazy—I don't know. If that happened, we could start over."

"Except we'd all die without the cognisphere." The spider stepped onto the wall and picked its way toward the nearest corner. "And nobody's made any babies that I know of. We're not exactly Adam and Eve material, Chance."

"But that's damn scary, no? Makes the case that none of us is real."

Rain liked him better when he was trying to coax her into bed. "Enough." She pushed her chair back and started to get up.

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands in surrender. "Story time. When I was a kid, I used to collect meanies."

"Meanies?" She settled back down.

"Probably after your time. They were 'bots, about so big." He held forefinger and thumb a couple of centimeters apart. "Little fighting toys. There were gorilla meanies and ghoulish meanies and Nazi meanies and demon meanies and dino meanies. Fifty-two in all, one for every week of the year. You set them loose in the meanie arena and they would try to kill one another. If they died, they'd shut down for twenty-four hours. Now if meanies fought one on one, they would always draw. But when you formed them into teams, their powers combined in different ways. For instance, a ghoulish and Nazi team could defeat any other team of two—except the dino and yeti. For the better part of a year, I rushed home from school every day to play with the things. I kept trying combinations until I could pretty much predict the outcome of every battle. Then I lost interest."

"Speaking of losing interest," said Rain, who was distracted by the spider decorating the corner of Chance's office in traceries of blue and green.

"I'm getting there." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and took another sip from the mug. "So a couple of years go by and I'm twelve now. One night I'm in my room and I hear this squeaking coming from under my bed. I pull out the old meanie arena, which has been gathering dust all this time, and I see that a mouse has blundered into it and is being attacked by a squad of meanies. And just like tha^ I'm fascinated with them all over again. For weeks I drop crickets and frogs and garter snakes into the arena and watch them try to survive."

"That's sick."

"No question. But then boys can't help themselves when it comes to mindless cruelty. Anyway, it didn't last. The wildlife was too hard on the poor little 'bots." He drained the last of the broccoli. "But the point is that I got bored playing with a closed set of meanies. Even though I hadn't actually tried all possible combinations, after a while I could see that nothing much new was ever going to happen. But then the mouse changed everything." He leaned forward across the desk. "So let me propose a thought experiment to you, my lovely Lorraine. This mysterious novel that everyone is so eager to find? What if the last name of the author began with the letter..." He paused and then seemed to pluck something out of the air. "Oh, let's say 'W.'"

Rain started.

"And just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that the first name also begins with 'W'... Ah, I see from your expression that this thought has also occurred to you."

"It's not him," said Rain. "He was revived at nineteen; he's just a kid. Why would the cognisphere care anything about him?"

"Because he's the mouse in our sad, little arena. He isn't simply recycling memories of the world like the rest of us. The novel your doggies are looking for doesn't exist in the cognisphere, never did. Because it's being written right here, right now. Maybe imagination is in short supply wherever the doggies come from. Lord knows there isn't a hell of a lot of it in Nowhere."

Rain would have liked to deny it, but she could feel the insult sticking to her. "How do you know he's writing a novel?"

"I supply the paper, Rain. Reams and reams of it. Besides, this may be hell, as Father Samsa insists, but it's also a small town. We meddle in each other's business, what else is there to do?" His voice softened; Rain thought that if Chance ever did take a lover, this would be how he might speak to her. "Is the book any good? Because if it is, I'd like to read it."

"I don't know." At that moment, Rain felt a drop of something cold hit the back of her hand. There was a dot the color of sky on her knuckle. She looked up at the spider hanging from the ceiling on an azure thread. "He doesn't show it to me. Your toy is dripping."

"Really?" Chance came around the desk. "A woman of your considerable charms is taking no for an answer?" He reached up and cradled the spider into his arms. "Go get him, Rain, You don't want to keep your mouse waiting." He carried the spider to the teak cabinet.

Rain rubbed at the blue spot on her hand but the stain had penetrated her skin. She couldn't even smudge it.

But Will wasn't waiting, at least not for Rain. She stopped by their apartment but he wasn't there and he hadn't left a note. Neither was he at the Button Factory nor Queequeg's Kava Cave. She looked in at the Laughing Cookie just as Fast Eddie was locking up. No Will. She finally tracked him down at the

overlook, by the blue picnic table under the chestnut trees.

Normally they came here for the view, which was spectacular. A field of wildflowers, tidy-tips and mullein and tick-seed and bindweed, sloped steeply down to the edge of the mesa. But Will was paying no attention to the scenery. He had scattered a stack of five loose-leaf binders across the table; the whole of *The Great American Novel* or *The Last President* or whatever the hell it was called. Three of the binders were open. He was reading—but apparently not writing in—a fourth. A No. 2 pencil was tucked behind his ear. Something about Will's body language disturbed Rain. He usually sprawled awkwardly wherever he came to rest, a giraffe trying to settle on a hammock. Now he was gathered into himself, hunched over the binder like an old man. Rain came up behind him and kneaded his shoulders for a moment.

He leaned back and sighed.

"Sorry about this afternoon." She bent to nibble his ear. "Have you eaten?"

"No." He kissed the air in front of him but did not look at her.

She peeked at the loose-leaf page in front of him and tried to decipher the handwriting, which was not quite as legible as an EEG chart... *knelt before the coffin, her eyes wide in the dim holy light of the cathedral. His face was wavy...* No, thought Rain straightening up before he suspected that she was reading. Not *wavy*. *Waxy*. "Beautiful evening," she said.

Will shut the binder he had been reading and gazed distractedly toward the horizon.

Rain had not been completely honest with Chance. It was true that Will hadn't shown her the novel, but she *had* read some of it. She had stolen glimpses over his shoulder or read upside down when she was sitting across from him. Then there was the one guilty afternoon when she had come back to their apartment and gobbled up pages 34-52 before her conscience mastered her curiosity. The long passage had taken place in a bunker during one of the Resource Wars. The President of Great America, Lawrence Goodman, had been reminiscing with his former mistress and current National Security Advisor, Rebecca Santorino, about Akron, where they had first fallen in love years ago and which had just been obliterated in retaliation for an American strike on Zhengzhou. Two pages later they were thrashing on the president's bed and ripping each other's clothes off. Rain had begun this part with great interest, hoping to gain new insight into Will's sexual tastes, but had closed the binder uneasily just as the president was tying his lover to the Louis XVI ar-moire with silk Atura neckties.

Will closed the other open binders and stacked all five into a pile. Then he pulled the pencil from behind his ear, snapped it in two, and let the pieces roll out of his hand under the picnic table. He gave her an odd, lopsided smile.

"Will, what's the matter?" Rain stared. "Are you okay?"

In response, he pulled a baggie of cookie dust from his shirt pocket and jiggled it.

"Here?" she said, coloring. "In plain sight?" Usually they hid out when they were eating dust, at least until they weathered the first rush. The Cocoa Peanut Butter Chunk made them giggly and not a little stupid. Macaroon Sandies often hit Rain like powdered lust.

"There's no one to see." Will licked his forefinger and stuck it into the bag. "Besides, what if there was?" He extended the finger toward her, the tip and nail coated with the parti-colored powder. "Does anyone here care what we do?"

She considered telling him then what Chance Conrad had said about small towns, but she could see that Will was having a mood. So she just opened her mouth and obediently stuck her tongue out. As he rotated the finger across the middle of her tongue, she tasted the sweet, spicy grit. She closed her mouth on the finger and he pulled it slowly through her lips.

"Now you," she said, reaching for the baggie. They always fed each other cookie dust.

Rain and Will sat on the tabletop with their feet on the seat, facing the slope that led down to the edge of Nowhere. The world beneath the impossibly high cliff was impossibly flat, but this was still Rain's favorite lookout, even if it was probably an illusion. The land stretched out in a kind of grid with rectangles in every color of green: the brooding green of forests, the dreaming green of fields under cultivation, and the confused gray-green of scrub land. Dividing the rectangles were ribbons the color of wet sand. Rain liked to think they were roads, although she had never spotted any traffic on them. She reached for Will's hand and he closed it around hers. He was right: she didn't care if anyone saw them together like this. His skin was Warm and rough. As she rubbed her finger over the back of his hand, she thought she could make out a faded blue spot. But maybe it was a trick of the twilight, or a cookie hallucination.

The rectangles and the ribbons of the land to the southwest had always reminded her of something, but she had never quite been able to figure out what. Now as Eddie's magic cookie dust sparked through her bloodstream, and she felt Will's warm hand in hers, she thought of a trip she had taken with her father when she was just a kid to a museum in an old city called Manhilton, that got blown up afterward. In the museum were very old pix that just hung on the wall and mostly didn't do anything, and she remembered taking a cab to get there and the cabbie had asked what her name was but she wouldn't tell him so he called her *little girl* which she didn't like because she was seven already, and the museum had escalators that whispered music, and there was one really, really big room filled with pix of all blurry water lilies, and outside in a sculpture garden there were statues made of metal and rocks but there were no flowers because it was cold so she and Dad didn't stay out there very long and inside again were lots of pix of women with three eyes and too many corners and then some wide blue men blocked her view of the Mona Lisa so she never really saw that one, which everyone said later was supposed to be so special but one she did see and remembered now was a pix of a grid that had colored rectangles and with ribbons of red and yellow separating them, and she asked her dad if it was a map of the museum and he laughed down at her because her dad was so tall, tall as any statue and he said the pix wasn't a map, it was a *mondrian* and she asked him what a *mondrian* was and then he laughed again and she laughed and it was so easy to laugh in those days and Will was laughing too.

"I want to go down there." He laughed as he pointed down at the *mondrian* which stretched into the rosy distance.

"There?" Rain didn't understand; the best part of her was still in the museum with her father. "Why?"

"Because there are people living there. Must be why Chance won't give out binoculars or telescopes." He let go of her hand. "Because it's not here."

"You're going to step over the edge?" Her voice rose in alarm.

"No, silly." He leapt up, stood on the tabletop and raised his arms to the sky. "I'm going to climb down."

"But that's the same thing."

"No, it isn't. I'll show you." He slid off the picnic table and started toward the thicket of scruffy evergreens and brambles that had overgrown the edge of Nowhere. He walked along this tangle until he came to a bit of blue rag tied to a branch, glanced over his shoulder to see if she was still with him, and then wriggled into the scrub. Rain followed.

They emerged into a tiny clearing. She sidled beside him and he slipped an arm around her waist to brace her. The cliff was steep here but not sheer. She could make out a narrow dirt track that switched back through scree and stunted fir. Maybe a mountain goat could negotiate it, if there were any mountain goats. But a single misstep would send Will plunging headlong. And then there was the Drop. Everyone knew about the Drop. They traded stories about it all the time. Scary stories. She was about to ask him why, if there were people down there, they hadn't climbed up for a visit, when he kicked a stone over the edge. They watched it bounce straight down and disappear over a ledge.

"Lucy Panza showed me this," said Will, his face flushed with excitement.

Rain wondered when he'd had time to go exploring the edge with Lucy Panza. "But she stepped over the edge."

"No," he said. "She didn't."

She considered the awful slope for a moment and shuddered. "I'm not going down there, Will."

He continued peering down the dirt track. "I know," he said.

The calm with which he said it was like a slap in the face. She stared at him, speechless, until he finally met her gaze. "I'll come back for you." He gave her the goofy, apologetic grin he always summoned up when he upset her. "I'll make sure the path is safe and I'll make all kinds of friends down at the bottom and when the time is right, I'll be back."

"But what about your book?"

He blew a dismissive breath between his lips. "I'm all set with that."

"It's finished?"

"It's crap, Rain." His voice was flat. "I'm not wasting any more time writing about some stupid made-up president. There are no more presidents. And how can anyone write the Great American Novel when there is no more America?" He caught his breath. "Sorry," he said. "I know that's what you wanted me to do." He gave her a sour smile. "You're welcome to read it if you want. Or hand it over to the dogs. That should be good for a laugh." Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Of course Rain kissed him back. She wanted to drag him down on top of her and rip his clothes off, although there really wasn't enough room here to make love. She would even have let him take her on the picnic table, *tie her* to the damn table, if that's what he had wanted. But his wasn't the kind of kiss that started anything.

"So I'm coming back, I promise," he murmured into her ear. "Just tell everyone that you're waiting for me."

"Wait a minute." She twisted away from him. "You're going now? It's almost dark. We just ate cookie dust." She couldn't believe he was serious. This was such a typical boneheaded-Will stunt he was pulling. "Come home, honey," she said. "Get some sleep. Things might look different in the morning."

He stroked her hair. "I've got at least another hour of light," he said. "Believe me, I've thought about this a long time, Rain." Then he brushed his finger against her lips. "I love you."

He took a step over the edge and another. He had gone about a dozen meters before his feet went out from beneath him and he fell backward, skidding on his rear end and clutching at the scrub. But he caught himself almost immediately and looked up at her, his face pale as the moon. "Oops!" he called cheerfully.

Rain stood at the edge of the cliff long after she could no longer see him. She was hoping that he'd come to a dead end and have to turn back. The sun was painting the horizon with fire by the time she fetched Will's binders to the edge of Nowhere. She opened one after another and shook the pages free. They fluttered into the twilight like an exaltation of larks. A few landed briefly on the path before launching themselves again into the breeze and following their creator out of her life. When all the pages had disappeared, Rain took the whistle that the dogs had given her and hurled it as far into the mondrian as she could.

Only then did she let herself cry. She thought she deserved it.

Rain found her way through the gathering darkness back to the apartment over Vronsky's Laundromat and Monkeyfilter Bowladrome. She put some Szechwan lasagna into the microwave and pushed it around her plate for a while, but she was too numb to be hungry. She would have gone to the eight o'clock show at the Ziegfowl just to get out, but she was mortally tired of *The Wizard of Oz*, no matter whom the cogni-sphere recast in it. The apartment depressed her. The problem, she decided, was that she was surrounded by Will's stuff; she'd have to move it somewhere out of sight.

She placed a short stack of college-lined, loose-leaf paper and four unopened reams in a box next to *The Awakening*, *The Big Snooze*, and *Drinking the Snow*. Will had borrowed the novels from the Very Memorial Library but had made way too many marginal notes in them for her to return them to the stacks. Rain would have to order new ones from Chance in the Barrow. She threw his Buffalo Soldiers warmup jacket on top of several dusty pairs of Adidas Kloud Nine running shoes. Will's dresser drawers produced eight pairs of white socks, two black, a half dozen gray jockey shorts, three pairs of jeans, and a stack of t-shirts sporting pix of Panafrican shoutcast bands. At the bottom of the sock drawer, Rain discovered flash editions of *Superheterodyne Adventure Stories 2020-26* and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Fetish*. She pulled his mustard collection and climkies and homebrew off the kitchen shelves.

And that was all it took to put Will out of her life. She shouldn't have been surprised. After all, they had only lived together for just over a year.

She was trying to talk herself into throwing the lot of it out the next morning when the doorglass blinked. She glanced at the clock. Who did she know that would come visiting at 10:30 at night? When she opened the door, Baskerville, Rover, and Spot looked up at her.

"You found the book?" The bloodhound's bowtie was crooked.

Beneath her, Rain could hear the rumble and clatter of the bowling lanes. "There is no book."

"May we come in?"

"No."

"You threw the whistle off the edge," said Baskerville.

As if on signal, the two terriers sat. They looked to Rain as if they were settling in for a stay. "Where's Will?" said Rover.

She wanted to kick the door shut hard enough to knock their bowler hats off, but the terrier's question took her breath away. If the cognisphere had lost track of Will, then maybe he wasn't. ∴ maybe he was... "I hate dogs," she said. "Maybe I forgot to mention that?"

Baskerville regarded her with his solemn chocolate eyes and said nothing.

The terrier's hind leg scratched at his flank. "Has something happened to him?" he asked.

"Stop it!" Rain stomped her foot on the doorsill and all three dogs jumped. "You want a story and I want information. Deal?"

The dogs thought it over, then Rover got up and licked her hand.

"Okay, story." But at that moment, Rain's throat seemed to close, as if she had tried to swallow the page of a book.

*Will was gone.* If she said it aloud, it would become just another story on the MemEx. But she had to know. "M-My boyfriend climbed over the edge a couple of hours ago trying to find a way down the cliff. I pitched the goddamn novel he was writing after him. The end."

"But what does this have to do with *The Last President!*!"

"That was the name of his book. Used to be. Once." She was out of breath. "Okay, you got a story. Now you owe me some god-damn truth. He's dead, right? You've absorbed him already."

Rover started to say, "I'm afraid that we have no knowledge of..." But she didn't give the dog a chance to finish; she slammed the door.

She decided then not to throw Will's things out. She dragged them all into the bedroom closet and covered the pile with the electric blanket. She made one more pass around the apartment to make sure she had everything. Then she decided to make a grocery list so she could stop at Cereno's on the way home from work tomorrow. That's when she discovered that she had nothing to write on. She gave herself permission to retrieve a couple of pages of Will's paper from the closet— just this once. As long as she was writing the list, she didn't have to think about Will on the cliff or the dogs in the hall. She cracked the apartment door just enough to see that all three of them were still there, heads on paws, asleep. Spot's ear twitched but he didn't wake up. She sat on the couch with the silence ringing in her ears until she got up and muscled the dresser over to block the closet where she had put Will's stuff. She thought about brushing her teeth and trying for sleep but she knew that would be a waste of time. She was browsing the books on her bookshelf, all of which she had long since read to tatters, when the phone squawked.

Rain was sure it was the dogs calling, but decided to pick up just in case.

"Lorraine Carraway?"

Rain recognized Sheriff Renfield's drawl and was immediately annoyed. He was one of her best customers—an avid Georgette Heyer fan—and knew better than to call her by her proper name.

"Speaking, Beej. What's up?"

"There's been some trouble down to the Laughing Cookie." He was slurring words. He pronounced *There is* as *Thersh*.

"Trouble?"

"Fast Eddie said you had dogs in the store today. Dogs with hats."

"What kind of trouble, Beej? Is Eddie all right?"

"He's fine, we're all just fine." Everybody knew that Beej Renfield was a drinker and nobody blamed him for it. Being sheriff was possibly the most boring job in Nowhere. "But there's been what you might call vandalism. Books all over the place, Rain, some of them ripped up good. Teeth marks. And the place

stinks of piss. Must've happened an hour, maybe two ago. Fast Eddie is ripping mad. I need you to come down here and lay some calm on him. Will you do that for me, Rain?"

"I'll do you one better, Beej. You're looking for these dogs?"

His breath rasped in the receiver so loud she could almost smell it.

"Because I've got them here if you're interested. Right outside my door."

"I'm on my way."

"Oh, and Beej? You might want to bring some help."

She sat at the kitchen table to wait. In front of her were the shopping list and the No. 2 pencil. They reminded her of Will. He was such a strong boy, everybody in town always said so. He *had* run that 4:21 mile, after all. And she was almost certain that Baskerville had looked surprised when she'd told him that Will was climbing down the cliff. What did surprise look like on a dog? She'd see for sure when Beej Renfield arrived.

For the very first time Rain allowed herself to consider the possibility that Will wasn't dead or absorbed. Maybe the cognisphere ended at the edge of Nowhere. In which case, he might actually come back for her.

But why would he bother? What had she ever done to deserve him? Her shopping list lay in front of her like an accusation. Was this all her life was about? Toilet paper and Seventy-Up and duck sausage? Will had climbed over the edge of Nowhere. What chance had she ever taken? She needed to do *something*, something no one had ever done before. She'd had enough of books and all the old stories about the world that the cognisphere was sorting on the MemEx. That world was gone, forever and ever, amen. She picked up the pencil again.

*I scowled at the dogs through the plate glass window of the Very Memorial Library. They squatted in a row next to my book drop. There were three of them, haughty in their bowler hats and silk vests. They acted like they owned the air. Bad dogs, I knew that for sure, created out of spit and tears and heartbreak by the spirits of all the uncountable dead and sent to spy on the survivors and cause at least three different kinds of trouble.*

*I wasn't worried. We 'd seen their kind before.*