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## THE EDGE OF THE BED OF FOREVER

Strand knew his wife would soon notice how terribly old he was getting. It was only a matter of time. Lingered before his bathroom mirror, he catalogued the ravages. The yellow of his eyes, the white stubble growing up under, and out of, his nose, the saggy pouches of skin accumulating around his jaw. There was no mistaking it. He was pulling away from his wife, agewise. And soon it would be obvious to her.

Using the time platform had been a dirty little secret from the beginning, but at the beginning he had had it under control. Now he was spending as much time in no-time with Angela as he was back here in realtime with his wife. And it was turning him into an old man. He had no right to call himself forty-five anymore. He had lost track long before, but he was surely at least fifty by now, biologically.

He opened the medicine cabinet and took out his bottle of dye --disguised as a solution for remetabolizing corns -- and began combing it into his hair. A new irony occurred to him. His wife could save him. By noticing his aging, and accusing him of the adultery, she would put the stop to it that he couldn't himself. His lover, youthful, life-giving Angela, was killing him, and only his wife could save him.

He finished, mussing his hair so it wouldn't look too combed. Downstairs his wife waited for him to join her in the large kitchen. He heard her. She was working already, piling the cotton shirts she and Strand would decorate with commercial logos today. All would be spotlessly clean, ready for the inking microbes they'd prepared the afternoon before. She would keep stacking them, silently reproachful, while he read his newsclod.

Finally, dressed, showered, every hair in or out of place as required, he descended the stairs.

"Good morning" she said, too brightly. The further apart they grew the more blandly cheerful she acted. She turned at the waist, without removing her hands from the long workbench. "How long have you been up?"

Strand glanced at his watch, resisting the impulse to tell a meaningless lie. "Just half an hour," he said. "Here, there's plenty of time. Come and sit."

"In a minute." She continued stacking shirts.

Strand opened the front door, picked up the newsclod lying on the welcome mat, and brought it inside. He emptied it from its packet into the basin hidden under the table and leaned back in his seat, waiting for the enzymes to decode the day's events and display the front page on the screen above the counter. The image that appeared, however, was unintelligible, shot through with colored streaks and abbreviated words. Strand picked up the packet and examined it. A muddy claw mark pierced the back. A cat or raccoon had eaten part of the news. Strand would have to go without his usual dose of headlines. He was surprised to find he didn't care. He felt something like relief, in fact, as he dumped the spoiled news into a house plant's soil.

"Angela," he said, "did you make any coffee?"

He winced in pain. He had called Miriam "Angela." The name hung in the air, irretrievable. A disaster.

Amazing. He switched labels on bottles, spent thousands of dollars renting a room in no-time, and hid a time machine around the house. All this, all the subterfuge and contortion, only to call his wife by his mistress's name.

"Yes," she said distantly. "Here you go." Strand fought to keep his features from simply melting into a lump on his face as she set coffee in front of him. Would she throw the cup in his lap? Or had she somehow not heard?

"Thanks," he said, gulping, struggling to return her slight smile. "Uh, milk?" He rose to get the creamer from the appliance alcove.

"Yes, of course." Another smile. She really hadn't noticed.

He'd gotten away with it. "No news?"

He allowed himself a small lie -- just an omission, really -- as reward for getting through the crisis. "I wasn't in the mood," he said.

Strand had only been to the offices of NoTime, Inc., once, years before, to set up the account when he and Angela began their affair. He'd arranged then to have the daily code updates delivered to a storefront maildrop so Miriam wouldn't see them. When he left the house today Miriam showed little curiosity. His painstakingly rehearsed speech about a visit to the podiatrist had done the trick.

Since his first visit to NoTime, the company had grown. The offices were newly plush, the receptionist newly professional, her short dark hair styled and lacquered. Strand had flirted with her on his first visit. Today she was almost icy. She directed Strand to a waiting area across the room, and he sat across from the only other client there, a young man with a fashionable slush hat and heavy, tired eyes. A sagging rucksack took up the seat beside him.

The man was drawing a diagram on a scrap of paper on the table between them. Strand leaned forward to catch a glimpse. A problem in Radial Bowls. It looked like the man -- little more than a boy -- was sketching alternate aiming strategies, based on which of the 4,320 target regions his opponent seized.

"I used to play a little Radial," Strand said, as cheerily as possible.

"I'm the regional NCAA champion," came the reply, in a distracted monotone. His voice was quiet.

"No."

"Yes," said the man, a little defensively. "I'm Zip Lignorelli." He looked up and stared at Strand. "I've been playing for State since I was a freshman. Youngest champion ever."

Strand recognized the boy's face. "You were on the newsclod yesterday. You won -- no, you lost a pasture."

"I lost. I'm losing four pastures to one."

"What are you doing here?"

Zip took a deep breath and leaned back. "It's kinds stupid. Maybe I shouldn't be talking to you --"

"You rent no-time," said Strand. The logic of it was obvious. "You work on your moves for Radial. You beat the time clock."

"You -- you a reporter?"

"Relax. Your secret's safe with me. Where do you hide the --"

Zip put a finger to his lips and smiled painfully. "Shhh. In the bathroom of the stadium." He sighed deeply and looked at the ceiling, then back at Strand. "It's not for the game, though. I got orals, for the baccalaureate, y'know? Coming up. During the nationals for Radial." He looked at his shoes and laughed. "Something had to give, right?"

"That's brilliant," said Strand. "What's the matter?"

Zip sighed again, and cast his eyes down.

"You're losing," said Strand. "The other one, what's her name, Andreyeva, she's better." He marveled at Lignorelli. So young, so wrapped up in sport. He wanted to urge him to forget the game and find himself a warm, loving female, but he wasn't sure the student, with his flip manner and self-absorption, would know how.

"I'll lose. I think you're right. It's either that or put my full attention to it and flunk the orals."

"Does anyone know you come here? What --"

Zip shook his head slightly and lowered his voice. "I'm by myself. Came in today 'cause I wanna different room."

Strand started to ask: what room? Then he saw that Zip meant his room in the no-time hotel.

What a funny idea. The rooms, as everyone knew, were all alike.

"-- I kinds want one with a window, right?" The kid presented his case as though Strand worked for NoTime, Inc. "The room's so plain, y'know? No window, can't think. Going crazy. I could use just a little view. Even a fence or an access road or something ..."

"You poor guy," said Strand gently. "The hotel is what they call a time-station, like a space station. It's just hanging there, you see. Adjacent to our world."

He took the paper and pen away from Zip and drew a little diagram: a building suspended in space. "It's hanging out in no-time. There's no view. If it were in the world, with a view, then time would be passing. Understand?"

"Oh," said Zip. He looked down, then clapped his hands to his knees. "Well, that's that."

"Mr. Lignorelli," the receptionist called out. "Mr. Axelrod will see you now."

Zip looked at Strand with panic in his eyes, then obediently rose from his seat and stepped over to the desk. Strand, feeling protective, followed.

"I gotta, I mean, you can cancel my appointment," said Zip. The woman narrowed her eyes. Strand remembered again how bubbly she'd been when NoTime was a new operation.

"It's okay," he said. "I helped him with a question he was going to ask Axelrod. It's all cleared up."

The receptionist paused long enough to make sure Strand knew she thought this was improper. "I guess that makes it your turn, Mr. Strand. You've saved yourself some waiting."

Strand turned to shake hands with Zip. "Good luck," he said.

"Thanks," said Zip. "Uh, good luck to you too." He moved toward the elevators as Strand was ushered into Axelrod's office.

"I had the idea," said Strand, after he and Axelrod introduced themselves, "that I could somehow lure my wife, unawares, into a room in the hotel -- perhaps in a sleep-state, or hypnotized -- and get her to pass a couple of years. Do you follow me?"

"You're concerned with the age differential," said Axelrod with a tight smile. "I understand you perfectly." He passed a hand smoothly over his thinning hair. "It's a very exciting suggestion, Mr. Strand. It also, if I read you correctly, constitutes kidnapping." He looked down at his desk, then back up at Strand. "No, worse, I think. It's really a variant of murder."

"Oh," said Strand, stupefied.

Axelrod pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Please -- don't feel I've accused --"

"Oh, no," said Strand. "You're absolutely right. I just hadn't thought -- it was a stupid idea." Silent panic coated his nerves with ice.

Axelrod regained his poise. "It's far from --" He coughed, then went on. "The ramifications often escape the layman, Mr. Strand. That's what we're here for." He smiled again, this time with something like warmth. "Richard -- may I call you Richard? -- you're one of our oldest noncommercial accounts. We're quite aware of your consistent use of your room in the hotel, and we want to help. I'm surprised, frankly, that we didn't hear from you sooner. This type of thing is our third-ranking customer concern."

"Oh," said Strand again. The cold subsided, leaving lukewarm sweat.

"I'm sure you realize that the effects you're concerned with are irreversible. My counsel to you is going to be very simple, and you may find it disappointing." Axelrod folded his hands. "Just because you're keeping the room doesn't mean you've got to use it every day, Richard. Ease up. Spend less time there when you go. Because otherwise --"

Axelrod turned his palms outward in a gesture of helplessness. Strand realized now that he had been counting on Axelrod's providing some answer, some counter-spell to NoTime's original magic. He wanted a refund on his lost time, wanted everyone but him to spend ten years in the hotel while he caught up. He wanted to be young again, even young and stupid, like Zip Lignorelli, instead of old and stupid, like himself.

He was suddenly aware that his face was covered with tears. Axelrod was sympathetic now. "Here," he said. He opened a desk drawer, brought out a mirror strewn with chamomile and handed Strand a slip of paper rolled into a tube.

Strand tried to snort, but his nose was clogged from weeping. He mimed satisfaction for Axelrod's sake and slid the tray back across the desk.

The waiting room was empty as Strand went to the elevator. He stopped at the table, hoping to retrieve the Radial Bowls diagram as a memento of his encounter with Zip. Instead he found a booklet with code updates for the NoTime hotel. It was the first Strand had ever seen besides his own. Apart from an unfamiliar account number at the top, it could have been his own.

Zip had left it behind. With a guilty look over his shoulder -- the receptionist was busy with papers on her desk -- Strand slipped it into his pocket, then hurried to the elevator.

Strand endured a lengthy dinner with Miriam, the whole time glancing surreptitiously at his watch. He and Angela had a date this evening, in the hotel, and he was eager for relief from the pressures of the day. Miriam wouldn't stop talking, either about new commercial clients they'd already snared or about the comic strip panels that had turned up on some of the house plants' leaves.

Before dessert, he carried the dishes into the kitchen. After arranging them on the dishwasher's tongue, he picked up the compost bag and went out back. Once he'd dropped the bag in the bin by the back fence, he crept into the storage shed, laid his wristwatch across the hibernating lawnmower's muzzle, and unfolded the time platform hidden in an old box of automobile parts. He took the code update from his pocket and was about to punch in the figures when he noticed the strange number at the top of the printout. It was Zip's.

Odd, he thought. What would have happened?

Strand conceived uneasily that he would have traveled into the student champion's past, or rather, dragged Zip into his future. For while Strand would have been perfectly able to jump back to his original point of departure and finish his meal with Miriam, Zip would have been forced to jump ahead to that point too. The computer that regulated the jumping enforced this rule. You couldn't use the hotel to go back in time. Zip would have walked into the bathroom of the contest hall and vanished for days. Strand would have destroyed the kid's careers, both athletic and academic.

And it had nearly happened.

Strand repocketed Zip's code, found his own, fresh from his maildrop, and entered the numerals.

He was transported instantly. But the room was empty. No Angela.

There was no being late for a rendezvous in the NoTime hotel, by definition. Angela's absence meant she hadn't used this code in the past and would not use it in the future -- if she had she would be here with him at the start of the booking.

The day was a double loss, this new disappointment punctuating the earlier one. Strand felt profoundly old and tired.

He knew to return immediately, to avoid logging any useless time here at the hotel. When he materialized in the shed, his mood lifted slightly. He always felt relief at returning to "normal" life after a clandestine sojourn in the hotel. His watch was warm from the lawnmower's breath. He strapped it onto his wrist and went inside to have dessert with Miriam.

The next day Strand caught a bus to Zip's college. His newsclod had said the match was suspended for a day at the request of the Lignorelli's handlers. It was widely interpreted as a sign of growing

desperation on the part of the beleaguered young champion.

Strand found Zip alone in his room, bent over a small replica of a Radial Bowls green.

"Why aren't you in no-time?" asked Strand. He felt paternal toward Zip, as he had the day before. "You shouldn't have called time-out. It's making a bad impression."

"Doesn't matter," said the student, "I'm not gonna be the youngest champion much longer. I'll lose the match or end up older than Andreyeva. Or both."

"My trouble exactly," said Strand. "If I stayed in no-time long enough to solve my problem I'd be an old man."

Zip seemed confused. "Your problem? Huh?"

Strand smiled. "My problem is I spend too much time in the hotel trying to solve my problem, which is the hotel. Forget it. Here." He pulled out Zip's code update. "You shouldn't leave this lying around."

He explained how close he'd come to doing something disastrous with the code.

"No," said Zip, shaking his head. "We wouldn't be trapped going back together. I could've jumped to another room, and from there come back to my own time --"

"Uh-uh," said Strand. "No one can go from room to room in the hotel. It causes time paradoxes. Screw-ups, the future meeting the past."

"Axelrod can," insisted Zip. "He left from my room. He had a call on his beeper. I saw him do it. He said it was him only."

"What was Axelrod doing in your room?"

Zip shrugged. "Told me he visited all new clients. He wanted to talk about Radial." The student snorted mirthfully. "I told him my problem, but he couldn't even comprehend, let alone help find the answer."

Strand felt suddenly self-conscious. Axelrod must have been drawn to the young man, much as Strand himself was. Strand pictured Axelrod showing off forbidden tricks with the time system, trying to impress the kid.

"Axelrod could have helped you, then," said Strand. "He could have gone up the line, found someone who knew the outcome of the match. Told you what your opponent's throws were."

And he could help me, Strand thought. He could have gone into the future and found out whether Angela and I stayed together. Whether it was worth all this, in the end.

"I don't think that would work," said Zip. "Probably the outcome is I lose. I think there isn't any right throw at this point."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Strand. "Axelrod would never do it. He's very unimaginative about the whole no-time setup. I'd do it, but of course I don't know the codes." Strand recognized that he was vying jealously for Zip's affections.

"I remember the number," said Zip idly, as though it wasn't important.

"What?"

"Photographic memory. In grade school I was on TV for memorizing the entire Wichita telephone directory. I saw Axelrod type the code into the console."

"What are you saying?"

"The picture's still in my mind. Five-four-six-two-zero-zero. A prefix, for overriding the computer. Then he types the code he wants --"

Strand felt a sudden thirst to know the hotel, to possess it as fully as Axelrod did. He'd spent enough time there, after all. It was his turf, as much as Axelrod's.

"Let's go," he said.

"What?" said Zip.

"Let's go together," said Strand, his excitement mounting. "We'll find out about that Radial move. Who knows what we'll find? Hell, we might even find a room with a view for you."

Zip raised an eyebrow, and didn't say anything.

"Come on," said Strand. More than anything, he wanted to guide the boy to victory. He wanted almost as badly to put no-time to some other use, now that Angela had stood him up; he wanted to renew his use of the hotel, make it mean more than just the affair.

Zip opened up the drawer of the desk and lifted out his time platform.

Strand had his in his briefcase. He'd been thinking of taking it to NoTime Inc. and turning it in.

The room looked the same as Strand's. But the bed was stripped, the blankets and sheets in a pile at the foot, and from the bathroom came the sound of running water, and someone humming a meandering tune. On the dresser was a smoldering hand-rolled cigarette, and the room was filled with the sweet stink of marijuana smoke.

Strand and Zip turned and looked at one another, but neither spoke.

An elderly black man came out of the bathroom, holding a sponge and a sprayer bottle. He would have been fairly short if he had been standing up straight; bent, as he was, like a question mark, he barely stood five feet tall. He opened his mouth in cartoonishly exaggerated surprise at seeing Strand and Zip in the room.

"You ain't supposed to come in like that, now. This is one of the in-between times. I ain't got the place made up."

"I'm sorry," blurted Strand, marveling. They'd discovered staff.

Suddenly the man's eyes narrowed. "You checkin' up on me?"

"Oh, no," said Strand.

"You could be lyin'," said the man. "Lots of people lyin'." He looked at Zip, who shook his head in wide-eyed fear.

"But we're not," protested Strand. "Listen, do you recognize this man? He's a famous Radial Bowls player. He's involved in a very important match --"

"I don't know nothin' about Radial," said the man suspiciously. He went to the dresser and stubbed out the smoldering joint.

"It's on the front page of the newsclods," said Strand. "Everyone reads about it --"

"Oh yeah? Well I ain't seen any newsclod either."

"What," said Strand. "Do you and the other -- the others who clean the rooms stay in the hotel all the time?"

"Ain't no others," grumbled the man.

"Are you saying you clean the whole place yourself? There couldn't possibly be time enough --"

"Time? There's plenty of time. And for every time there is, there's a between time, like right now. Me 'n' Yaller just clean it up when we ready." He indicated the aging scrubhound that had shambled out of the bathroom after licking the fixtures. "Ain't no hurry."

"Where do you live?" said Strand, confused.

"Oh, ho." For some reason this was amusing. "Way do I live? I live down the line a bit." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Same as all the rest, but I do like it back there. Feels clean and new. Ain't no one sleepin' in the bed before I sleep in it."

"Uh, Strand?" said Zip, strain evident in his voice.

"Yes." Strand tried not to appear flustered. He felt mildly affected by the marijuana fumes. "Well, I'm sorry we intruded. We'll just go and come back later. Some kind of slip-up, I suppose."

"Okay," said the janitor, shrugging. "I get it all clean up in a bit. Heh heh. So long."

Strand realized the man took him and Zip for a couple. "Here," said Zip. He'd scribbled a new number onto a sheet of the hotel's stationery.

It was the first time Strand had jumped from room to room within the hotel, and for a moment he thought Zip and the janitor had simultaneously vanished. But the bed was made. It was another identical room.

At that moment Zip appeared.

"Where are we?" said Strand. "How did you get this code?"

"It's easy for me to extrapolate the numbers," said Zip. "But I dunno where they wind up." He looked around. "At least no one's here."

Strand was impatient. How could they learn anything in an empty room? "Let's jump again --"

"No," said Zip, his voice high and squeaky. "I can't stay here anymore. This is getting too weird."

"You don't want to see the rest of the hotel?"



"I never wanted to see the hotel. That's your bag. Besides, I have a Radial move to make." The student suddenly relaxed.

Strand felt bereft. He'd secretly wanted Zip's dilemma to be permanent, insoluble, like his own. To lead further into the hotel, not out of it. "You have a throw?"

"More: a strategy. It came to me while I was working with the codes, instead of thinking of the game. It happens like that."

"I understand," said Strand, hiding his disappointment. "Go and win the game."

"No," said Zip. "I'm going to draw."

Strand felt betrayed. "Shouldn't you try to win?" Wasn't that the point? But he knew he was naive about Radial.

Zip smiled. "I'm at the top of my game. Or maybe I'm fading; same thing." He shrugged. "Even if I won this match, I'd lose the next, y'know? I should just get on with my life."

Strand began to see. "So if you draw, you retire without losing?"

"In a sense. And," here Zip actually grinned, the first time Strand had seen him truly happy, "you helped me. Since you told me before that all the rooms are identical, right? Like the Radial slices, where we move from pasture to pasture, but they're all really the same. The way the balls lie now -- it's like this: I can make a particular throw, a short easy roll, that she'll have to defend against. And her only possible roll will put me in the same jeopardy, so I'll be forced into one of two throws. One is ordinary, and after that I'd need a new strategy -- and there just isn't one. But the other will force her into the same defense. And then it'll be a closed cycle, unless one of us aims badly on purpose: we'll have no choice but to chase each other around the green, through all the slices, forever. Movement, but no true change. So I won't win, but I'll have made my mark."

Strand understood. It was something entirely new for the sport. He could even share some satisfaction at the idea. "And they'll name the maneuver after you, I guess."

"Probably. So thanks, y'know? Maybe you'll be famous with Radial fans, too."

"Don't," said Strand. "You can't use my name."

Understanding lit the boy's face. "Sorry. I didn't wanna -- I mean, I guess you got enough troubles, right?"

Strand relaxed.

"What will I do?" he said.

"Here." Zip went to the desk, and began scribbling out codes. "I can extrapolate codes from the pattern --"

"They can't all work," said Strand. "The hotel can't go on forever." Zip shrugged. "Maybe it'll reject the useless codes." He continued writing. "Here's a few dozen. And here, if you want to go back, the return code, to my room." He circled it twice. "Where you left your platform."

Strand felt exhilarated and dumbfounded at once. He was free to roam the hotel. After years of jumping to a single room he was going to possess the territory, plumb its depths.

But he was to do it alone. Zip was punching in his return code at the wall console.

"Good luck," said the young man.

"Yes," said Strand, but by then he was alone. He felt a moment of sadness, but it passed. There wasn't any reason to sit in the hotel, moping.

He went to the wall console and punched in the topmost code on the list.

It was very much the same room again, with just one difference, a big one: two people sat on the edge of the bed, which was unmade, and neither of them wore any clothes. Most oddly, Strand knew who the two people were.

Angela and Axelrod.

"Richard!" blurted Angela. She didn't make any move to cover herself. Axelrod, on the other hand, grabbed his pants from beside the bed and leapt to his feet.

"I don't understand," said Strand numbly.

"You don't have to understand," said Axelrod. "You're in a lot of trouble. Where'd you get this code?" He sucked in his gut and fastened his trousers.

"Code, code," said Strand. "Uh, it was on that rolled-up paper you gave me in your office. For snorting the chamomile." Strand wanted to protect Zip, and this seemed an opportunity for a vicious lie. He wondered if it was vicious enough.

"That's nonsense," snarled Axelrod. "You shouldn't trifle with me, Dick. You're under quarantine as of right now."

"Quarantine?"

"Time quarantine, Dick. What do you think you're achieving by blundering into the hotel like this?"

"Stop calling me Dick."

Axelrod hurriedly buttoned his shirt and tucked it into his pants. "Listen, old man," he said, stepping up to poke a finger at Strand's chest, "you don't seem to understand --"

Strand reared back, uncorking his hostility, and, from some unprecedented inner wellspring, delivered a championship-caliber punch to Axelrod's midsection. The younger man fell in a heap at Strand's feet. Strand noted with satisfaction Axelrod's bald spot, now quickly flushing pink. Old man.

"Oh, Jesus, Richard," said Angela.

"Motherfucker," gasped Axelrod from the floor.

Angela got up, still naked, and helped Axelrod to the bed. Strand watched, furious. It seemed to him that Angela ought to rush to him and plead out an explanation. But apparently she didn't agree.

"Okay," croaked Axelrod, his arms wrapped protectively around his middle. "Now listen. You can run if you like, deeper into the hotel --it doesn't matter. When you come out I'll catch you and hang you by the balls. Understand?"

"What if I never come out?" said Strand. "What if I just roam the hotel for a while? Kick everybody out, take it over."

Axelrod shook his head. "You'll come out. Trust me. You can get it over with fast, or play it out. Either way I'll get you."

"What are you talking about?"

"This is the future, Dicky-boy. You wanted to learn about the future --fine. But the future gets to learn about you, too. You fucked up, and you've got about, ah, about two weeks before we catch you."

"Two weeks?"

"Tell him, Angela."

Angela looked up from the bed guiltily. "I -- I broke it off, Richard. Remember when I didn't come to the room?"

"Yesterday," said Strand firmly.

Angela shook her head. "Two weeks ago. We've talked about it, only I guess you don't know yet. I'm sorry."

"You -- you don't want to be with me anymore?" Strand ignored Axelrod's red-faced sneer.

Angela simply looked down at the floor, and now, only now, grew modest, reaching for a sheet to cover her breasts.

"What happened?" said Strand.

She looked up, her expression pleading. "Oh, Richard. I went to Daniel's office, about our problem." She glanced at Axelrod, who nodded, then went on. "Just as you did. You knew as well as I did that we needed a way to stop. A way out."

"And Daniel here offered you one."

She nodded silently.

"You're a married man, Dick," said Axelrod.

Strand sagged. The air had gone out of his universe. "How could you tell I didn't know about the breakup yet?"

"You turned in your platform two weeks ago," said Axelrod. "Right after the breakup. Renounced no-time. So this bouncing around, this intrusion -- it had to be before. There's no way you can return to a time after you turn in your platform. We've got you pinned. We're later than you."

"So now I go back. To have Angela break it off. And then I wait around for the arrest."

Axelrod smiled. "It certainly looks that way."

"But no. That can't be right." Strand realized how little Axelrod knew about the situation. "You're only learning now. You don't know what you'll find when you jump back. Perhaps I'll have vanished. Or perhaps --" He kept himself from mentioning Lignorelli's platform. "Maybe by the time you come back I'll own NoTime, Inc. I'll have your job. You can't possibly know."

"Not exactly," said Axelrod. "Think it through. We've seen you around and about the last two weeks -- Angela had to have someone to break up with, didn't she? You came back. So the only indeterminacy is what you did this afternoon before I pinned down your location, which I'll do as soon as we go back. In fact, I have a much better sense of how you spent the last two weeks than you do. Because for you they're the future --unknown."

"It's true, Richard," said Angela.

"So go ahead, Dick. Do your worst." Axelrod was able to sit up straight now; he shrugged Angela away and pointed an accusing finger. "Maybe you're right, maybe you'll own NoTime. All I know is you didn't own shit this morning when I left. You weren't even man enough to come up to the offices and confront me about Angela. You'd been avoiding me."

Strand looked to Angela. She softened her eyes and nodded sadly. Was she communicating something, offering some hope? Or merely urging him to follow Axelrod's sneering orders?

"Go back, Dick," said Axelrod. "Don't make a mess of it."

Instead Strand punched in the next code from Zip's list, and jumped.

The first thing he noticed was the banner stretched out over the bed, a fading printout that read: STRAND GO HOME. Then he saw the poker game: five grizzled, middle-aged men sitting around a card table. The table was littered with cigarette butts and disarrayed piles of poker chips; behind it, the bed was strewn with delicatessen sandwiches. Strand felt something under his foot. He looked down. He was standing on a hat.

The men turned to face him. "Can we help you with something" said one.

"We're all paid up for the room," said another.

Strand was struck dumb.

"Hey," said one of the others, in an exaggerated tone of wonderment, "you're that guy -- you know, the one Danny Axelrod used to talk about -- the one who went crazy and got lost in the hotel --"

"Where you been, man?" said another. "They gave up on you a long time ago."

"I'm not lost," said Strand. "I've been in the hotel less than an hour."

"You ought to get in touch with Axelrod," said the first man. "He doesn't even know you're still here."

Strand took his foot off the hat. "Tell Axelrod to go fuck himself," he said. "Tell him to stop playing games with me." He turned and punched a new number into the console.

He jumped to the sound of laughter at his back.

The next room was empty. Apart from the banner again: STRAND GO HOME.

Strand saw now that Axelrod had jumped ahead and spoiled the hotel. There wasn't anywhere Axelrod hadn't already been. Strand had a sheet with twenty-some-odd codes, but Axelrod had access to the formula that generated codes to begin with.

And suddenly he understood something else: there wasn't any hotel. There was only a room, because that was all there needed to be. One room, extended endlessly through no-time. Suddenly the janitor's talk made sense. All the various liaisons and retreats were played out not side by side in some vast, drifting hotel, but one after another in the same little room, the same little desk and bed. With an elderly janitor and a scrubhound to swab it out after each visit.

It rendered Strand's desperation absurd. He'd been struggling to inhabit a single room.

He suddenly felt a terror of isolation there, alone, a thin shell of cheap wallboard between him and the no-time. It was the loneliest place there could possibly be.

He couldn't think of what to do.

Like Zip, he couldn't go back until he came up with a move. His opponent, like Zip's, sat and waited across from an empty chair. Only in Strand's case his opponent was ruin, abandonment, and death. And Strand lacked even the option to draw.

He punched another code into the console.

A woman was standing on the bed, taping the new GO HOME banner to the wall. One end draped over a pillow onto the floor.

Securing one corner with tape, she turned and smiled. "Good to see you again." She swayed slightly where she stood on the mattress, towering over Strand.

After a moment he recognized her. "You're the receptionist. You work for Axelrod."

She snorted mirthfully. "Axelrod thinks so. I mean, I do. But I was also waiting for you, and I'm doing that for myself. And for you."

Strand wondered how she could know he'd be there now, then blurted, "You got the list from Zip."

"I know Zip made you a list, and I know what codes he had to use as bases. It's the same thing." She shifted her weight and slid a drooping lock of hair from her forehead. "I needed to use a calculator, though. Couldn't do it in my head, the way he does."

Strand sagged in relief that the boy wasn't in league with Axelrod.

She spoke again. "Axelrod's a stooge. He has nothing to do with your real problem. He doesn't even know what it is."

"He told me he couldn't help me. And he wants to kill me."

"Danny couldn't kill a sick puppy. And he wouldn't need to help you even if he wanted. You're not aging in no-time, baby, not like you think."

He gaped.

"Think about it. How much time do you think you've lost?"

"Five years, I figure."

She laughed again. "You figure, or you feel? Look, you've been a client for less than ten years, and you didn't start using the hotel a whole lot until the last few weeks. I can give you your real count: it adds up to about six months."

Strand felt dizzy with bafflement and relief. "But my hair, the ..."

"Listen. You're forty-five years old. Or maybe forty-five and a half. But that's it."

He sat on the edge of the bed, not caring if she looked down on him. "I feel so stupid."

"Don't. You're not the only one to worry about that. It's our third-ranking customer concern."

"I guess I knew I was losing Angela, and couldn't face it." He started to cry. "I was using her for so long, and she never asked me to leave Miriam, and --"

The receptionist sat down on the mattress suddenly and pressed herself against his side. "She didn't want you to leave Miriam. If she wanted a man all to herself she wouldn't ever have been with you." She snorted again. "And she sure wouldn't be with Danny Axelrod."

"I'll miss her, though."

She grabbed his arm tightly. Strand felt her breath chilling the tear streaks on his face. "Maybe, but you'll miss the rest of it a lot more. Did Angela herself need anywhere near the care you had to give to the planning, the slipping away?" His tears had dried and her breath was hot on his eyes. "Didn't you panic the first time you noticed your watch was hours fast? Did your wife notice it before you did, and ask you about it? Didn't it feel great after you lied your way out of it? And doesn't it feel great now, every time that you take the watch off first, that rush of competence and secrecy?" She breathed. "Some people just need that, and you got it with a woman instead of with, say, shoplifting like I used to." She stopped, her chest heaving against his sleeve.

Strand recalled the disappointment he felt over Miriam not noticing when he called her by the wrong name. "It did take a lot of effort to keep her from finding out."

She got a pinched look around her mouth and inhaled sharply. After a moment he realized that she'd succeeded at not laughing in his face.

"Oh," he said. "Oh."

"You're not the only one to think that, either." She smiled and released his arm. "So you don't really have a problem, not like you thought. You just need to find another secret to play chase-me with." She stood and pulled him to his feet, then kissed him quickly on the lips, pressing the length of her body up against him. She smelled lightly of sweat and hair lacquer.

"You'll go back now, won't you?" she said.

"I suppose so," said Strand. Then he felt wary. "So you've done your job -- I'll return, and Axelrod will nab me."

She laughed. "You should be more trusting. You and Axelrod are exactly the same, thinking everything's cops and robbers."

She stepped away and looked at him. "If you want, you can phone me at NoTime. It's always me answering, or the service. Now get going, I need to finish this." She grabbed the loose end of the banner and stepped back up on the mattress.

He hesitated. Her warmth lingered on his chest and legs. "But if I call you now, won't it be too early?"

She faced him, laughing and swaying. "What do you mean by 'now'? What do you mean by 'early'?" She turned back to fussing with the banner.

Strand went to the console.

He started to punch in the return code, then paused, and substituted another code from the list.

A woman lay fully clothed atop the bed, turned on her side away from him. He felt a surprising surge of attraction toward her before recognizing her dress. It was Miriam.

His nerves iced over, just as when Axelrod had teased him with the murder accusation. How could she know I'd be here? he asked himself. He tensed as he waited for her to turn and confront him.

As the seconds passed, however, she remained still, showing no sign of turning. He saw that she didn't know anyone had entered the room; at the same time he saw her ribs heaving in noiseless sobs. On the bedspread beyond her sat several boxes of tissues. He knew the brand from her stockpile in the closet. He'd never thought to wonder why she bought in bulk.

Used tissues littered the floor. He felt a brief twinge of sympathy for the janitor, before reflecting that Miriam probably was one of the easiest clients to clean up after. She'd even brought her own towel to catch her tears on the pillow. The towel was in a color he hadn't seen around the house in months, that he'd assumed had been thrown out.

Then he noticed that it was nearly new.

He punched in the code for Zip's room, back in realtime. The eye of the world blinked and he was home.

The room was empty. Strand looked outside and saw Zip rushing away through the parking lot, off to make his throw.